

A Redeemer in Bethlehem?

Recently, I stood on the balcony of my hotel room in Bethlehem watching a group of young male Palestinians carry out a protest attack against the main checkpoint gate going into Israel. I observed the young men as they took rudimentary (Molotov cocktail-type) explosives from a field beneath my hotel room to hurl at the checkpoint security tower along with rocks and bullets.

The Israeli forces used percussion grenades, rubber bullets and smoke in return until Palestinian security forces helped disperse the protesters during the approximately one-hour-long incursion. In retrospect, I probably should have been more concerned about my personal safety, but I actually felt physically safe during the attack though my heart was on high alert. The scene was surreal as I watched the attack being carried out around me. The incident was a stark reminder—perhaps even a prophetic reminder—of my reason for being in Bethlehem.

I was in the city where Jesus was born to speak at an event called “Christ at the Checkpoint.” This conference brought together over 500 attendees and leaders from several nations for study, prayer and reflection. The event was sponsored by Bethlehem Bible College and was the third time they have held the conference. When I agreed to share at the conference, it was with the understanding that I did not agree with every principle of the conference but did want to show my love and support for my Palestinian Christian brothers and sisters. These believers find themselves in one of the most difficult situations of any group of Christians on Planet Earth.

According to Dr. Jack Sara, president of Bethlehem Bible College, there are approximately 1,000 evangelical Christians in the Palestinian areas of the West Bank and Gaza worshipping in about 15 different congregations. This is among a total

Palestinian population of approximately 4.5 million. The pressure in serving Christ as such a small minority while being surrounded by religious fundamentalist radicals would be more than most Christians could endure. Added to this are the difficulties all Palestinians face, like restricted access, economic depression, identity crisis and family separation.

Though I am sure my experience as a speaker at the conference is much more subjective than objective, I will attempt to at least give my take on this meeting as well as a few suggestions moving forward.

First of all, the conference theme was "Thy Kingdom Come." Conference attendees sought to grapple with the question of what the coming of Christ's kingdom means to the Palestinian/Israel question as well as to individuals on both sides of the issue. The conference focus was geared toward social justice and the perceived injustice being suffered by Palestinians. There were a number of various presenters at the conference from diverse backgrounds, including a couple of us who were more overtly supportive of Israel.

There could be little doubt in anyone's mind that one of the goals of the conference was an attempt to share the Palestinian side of the story regarding what has happened and what is happening today in Israel. The Palestinian Christians connected their narrative closely with the narrative of secular Palestinians, so much so that it was difficult to separate the two. To many who criticized the conference, this seemed like Palestinian propaganda against Israel.

My personal observance during the conference was that much of this criticism was justified, as the narrative was very one-sided. Over the years, the Palestinians have worked hard to have their story heard by the world. However, it was surprising for me to see how much of this side of the conversation took place in a Christian conference and how little of the other side of the story was offered to

attendees.

The conference did provide opportunity for other opinions from varied theological perspectives and addresses, including my own. I believe this was wise on the part of the organizers. Everyone involved in the program shared in a spirit of Christian graciousness and peace. The issues being addressed have huge emotions surrounding them, yet everyone was relatively calm throughout the conference.

One of the principal issues Palestinian Christians face is finding a biblical hermeneutic that makes sense to their heart and their community. One can only imagine the thoughts of a Palestinian Christian who is forced to ask the question of how a loving God would allow His family to endure injustice and pain. This question is especially acute when the pain has occurred because God is fulfilling His prophetic purpose and promises to the Jewish people. Palestinian Christians through the decades have been caught in the pressure between Israel inhabiting the land and factions of their own people fighting against Israel's existence. The inner confusion this would produce for any of us would be pronounced and difficult to reconcile.

Some have tried to resolve this tension by making theological claims that Israel does not have a right to the land or that the physical promises made to Abraham's children are no longer in effect, thus suggesting that Israel is an intruder in Palestine. Some theologies have even claimed the church has replaced Israel in God's plan or that God's plan for the Jewish people has been fulfilled and God is finished with the Jews. These theological streams of replacement or fulfillment theology did not initiate with Palestinians but have been used by some to try and reconcile their situation. In my opinion, those who embrace fulfillment or replacement theology reveal an incomplete reading of Scripture or a failure to see all of Scripture as inspired by God.

Beyond all of the Hebrew passages and prophecies regarding Israel's restoration in the land, the apostle Paul also goes to extreme lengths to show that God is not finished with Israel or the Jewish people:

"I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved. As it is written: 'The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.' As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies for your sake; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable. Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you" (Rom. 11:25-31, NIV).

As Gentile believers in Christ, we have been grafted into the original olive tree and added to God's plan as one of His people. I am encouraged biblically to walk in great humility for being given this privilege. I am also called to honor the root of my faith in the Jewish people and not to boast against them.

A significant theological debate also swirls around whether or not God's continued plan for the Jews includes land or, more importantly, "the Land." I believe it is clearly true in the promises of God to Abraham under grace that "the Land" is integral in God's plan. This understanding continues in the New Testament through passages like Luke 21:24, which declares that Jerusalem would be trodden under the feet of the Gentiles (definitely related to ownership and authority over land) until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

God's purpose and calling for the Jewish people is not finished yet. God's physical promise that they will possess the land promised to Abraham continues, and the Jews will rule Jerusalem.

Given these understandings, where does this leave a Palestinian Christian who wants to bless the Jewish people while at the same time reconciling the situation he and his family face? Finding answers to these questions represents some of the most difficult theological and social justice issues of our generation. The energy and division generated because of the "Christ at the Checkpoint" conference clearly signal to us that these answers are significant for the future. I would like to offer a few thoughts to consider as we contemplate these issues:

1. Christian unity is key to extending Christ's kingdom in the Middle East and around the world. We must exhibit primary loyalty to our brother and sisters in Christ wherever they are found. Though I am an American citizen, I am first and foremost a citizen of God's kingdom.

2. Praying for, supporting, loving and serving our Palestinian Christian brethren does not mean a person is against Israel or anti-Semitic. The physical wall separating brethren should not be allowed to separate them spiritually.

3. We must search for new ways that Palestinian believers and Messianic believers can have dialogue about these issues in a loving, peaceful environment.

4. While we stand in support of Israel, we must maintain our prophetic voice to Israel and other secular governments so that not everything is considered acceptable. In other words, our support for Israel doesn't mean we support every action secular Israel takes.

5. The gospel is for the Jew first and also for the Gentile. While we don't embrace replacement or fulfillment theology,

neither should we embrace a nonevangelistic position for today's Jew. God is moving in "the Land," and we are called to pray that the Lord of the harvest will send forth laborers into the amazing harvest before us. One of the greatest moves of the Holy Spirit in history is coming to Israel and the Middle East. Our Palestinian brethren could be one of the bridges God will use to further extend His kingdom into predominantly Muslim-influenced countries. Synthesizing a proper position on the Jewish people, Israel and the work of Christ in our generation will be critical to their success in becoming God's ambassadors beyond Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

6. Believers around the world must work to exhibit Christ's love in tangible ways to those who are displaced or broken by life's injustices.

7. A message of hope resounds from God's Word for those who are suffering human injustice around the world. That hope is not only that God's people have compassion and will respond, but more importantly that Christ is our redeemer.

Naomi, the biblical matriarch from Bethlehem, endured amazing hardship as a refugee who lost her husband and two sons in Moab. When she returned to Bethlehem, she was embittered because of life's difficulties but discovered that there was a redeemer in Bethlehem named Boaz. Naomi became a part of God's work in adding a Gentile named Ruth to the lineage of Jesus. Redemption for Naomi was realized as she became connected to David's family history and was able to celebrate in the goodness of God despite the difficulties of life.

I testified at this conference to the fact that there is still a redeemer in Bethlehem. His name is Jesus, and He can take what feels like an unjust situation and turn it around for His glory.

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