

Dr. Don Stanley

Thank you for the invitation to speak today. As I understand things our main focus today is a concern about what is understood as an unbalanced Pro-Palestinian view emerging among some Evangelical Christians and I should say, at this point, that I regard today's other speaker, Dexter Van Zile, a Christian media analyst for CAMERA, as today's "main act" through his analysis of the 2010 documentary movie "With God On Our Side". It is true, as the blurb about me suggests, that I do have a strong media background. However, on the topic of this documentary, I defer to the expertise and scholarship of Dexter, who I admire a lot.

Today I want to offer a number of observations – some of which are personal and anecdotal, and these come from my media background, my academic background which covers Israeli history at Ph.D. level, my work context here in Israel and also my background which has involved fraternal work with other scholars in what's called the "Jewish Roots Movement". I trust that these observations will complement Dexter's main thrust and prove useful for subsequent discussion.

I want to begin with two particular personal reflections and I want to begin, as well, with a disclaimer. I am an Evangelical Christian myself. What do I mean by Evangelical? Well, I don't mean that I go around trying to "evangelize" people and I'm not particularly interested in eschatology - I'm not into those populist "end times" theories. I'm an Evangelical from an Anglican point of view and that comes with an especially high regard for Biblical authority and a commitment to Biblical obedience.

I appreciate that there are many angles around in the Christian world about the modern State of Israel. I've thought about this a lot myself and I have to say that as an historian and as an Evangelical I think that the God of the Bible is definitely and unquestionably behind the return of the Jewish people to settle this land, in the modern era. I'm not talking about this from the point of view of being a Biblical scholar, as such, but rather as an historian. And I think that when I consider, as an historian, what has happened here in this land in the last one hundred years or so, it is a miracle, and miracles we attribute to God.

I remember in 2004 I was here with my wife Caroline on a scholarship studying *shnat shmitah*, the Sabbatical year, and spent some five months traveling the land, talking with Israeli farmers. This experience – a very first hand one, was important in reinforcing for me the incredible transformation that has happened in this land in such a short time. Thus I have a very strong conviction that the Lord is very much behind the return of the Jewish people and of course, theologically, there are many Biblical scriptures which support this view. So we need to keep this point very much in mind. In considering all the debate, especially the views of the "Pro-Palestinian Camp" that we're discussing today, I believe it really important for Christians to appreciate that the God of the Bible has been very much behind the modern return to the Land of the Jewish people.

The second personal reflection concerns me as someone with a media background. As was mentioned in the introduction to me, I have worked for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) as a program maker and senior executive, and also I have worked for the BBC as a network director. So I know a little bit about the media. As much as I love these public server broadcasters like the BBC and the ABC for their wonderful programs, their great dramas and documentaries etc, I'm afraid that from a news perspective they're not particularly good friends of modern Israel and her political challenges. As an historian, I find myself in a good position to critique media coverage from an historical point of view and I have to say that I see here a huge failing. In my opinion there's very little sense of history in media coverage of Israeli-related political events and here I'm especially talking about historical balance. It seems to me that the key events that have happened over the last one hundred years or so, including the various wars and what caused them, the Israeli response to those wars, the continued threat of war against Israel and so on - journalists and media commentators only reflect a very short snapshot of history in their coverage. There's very little historical perspective and I find that distressing.

In terms of pro-Palestinian imbalances within Christian contexts, I want to mention several scenarios which have arisen in relationship with our Christ Church guesthouse. The guesthouse is opposite David's Citadel. Some of you may have been there before, just inside the Old City. And at the guesthouse we have a new manager whose name is Gwen. She's Scottish and she joined our guesthouse earlier in the year. She's doing an excellent job and has an interesting story that she recounted during her job interview. Previously, from 2004 to 2007, Gwen was the manager of St. Andrew's guesthouse here in Jerusalem where, again, she did a fine job. St. Andrews is owned and operated by the Church of Scotland. After three years, she was asked to extend her contract a further two years and found herself in a personal, ideological struggle, which she couldn't reconcile. And what was that struggle? It was what she saw as the Church of Scotland's pro-Palestinian stance. She just couldn't live with it anymore and so she resigned. I note from their website that the Church of Scotland in its Middle East context promotes the Sabeel movement, and Sabeel represents pro-Palestinian Ecumenical Liberation Theology. I took a look at Sabeel's website and especially noted under the heading of "Action and Advocacy" their values-based "Kairos Document". While I do not doubt Palestinian people as having struggles, I note a range of highly loaded words in this document like "occupation" and "apartheid" and I have to ask myself - where is the balance? If we're talking about maintaining justice and so on - how about Christian organizations like this taking a public stand against decades of terrorism against the Jewish people? Why don't they acknowledge huge levels of Jewish suffering? Where is the balance? So Gwen came to us and I think it's fair to say that she finds us a much better fit ideologically.

Speaking of balance, it's interesting, as well, to contemplate the work force context in and around our guesthouse. For example, we have teams of people, both Jewish and Arab, working really well together. And we find that with these mixed teams, in some cases the leader of the team is an Arab, and in some cases the leader is Jewish - an Israeli. So, here we see a really interesting snapshot of Gwen's work force, reflecting a balance in a very natural way. I have to say it's a joy to behold; there are no politics,

there's no rhetoric, there's no political correctness and there's no affirmative action. It's all relational. I think that as we reflect upon all the political rhetoric that's around, especially from this slice of the "Christian world" with its pro-Palestinian stance, this is an interesting model for us to contemplate.

The other perspective about trends from our working context is an interesting story, which illustrates a trend the other way. In our guesthouse, we get people from all Christian denominations from all over the world. Last year, for the first time that any of us can remember, we hosted an Amish/Mennonite group from America. Towards the end of their stay some of us joined them in a special ceremony somewhere down in the Western Wall tunnels. At this ceremony they joined with the Rabbi there and other Jewish officials, and they sought forgiveness for what they understand as their denomination's long-standing negative attitude towards Israel and the Jewish people.

This particular event was covered in the Christian Edition of the Jerusalem Post, 5 January 2011. I'm going to read a number of quotes from the article. It says, first:

"Led by community elder Bishop Ben Girod, the group shed the traditional Amish rejection of modern transportation in order to make the visit and offer the statement of contrition and of support for modern Israel."

These folks don't normally get on a plane. It's a big sacrifice. And the heart of the matter for them is as follows – again I quote:

"The declaration submitted by Girod and his fellow travelers asked forgiveness for the movement's historic acceptance of Replacement Theology and 'for our collective sin of pride and selfishness by ignoring the plight of the Jewish people and the nation of Israel'."

The article's reporter David Parsons asked some excellent questions with some most interesting and very unambiguous responses. For example, there's the question:

"Does your support for Israel include recognition of the enduring nature of the land-promise to Abraham and his descendants?"

And the answer:

"The two cannot be separated".

The interview continues:

"Do you support Israel's right to self-defense? If so, how does that reconcile with the traditional pacifism of the Amish movement?"

"The original Anabaptist position was nonresistance, not pacifism – a big difference when defined correctly. Yes, I support Israel's right to defend itself."

“Some in the Mennonite movement have veered away into very liberal positions and social activism, including pro-Palestinian advocacy and even dialoguing with figures like Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. What is your view on these trends?”

“This is extremely disturbing, for it also reveals just how far we have fallen from God’s perspective of the whole issue concerning the promise coming through Abraham for our day.”

So the story of these Amish folks who stayed at our guesthouse and who came very sacrificially with a clear ideology is an interesting illustration of the trend going the other way.

As the introductory blurb says about me, I’ve been involved in what’s called the “Jewish Roots Movement” and in this movement Christians explore the Jewish roots of their faith. My connections have been with a small group of “Jewish roots” scholars, mostly based in America, of Evangelical persuasion. And through these connections I’ve used both my academic and media backgrounds to produce on video, “Jewish roots” teaching. It’s been largely a research and development exercise up to this point. It may interest you to know that the scholars I’ve been working with are in dialogue with Rabbi Shlomo Riskin and his team in Efrat, the team connected with “The Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding and Cooperation”.

In preparation for today I’ve been thinking about how “Jewish roots” teaching might be important in helping Christians understand a wider perspective about the Jewish people. I think this is important given today’s focus on a particular pro-Palestinian Christian stance which also, it seems to me, often degenerates into “Israel bashing” and the demonizing of Jewish people, particularly Jewish Israelis. So - to finish, I’d like to offer a range of points coming from classic Jewish Roots teaching.

First, “Jewish roots” teaching helps us to understand better the huge debt we Christians owe to the Jewish people for what they’ve given us for our understanding of God, the covenants, the Bible, and of course, our Jewish Messiah.

Second, we come to understand that God still loves the Jewish people. The Apostle Paul is clear about this – it is part of God’s heart – it’s on account of the Patriarchs as he says in Romans 11, and this is written in present tense language so it’s clearly relevant today. And if God loves the Jewish people - as Christians - we can do no less. We know that, like us, Jewish people are not perfect and there are differences between us, but, as I said, this is clearly part of God’s heart - his love for the Jewish people, and we can do no less than love them as well.

Third – as part of our care of the Jewish people and really - in obedience to God, we Christians need to stand overtly against anti-Semitism, and in my opinion this means challenging politically inspired sources of anti-Semitism, such as my previous reference

to “Israel bashing”. I think this form of anti-Semitism is now well and truly entrenched in the “Christian world”, in a very unbalanced way, and is clearly inherent in this pro-Palestinian propaganda that is our focus today. Having made this point, I also think that it’s important to appreciate the struggles of Arab people and I’m aware of this first hand, from people who work at our guesthouse. In our guesthouse there are Arab Christian workers who have family in Ramallah, for example, and when there’s a security clampdown, being connected with the family is often very problematic. So, we need to be mindful of these struggles, as well – but “for heaven’s sake”, let’s be balanced about it!

Fourth – linked with the points above, we need to be reminded that the Church has a terrible history of arrogant, triumphalist theology – what’s called “Replacement Theology”. A “Jewish roots” perspective helps us understand and appreciate how important it is that the Jewish people have their own homeland, with security and peace, and their highly significant historical connections going back to ancient times to this particular land. I think that there are people who pay lip service to this - to Israel’s security. They might talk about it but they don’t really understand this at the level of the heart because it is in fact a “heart” thing; it’s very deep within the heart of the Jewish people. As Christians who should have the same “heart” as the Lord regarding the Jewish people, we need to assimilate this same level of depth in our hearts about how important this issue is.

Fifth, having a “Jewish roots” perspective helps us to be genuine – from a strongly Biblical point of view, to pray for the peace of Jerusalem. And I have to say that this is really much more than just praying for this city. It’s the whole scene – the whole context about the whole land, and the prayer should be coming - in a Hebraic way - from the heart of the Lord.

Sixth - “Jewish roots” teaching helps us better understand the Jewishness of Jesus. Why is this important? Because it helps us understand the whole context of Jesus’ life on earth and it helps us better understand his teaching. Also, it helps us appreciate that he was born a Jew, lived as a Jew, died as a Jew, was resurrected as a Jew and will return as a Jew. His return as judge and as a Jew is well illustrated in the New Testament book of Revelation: “The Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the heir of David” (Rev 5:5). Thus there is no question about this highly distinctive position of Jesus – the position of being fully Jewish. I think it very important to raise this in today’s context because within this pro-Palestinian discourse you have Jesus very unambiguously cast as a Palestinian.¹ In my opinion this is an unbelievable stance for the sake of political motivation. And if you consider the high importance that Christians are supposed to put on the authority of Scripture, I am shocked by this perspective. Again, where is the balance and in this case, where is the intellectual rigor of solid Biblical scholarship?

Thank you.

¹ See, for example, Naim Stifan Ateek. *A Palestinian Cry for Reconciliation*. (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, 2008). 11