

ICEJ BACKGROUND BRIEFING

Behind the 2012 “Christ at the Checkpoint” Conference in Bethlehem

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Just when the annual “Israel Apartheid Week” campaign will be hitting college campuses across North America this week, Palestinian Christians will be hosting a five-day conference in Bethlehem which is expected to convey many of the same messages and aims of seeking to delegitimize Israel. What makes this “Christ at the Checkpoint” conference unusual is that it is largely an initiative of Christians from the Evangelical movement, whose ranks traditionally have held favorable views on Israel.

This briefing paper provides background information for the media on the “Christ at the Checkpoint” conference [March 5-9, 2012; www.christatthecheckpoint.com/], its objectives, sponsors, and the speakers involved.

The annual “Christ at the Checkpoint” conference was first launched in 2010 at the initiative of the Bethlehem Bible College, an Evangelical institution established by local Palestinian Christian clerics and educators. Many of the core sponsors and speakers at that initial “Checkpoint” gathering were previously involved in events held under the auspices of the Sabeel Center, directed by local Anglican canon, Rev. Naim Ateek. Yet it appears that these Evangelicals have made a conscious effort in recent years to distance themselves from their past associations with Sabeel and to offer a forum more appealing to a wider Evangelical audience. Indeed, Dr. Ateek was a speaker at the inaugural 2010 Checkpoint gathering but has not been invited back since.

Critics of Sabeel say it has espoused a radical brand of Palestinian Liberation Theology that would seek to justify violence by the “oppressed” Palestinians against the “oppressor” Israel on biblical grounds. In one sample of his radical rhetoric, Ateek once told followers in an Easter message: “In this season of Lent, it seems to many of us that Jesus is on the cross again with thousands of crucified Palestinians around him. It only takes people of insight to see the hundreds of thousands of crosses throughout the land, Palestinian men, women, and children being crucified. Palestine has become one huge golgotha. The Israeli government crucifixion system is operating daily. Palestine has become the place of the skull.” (1)

Over the years, a number of Sabeel speakers have also denied the reliability and authority of Scripture or offered radical interpretations of biblical passages related to Israel. For instance, the late Prof. Michael Prior denounced the Bible as “a dangerous book” which legitimizes and mandates genocide. Prior also described

the authors of the biblical narratives as “very narrow minded, xenophobic, perhaps militaristic... pin-headed bigots,” and ridiculed Joshua as the “patron saint of ethnic cleansers.” (2)

These are all positions that would make most Evangelicals quite uncomfortable and even the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rev. Rowan Williams, turned down an invitation to speak at a Sabeel conference in Jerusalem in 2004 because he did not want to be identified with “the wrong voices” – as his spokesman put it at the time. (3)

Thus the annual “Christ at the Checkpoint” conferences should be seen as a bid by local Palestinian clerics and their allies abroad to move away from Sabeel and offer a message more appealing to Evangelicals. This has included an effort to invite new voices into the conference more supportive of Israel. This year’s roster of speakers, for example, includes Rev. Wayne Hilsden of the King of Kings Community fellowship in Jerusalem and two local Messianic Jewish leaders.

Still, these voices will likely be drowned out by the overwhelming chorus of Israel critics at the conference, and the thrust of Christ at the Checkpoint 2012 will remain largely a one-sided message based on a deeply flawed historical narrative of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and highly suspect theology.

Nonetheless, the conference has begun to achieve its aim of drawing more speakers and attendees from the Evangelical movement, though from its more liberal wing, such as Tony Campolo and Lynne Hybels. These Evangelical newcomers have begun expressing sympathies for Palestinian suffering as part of their wider advocacy for the cause of “social justice.” But they are largely novices regarding the history and complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and thus their views are often misinformed and easily misguided by anti-Israel propaganda.

A number of these new Checkpoint participants from the “Religious Left” signed the letter to US President George W. Bush in July 2007 seeking to distance themselves from the Evangelical mainstream’s more skeptical view of Palestinian intentions in the Middle East peace process. (4)

Meanwhile, the more veteran Evangelical critics of Israel involved in the Checkpoint conference consist mainly of native Palestinian Christian clergy with nationalistic motivations, along with a small group of Christian scholars from the West who have made a career out of maligning Israel and its Christian Zionist admirers.

Most of the local Palestinian Christian participants can claim genuine Evangelical credentials and some have personal family stories of loss and dispossession which they have utilized to elicit sympathy from Evangelicals abroad. The “Local Committee” for the Checkpoint conference is listed as Munther Isaac, Bishara Awad, Salim Munayer, Hanna Katanacho, Jack Sarah, Sami Awad and Alex Awad.

The veteran Evangelical scholars from abroad will include Stephen Sizer and Colin Chapman from the UK, and Gary Burge from Wheaton College, near Chicago. They were also previously involved with Sabeel events

in years past and were among its most strident critics of Israel and of Christian Zionism. Sizer, for instance, has defended the provocative Gaza flotilla in May 2010, welcomed the caustic comments against Jews by veteran AP White House correspondent Helen Thomas which led to her dismissal, and has even been willing to appear at conferences alongside radical Islamist elements from Iran and Hizbullah who called for Israel's elimination and denied the Holocaust. (5)

Based on past Checkpoint conferences, the listed speakers, and the topics to be addressed, the gathering can be expected to promote a series of disturbing positions, including:

Cloaked versions of Replacement theology: For many Evangelicals, the main concern with the Checkpoint conference lays in the theology espoused by various invited speakers which serves to undergird their one-sided and critical approach to Israel. Not wanting to be identified with Replacement theology and its abysmal fruits down through Church history, many now expound Fulfillment theology or other beliefs which deny Israel its rightful place in the land today. They maintain that with the death and resurrection of Christ, all the Old Testament promises to Israel were fulfilled. Yet this teaching winds up in the same place as Replacement theology by insisting that Israel has already served its purpose and the Church has now superseded the Jewish people as God's redemptive agent in the world. This teaching does not give room for a unique and enduring national calling upon the Jewish people and rejects any notion that the modern-day restoration of Israel is the consequence of God keeping His eternal covenant with them. Rather they denounce Zionism as "man-made." In doing so, they also abrasively assail Christian Zionist supporters of Israel without just cause. (6)

The Israel=Apartheid analogy: Many Checkpoint speakers have wrongly smeared Israel with the apartheid label and called for dismantling the Jewish state. For instance, conference speaker Ben White has authored a book entitled, "Israeli Apartheid: A Beginner's Guide". The fact that the conference is timed to coincide with Israel Apartheid Week only serves to reinforce this distorted message. The conference has also set aside special sessions to reflect on the Kairos Palestine document, co-written by conference organizer Yohanna Katanacho, which peddles the apartheid analogy as well as the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions strategy. (7) It is worth noting that some leading proponents of this BDS movement are now admitting its real aim is the elimination of Israel, not peace with the Palestinians.

The 'Palestinian Jesus': Many Palestinian political and religious leaders, including the late Yasser Arafat, have falsely portrayed Jesus as a Palestinian revolutionary fighting Roman oppression, and described Palestinians today as the Body of Christ suffering under Israeli oppression. Even the very name of the conference, "Christ at the Checkpoint," plays into this distorted narrative of a Palestinian Jesus. A number of conference speakers have endorsed this twisting of the true Jewish identity of the historic figure of Jesus. For instance, co-sponsor Sami Awad once wrote that an Israeli incursion into Bethlehem during the second intifada was akin to the Roman massacre of infants in the same city as described in the Christmas story. He wrote of "passing by big Israeli army tanks and army personnel carriers each pointing their guns at us. Israeli army troops were being brought from all corners into Bethlehem like Herod's soldiers... We pray that the reign of Herod will come to an end and that the message of the Prince of Peace will again be a light from

Bethlehem to all corners of the world.” (8)

One-sided Palestinian narrative: Conference speakers have repeatedly denounced Israeli “injustices” against the Palestinians while ignoring or falsifying the true course of events which led to Palestinian loss and displacement. That is, there is little or no acknowledgement that the Jewish people came to resettle their ancient homeland in peace and it was Arab leaders who ignited a war against the fledgling state of Israel in 1948. Further, there is no acknowledgement that Palestinian leaders have repeatedly rejected peace offers made by Israel and escalated the conflict instead, leading to more losses for their people. Conference speakers have consistently downplayed Palestinian terrorism and other security threats to Israel, while also ignoring radical Islam as a primary source of Palestinian Christian grievances. The conference’s use of the Israeli security “Wall” and IDF checkpoints as symbols of their suffering is indicative of this dishonest historical narrative. No calls for reconciliation and ‘social justice’ – as demanded by numerous Checkpoint speakers – can be built upon such untruths.

Beyond Anti-Israelism: Finally, certain speakers invited to the Checkpoint conference have taken stands that go beyond mere criticism of Israel and into outright anti-Semitism. Scholars have characterized the “new anti-Semitism” as obsessive efforts to highlight and condemn alleged injustices committed by the Jewish state while ignoring gross atrocities being committed elsewhere. In this regard, it should be noted that the Christ at the Checkpoint conference is being convened to focus on perceived Israeli injustices at a time when Arab regimes in the region have been openly slaughtering their own people.

In anticipation of the Checkpoint conference, Dr. Jürgen Bühler, Executive Director of the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem, noted on Sunday: “While we do recognize and respect the organizers of the conference as our brothers in Christ, we do have strong disagreements concerning their theological approach, as it can easily lend itself to anti-Semitism and anti-Israel propaganda, as some of the Checkpoint speakers have proven in the past. Yet at the same time, we have to confess that too many Christian friends of Israel have neglected our Arab brothers in the Holy Land and beyond. We surely need to increase our efforts to prove that being pro-Israel does not mean being anti-Arab. Jesus loves both people groups and we do well to do the same.”

Footnotes:

1. <http://web.archive.org/web/20080310035855/http://www.sabeel.org/old/reports/easter01.htm>
2. Paul Wilkinson, “Report of The 5th International Sabeel Conference, April 14-18, 2004
3. http://www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/ENS/ENSpress_release.pl?pr_number=042804-3
4. http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/29/us/evangelical_letter.html. See also the ICEJ Response to Fuller Seminary’s ‘Just Peacemaking Initiative’ which made a similar charge in September 2011 at: <http://us.icej.org/open-letter-americas-christian-zionists>
5. <http://seismicshock.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/antisemitism-and-christ-at-the-checkpoint-2012.pdf>
6. See <http://int.icej.org/news/commentary/israel-and-fulfillment-theology>
7. <http://www.kairopalestine.ps/>; See also <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Article.aspx?id=164070>
8. <http://www.indcatholicnews.com/news.php?viewStory=9598>