

A VISIT TO “CHRIST AT THE CHECKPOINT CONFERENCE”

Tom’s Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

“In this conference we continued as Palestinian Christians to challenge Christian Zionism. We have done this in the first conference. We have done this in the second conference, and the third and the fourth, and we will do it again. Because we continue to see that theology as a threat to us, let alone in our opinion, the way we read it is not combatable to the teachings of Jesus.”

—Munther Isaac, *Christ at the Checkpoint*, March 10, 2016

I attended the fourth bi-annual Christ at the Checkpoint Conference in Bethlehem, Israel on March 7–10, 2016. I am writing a book on Christian Zionism and this is one of the main “Christian” conferences in the world that advocates for Christian Palestinianism and against Christian Zionism, as the academic dean of Bethlehem Bible College stated in the above quote. There were about 400 people in attendance with about 100 of them native Arab Christians. The rest were primarily from the United States and Great Britain, about 100 of those were college students. (These numbers are all estimates.) I was surprised to see a classmate of mine from Dallas Seminary in attendance and in full support of the anti-Christian Zionist viewpoint. This year’s theme was said to be “The Gospel in the Face of Religious Extremism.” Can you guess who the extremists are from their point of view?

WHAT THEY BELIEVE

Their stated purpose for the conference is as follows: “The mission of ‘Christ at the Checkpoint’ is to challenge Evangelicals to take responsibility to help resolve the conflicts in Israel/Palestine by engaging with the teaching of Jesus on the Kingdom of God.”¹ The leaders at Bethlehem Bible College hope to accomplish this via the conference.

The conference will bring Palestinian and international Evangelical leaders, to study and explore the rise of religious extremism within Christianity, Judaism, and Islam and how this impacts the Israel/Palestine conflict. We will also explore what the Bible has to say about religious extremism in any form. Together, we will seek a Biblical response to religious extremism, and find ways that provide an alternative through living out the kingdom of God.²

The leaders of the conference claim to be Evangelicals, yet their Manifesto includes the following points:

1. The Kingdom of God has come. Evangelicals must reclaim the prophetic role in bringing peace, justice and reconciliation in Palestine and Israel.
3. Racial ethnicity alone does not guarantee the benefits of the Abraham Covenant.
5. Any exclusive claim to land of the Bible in the name of God is not in line with the teaching of scripture.
9. For Palestinian Christians, the occupation is the core issue of the conflict.³

There are twelve points in the manifesto, but the ones listed above are the ones that jump out at me as errant. In short, their agenda is that of the far left on the matter of the modern state of Israel. They attempt to totally disassociate modern Israel from any biblical connection, past or future.

SPEAKERS

There was a wide array of speakers, primarily leftwing in orientation. For example, Regina Henderson, an American from Duke University claimed she was NOT an Evangelical, but a moderately conservative liberal. She called Jesus a radical and spoke of how pleased she was that students from Bethlehem Bible College were the first to support Black Lives Matter when things were happening in Ferguson, Missouri. She also said the Bible must be understood, not in its original context, but within our social setting of today.

Another socialist speaker was Lisa Sharon Harper from Washington, D.C. who works for *Sojourners* magazine, the socialist organization headed by Jim Wallis. She said Israel was an Apartheid State like South Africa used to be. Harper agrees with Obama that colonialism was the evil cause that ripped off the colonies of the world; thus, we now need to redistribute the world's wealth. She said that true repentance means resisting the unjust structures. She in essence closed with an altar call as she led the group in singing "We Shall Overcome."

Hank Hanegraaff made an appearance, which is not surprising since he also participated in an anti-Israel conference in Iran a few years ago. He gave his normal replacement theology rant. The promises made to Abraham have already been fulfilled. God only has one chosen people, which were fulfilled in Christ. Hanegraaff accused Israel of ethnic cleansing. He said Abraham was a Zionist, as are modern Jews who reject Christ. He claimed modern Israel has not biblical basis for its existence since Jesus, not Jerusalem, is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. Hanegraaff then went on to provide a preterist/idealist explanation of the Bible's eschatology. Accused dispensationalists of being racists since we believe that God has a future plan for national Israel. He closed with an allegorical vision of the millennium and the eternal state, sounding like a postmillennialist.

There were over two-dozen speakers, including a moderate representative of Hamas who was filmed before the conference with an English translation at the bottom of the video screen that I could not read at all since I was sitting toward the back. There were two Jewish speakers, a rabbi and a lady who was a Messianic Believer who works at Bethlehem Bible College. Neither said very much of significance. They also had a Roman Catholic priest from Jerusalem who merely chronicled the modern history of Jewish/Arab relations. In the past they have had a speaker or two who held to Christian Zionism; however, there were none at the 2016 conference.

ANALYSIS

The first thing that struck me and held true throughout the entire conference was that their whole viewpoint was based upon the idea that the current church age is really a spiritual form of the millennial kingdom. Many sounded postmillennial, as if they were going advance the kingdom leading to a time of utopia. Their whole rationale presupposes kingdom building rather than fulfilling the church's actual calling of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:16–20; Mark 16:14–18; Luke 24:44–48; John 20:19–23; Acts 1:6–8). Because they have misidentified the dispensation in which we currently live they are pursuing unrealistic dreams that will never be able to implement since the

actual kingdom will not arrive until Jesus returns at the second coming and set it up not far from Bethlehem, in Jerusalem.⁴

The Christians at Bethlehem Bible College have totally misidentified what their real problem and who where their opposition really comes from. Their real problem is really with their Arab Muslim brethren. Before the Oslo agreement was initiated in 1995, the Arab Christians in Bethlehem and throughout Judea and Samaria had experience a slight but steady growth since 1967. It was when local Muslim rule was implemented in 1995 that the Arab Christian community went into steep decline. Actually, the decline started under Jordanian rule from 1948 until 1967. The obvious reason for the separation wall that Israel has erected is due to Arab Islamic terrorism and has nothing to do with Arab Christians, who have not been a threat to Israeli safety. So the real problem is caused by the Arab Muslim domination of the once Arab Christian majority of Bethlehem's population.

When I visited Manger Square on my recent trip it was dominated by the fairly recent Mosque build by the Muslims at the opposite end of Manger Square across from the Church of the Nativity. As I was eating a meal at a café in Manger Square, an Imam was broadcasting over a very loud speaker an Islamic sermon, which was then followed by about half of the square filled with Muslim men observing a call to prayer. This was a totally different atmosphere than the one my wife and I experienced in January 1973 on our honeymoon trip to Manger Square in which we only saw Arab Christians at that time.

Replacement theology in various forms was prominent as well throughout the conference. It was a dogmatic dictum that the modern state of Israel had no divine right to the land. In order to come to such an errant conclusion they practiced an extreme form of non-literal, allegorical interpretation of many parts of the Bible. This is to be expected since even a cursory reading of the Bible makes it clear that God gave that land to Israel, in the past, present, and future. Since God is sovereign and nothing can happen in the world unless He allows it, I wonder how the modern reestablishment of Israel as a contemporary nation could have happened since they say it is certainly not His will for it to have occurred. They repeatedly said that Jesus fulfilled the land promises to the Jews so that the current state of Israel is a mistake in history caused by the evil colonialism from the West. They further argue that the Arabs are the indigenes people, thus, they are the ones who have a right to the land today. The late Joan Peters has demonstrated in her great work that the overwhelming majority of Arabs had been in Israel less than one generation when Israel became a nation in 1948.⁵

With all their emphasis upon so-called "peacemaking" they displayed no passion for the preaching of the gospel as having a role in the mission of the Church or at Bethlehem Bible College. Isn't that what Christ's last words to the Church were right before His ascension? Yes it was! Instead, they are bringing division within the Body of Christ with their social activism, which is not commanded in Scripture. In order for them to justify their focus, they have basically adopted a liberal social action agenda, while at the same time they call themselves Evangelicals. The historic use of the term "evangelical" is a label for those who focus on preaching the gospel.

Their whole focus of their conference is what would Christ do if He was living today and had to encounter the separation wall and its checkpoint because of the supposed occupation by Israel. Well, the New Testament makes it clear that in the time of Christ at His first coming, He and the Jews were under occupation—Roman occupation. I do not know of a single instance in the life of Jesus where He ever made that an issue or even talked about it. This just demonstrates how far away from an actual New

Testament emphasis the Bethlehem Bible College and their movement have strayed. I noticed on the Internet that there is a Bible College in Israel that emphasizes evangelism of both Jews and Gentiles (Arabs). Israel College of the Bible¹ is composed of Jewish and Arab Believers who work together to speak the gospel to all people, whether Jews or Arabs. Shouldn't this be the goal of Bethlehem Bible College, rather than sponsoring a bi-annual conference that brings division?

There were dozens of college students, primarily from the USA who were there, many getting college credit, that will be bringing these ideas back to the United States and encouraging activism against Israel. This fits into the current predisposition of a majority of students at Christian colleges in America who already have exchanged Bible study for social action. I can also see this emphasis moving college students toward the more radical pro-Palestinian organizations that already have a stronghold on most college campuses.

We do not know to what degree professing Christians in America will abandon their past support for the modern state of Israel and move today this new unbiblical viewpoint before Christ comes for His Church at the rapture. But it is sad to see something that is so clearly taught throughout the Old and New Testaments as God's plan for Israel now being replaced in some circles by a movement that the Anti-Christ would be in total agreement with. Therefore, I admonish every Believer in Christ to stick with the clear teaching of God's Word on this matter and resist the vain speculations of man. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Taken from christatthecheckpoint.com, home page, "About the Conference."

² From christatthecheckpoint.com, home page, "About the Conference."

³ From christatthecheckpoint.com, "Manifesto."

⁴ See the article in this edition of *Pre-Trib Perspectives* by Charles Clough entitled "Why the Millennial Kingdom Cannot Come with Leadership of Fallen Man." This renders the idea of the kingdom in this age impossible.

⁵ Joan Peters, *From Time Immemorial: The Origins of the Arab-Jewish Conflict Over Palestine* (New York: J. KAP Publishing, 1984). See also another painstaking work that surveys who own what land and when within modern times in Israel. Arieh L. Avneri, *The Claim of Dispossession: Jewish Land-Settlement and the Arabs 1978-1948* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1984).

⁶ Israel College of the Bible, <http://www.israelcollege.com>.