

Report
of
The 5th International Sabeel Conference
Notre Dame Ecumenical Centre, Jerusalem, April 14-18, 2004

"Challenging Christian Zionism: Theology, Politics, and
the Palestine-Israel Conflict"



Photograph of Conference Delegates and Speakers, April 17, 2004

Introduction

My reasons for attending the Sabeel conference were twofold. Firstly, I am currently undertaking doctoral research on *John Nelson Darby and the Origins of Christian Zionism*. Secondly, the Lord had a purpose that went beyond academic interest, a purpose that became clearer to me as the conference progressed. I knew beforehand that I would be coming from a very different perspective to that of Sabeel, having read articles on Christian Zionism on their web-site. It was in the course of reading these articles that I came across the conference advertisement.

Conference Venue

Conceived in 1884 as a centre for French pilgrims, the Notre Dame of Jerusalem Centre was completed in 1904 and crowned with a statue of Mary. It was sold in 1970 to the Jewish National Fund, who donated it to the Hebrew University. In 1973 Pope Paul VI had it restored as the Holy See International Pilgrimage Centre, and in 1978 Pope John Paul II established it as a Pontifical Institute and Ecumenical Centre. In March 2000 he inaugurated the newly built Conference Centre.

Revd Dr Naim Ateek and the Founding of Sabeel



the founding of Sabeel in 1994; *sabeel* is Arabic for 'the way'.

Naim Ateek is the founder and director of Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre and Canon of St. George's Cathedral, Jerusalem. He describes himself as a Palestinian Christian who became a refugee in 1948 when his hometown of Beisan (Beth Shean) was destroyed by Israeli forces. In 1989 an ecumenical *ad hoc* committee of ten clergy and lay theologians came together to explore ways of fostering liberation theology among Palestinian Christians. Out of this came an international conference in March 1990, and the

In its *Purpose Statement*, Sabeel describes itself as "an ecumenical grassroots liberation theology movement among Palestinian Christians" which "strives to develop a spirituality based on justice, peace, non-violence, liberation, and reconciliation for the different national and faith communities". Sabeel works "to promote a more accurate international awareness regarding the identity, presence, and witness of Palestinian Christians", encouraging individuals and groups around the world "to work for a just, comprehensive, and enduring peace informed by truth and empowered by prayer and action." International Friends of Sabeel consists of regional chapters around the world supporting the work "through education, advocacy, conferences, solidarity visits, partner-to-partner projects, and financial contributions." The Anglican Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu, is Sabeel's Patron, and in a letter to the 'Friends' made mention of an upcoming Sabeel conference in South Africa "whose theme will be ending **Apartheid** in the Holy Land."

In its pre-conference notice, Sabeel described Christian Zionism as "highly problematic for all who believe in the biblical mandate of justice for all God's people." Its response was to organise this conference and bring together theologians, bishops, clergy, political scientists, legal experts, peacemakers, and non-violence activists from around the world for panel discussions, lectures, workshops, Bible study and worship. The following questions were to be addressed:



- ❑ What are the theological, social and political roots of Christian Zionism?
- ❑ How is the Bible used to support Christian Zionism?
- ❑ What is the relationship between Christian Zionism and anti-Semitism?
- ❑ How does Christian Zionism influence attitudes and policies towards Palestinians?
- ❑ How does Christian Zionism relate to colonialism in the Middle East?
- ❑ How is Christian Zionism influencing religious communities and political leadership around the world?
- ❑ How can those who seek justice for Palestinians as well as Israelis strategize to challenge Christian Zionism effectively?

In preparation for the conference Sabeel dedicated issues 30-32 of its *Cornerstone* magazine to these questions. The articles, written by some of the conference speakers, can be viewed at www.sabeel.org/documents/cs30.pdf.

The Conference

The conference opened with various formalities, including a greeting from the controversial Archimandrite Attallah Hanna of the Greek Orthodox Church (below left at the conference). Hanna is an outspoken supporter of suicide bombers. An address was then given by Abuna ('Father') Elias Chacour (below left with Hanna, below right with the Pope). In 2003 the Pope appointed Chacour to be Vatican consultant for world Jewish relations with the Catholic Church. Chacour is an ordained priest in the Catholic Melkite Church, which is in communion with Rome, and President of the (interfaith) Mar Elias Educational Institutions in Ibillin, Galilee. He has been nominated three times for the Nobel Peace Prize and in 1994 received the prestigious World Methodist Peace Award. As indicated in Michael Prior's book, *They Came and They Saw*, Elias



Chacour was instrumental in transforming the understanding of several conference speakers, including Stephen Sizer and Donald Wagner, on the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

The lectures commenced with four papers on the 'History and Theology of Christian Zionism'. The focus on John Nelson Darby was particularly interesting in light of my own research, which gave me the opportunity to challenge some of the inaccuracies and misrepresentations that were made. (Quotations have been taken from an audio recording I made of these papers).

□ **Revd Dr Stephen Sizer**



Stephen Sizer is Vicar of Virginia Water, an Anglican church in Surrey and a member church of the Evangelical Alliance. Sizer is also chairman of International Bible Society UK, board member of Friends of Sabeel UK, member of the UK Board of Reference for the Mar Elias Educational Institutions, and contributor to the *Friends of Al-Aqsa Journal*. Sizer once held to a dispensational, Christian Zionist understanding of the end-times, having been influenced by men like David Pawson (see Sizer's web-site, and Michael Prior's book, *They Came and They Saw*). He delivered a power-point presentation on the historical development of Christian Zionism from Edward Irving to the Balfour Declaration (1917) in which he suggested (with some justification) that Christian Zionism had been founded **as a movement** in 1809 with the

formation of the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews (now CMJ, or ITAC as it is known in Israel). He rightly suggested that the movement had blossomed in the early nineteenth century writings of Edward Irving and John Nelson Darby, but then made the claim that following Irving's death "It was John Nelson Darby who *took up Irving's ideas* - never attributed them to Irving - took up the ideas and developed the idea of dispensationalism....And it is Darby who is regarded as the father of *this very novel* theological movement that can only be traced back to the 1820s." Having recently researched what I would classify as Christian Zionist writings dating as far back as the late 16th century, which focussed on the future restoration of the Jews to the land, I knew that Sizer's "novel" claim was inaccurate and misleading.

During the Q&A session I challenged Sizer's claim that Darby had "taken up" Irving's ideas. In volumes 7 and 15 of his *Collected Writings*, Darby describes Irving's doctrine of the Incarnation as "the deadly wickedness of Irvingism" and "the Irvingite delusion". Darby and the vast majority of the Plymouth Brethren distanced themselves from Edward Irving and his followers, even after Irving's death. I felt that Sizer's assertion was not only contrary to reasonable judgment, but to Darby's lifelong testimony that his understanding had been shaped through the study of the Scriptures and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Sizer stood by his claim. I later challenged him privately about the way he had taken out of context Darby's reference to the Church dispensation being a "parenthesis" in God's redemptive purposes, as though the Church had merely been an afterthought. Darby implied nothing of the sort, consistently teaching that the 'heavenly' Church enjoyed better promises and privileges than the 'earthly' Israel. Sizer did not want to pursue this.

□ **Revd Dr Donald E. Wagner**



Donald Wagner, Director of the Centre for Middle Eastern Studies at North Park University, Chicago, shared the platform with Stephen Sizer, taking up where Sizer left off. Wagner presented the American face of Christian Zionism. Key figures such as Ed McAteer and Jerry Falwell (of the Moral Majority: 1979-1989), Tim Lahaye and Jerry Jenkins (of the 'Left Behind' series), and U.S. Presidents Carter, Reagan and Bush Jr. were cited as Christian Zionism's foremost representatives. Donald Wagner made the comment that he was uncertain as to Reagan's Christian Zionist views "in his present state" (Alzheimer's), a comment greeted with laughter. During the Q&A session I expressed my offence at Wagner's tone, and the response of some of the delegates. Several people applauded, though Donald Wagner made no comment.

Wagner portrayed Christian Zionism as the convergence of Bible and politics. He then rooted Christian Zionism in the teachings of Irving and Darby, claiming, as Sizer had done, that "Darby is the one who took the teachings of Irving and others and developed this doctrine...." However, as attested by Brethren scholars, Darby insisted throughout his life that there was no place for Christians in politics!

as a whole, but then made the same mistake as Sizer by representing Darby as having taught that God's covenant with the Church was a lower, or interim, covenant compared with His covenant with Israel. Donald Wagner concluded by calling for the establishment of an institute for the study of Christian Zionism to monitor, and provide a theological alternative to, Christian Zionism.

□ **Revd Dr Mitri Raheb**



Mitri Raheb, Pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem and Director of the International Centre of Bethlehem, offered "an alternative reading" of Acts 1:6-11 in which he described as "unbelievable" the question the disciples had put to the risen Lord. The disciples, according to Raheb, "did not get it", having been "pre-programmed" to ask such a question on account of their education and environment. They were, according to Raheb, the forerunners of contemporary Christian Zionists: "nationalistic", "narrow-minded", and "blinded" to the future.

Raheb used the title of Donald Wagner's book to brand all Christian Zionists as "anxious for Armageddon". Christian Zionists, he suggested, are those who love to search for enemies (the Pope, Roman Catholicism, Islam) and who have little or no concern for minorities. During the Q&A, I challenged Raheb for the way he had portrayed the disciples. I reminded him that these were the same Jewish disciples who would have been well-versed in the Scriptures before Jesus called them, and who then spent over 3 years with Him night and day. They were the same disciples who received the Holy Spirit when Jesus breathed on them, and who spent forty days with the risen Lord receiving teaching specifically about the kingdom of God. It was contrary to all reason, therefore, to suggest that the disciples had not "got it". In fact, the Lord's response implied that they had; only the timing of Israel's restoration was in question. Following Raheb's reply Stephen Sizer responded to my question by quoting John Calvin who, in his commentary, suggested that there were as many errors in this question as words. Sizer was to prove a prominent figure throughout the conference.

□ **Right Honourable Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury**

The Archbishop of Canterbury, seen here recently with the Pope, was absent from the conference. Canon Jonathan Gough, his Secretary for Ecumenism, apologised on behalf of Dr Williams who wanted to remain impartial, despite having been listed as key-note speaker for several months. Canon Gough presented the address, entitled *Holy Land and Holy People*, on behalf of the Archbishop (see the Archbishop's website). It is worth noting that this address was preceded by the chanting of Ephesians 4:11-16 by Fr.Boulos Armaleh, Parish Priest of the Melkite Catholic Church in Jerusalem, and followed by a solo from Fr.Goussan Aljanian, the Armenian Orthodox Patriarchate.



In his address Rowan Williams spoke of there being "two distinct but overlapping realities: 'Israel under God', the Jewish people considered as bearers of the covenant and witnesses to God's revealed justice, and the state of Israel, a contemporary and secular political reality which is also seen as the homeland for 'Israel under God', the sole place in the world where the Jewish people have guaranteed place." He described the Israel of the Bible as being the "paradigm nation" held up before all nations and afforded by God "the explicit vocation to justice". In seeking to define a liberation theology for Israel today, Dr Williams stated that "The modern political reality of Israel is not biblical Israel; but it is ideally one of the conditions for biblical Israel's message and witness to be alive in the world today – a context in which God's people can manifest God's justice." In other words, though the modern state of Israel was not, in his opinion, "the heir of biblical promise in a

literal way", it continued to carry from biblical times an "historic calling" to demonstrate wisdom and justice to the world. This required, then, the existence of a modern Israeli state within stable and

that Israel's neighbours, instead of denying Israel's right to exist, should have been fulfilling their own commission to "reflect back to Israel" her calling as a nation.

What was remarkable about this address, in light of the overall thrust of the conference, was the Archbishop's refusal to beat the anti-Israel, pro-Palestinian/Arab/Muslim drum. Unlike many of the other speakers, Dr Williams appealed to Scripture rather than to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It came as no surprise when subsequent speakers, along with conference delegates, vented their anger and dismay at the Archbishop's address (which is saying something, considering the position of the Archbishop on certain issues).

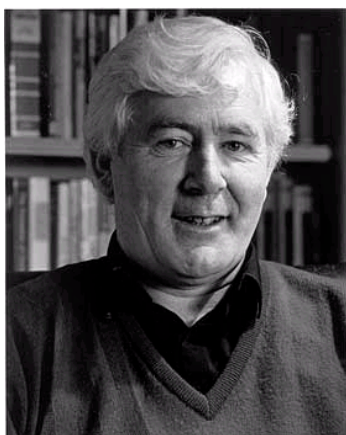
□ Dr Gary Burge



Gary Burge, Professor of New Testament at Wheaton College in Chicago and former President of Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding, began his paper with a diagrammatical presentation of the pretribulation, premillennialist position he claimed was rooted in the writings of J.N. Darby (not entirely accurate). His presentation, like that of Sizer's, was delivered in a rather mocking tone. He described Darby as the father of popular Christian Zionism and the first to establish it in its theological form (which I would agree with). Burge outlined what he perceived to be the 6 basic tenets of Christian Zionism: (i) that God's covenant with Israel is eternal and unconditional, (ii) that Eretz Israel belongs to the Jewish people, (iii) that 1948 was a watershed in the fulfilment of prophecy which commenced the prophetic countdown, (iv) that those who bless Israel are blessed, (v) that the

Church is merely an afterthought/parenthesis in redemptive history, and (vi) that the Jewish people can be saved outside Christ. It is important to stress that the final 2 tenets represent an extreme, minority view within dispensationalism, and do not accurately represent Christian Zionism as a whole. Burge described Christian Zionists as "theologically passionate" yet "hermeneutically naïve", and Christian Zionism itself as territorial and triumphalistic, with no integrated theology of the cross.

□ Revd Dr Michael Prior



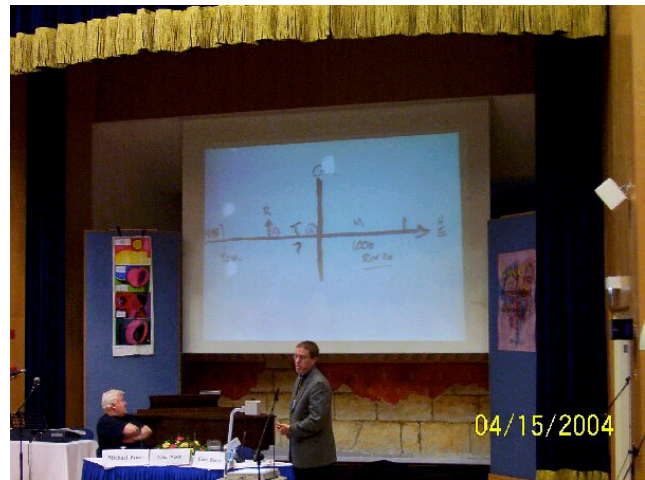
The most controversial speaker at the conference was Michael Prior C.M., a professor of Bible and Theology at St. Mary's College, Strawberry Hill (University of Surrey). Prior is also Chairman of the Catholic Biblical Association of Great Britain, and a member of the International Editorial Advisory Board of the Journal of Islamic Jerusalem Studies. "The Bible is a very dangerous book," he began, "On its cover should be written, 'This is a dangerous book. Reading it may damage somebody else's health'." He believed that the Bible legitimizes and mandates genocide: "The question is: is God moral? Does God approve of genocide? Does God merit the term, 'The Great Ethnic Cleanser'?" Prior described the Zionism of Theodor Herzl as having been "an ethnic cleansing project" from its inception and therefore a moral abomination that had derived legitimacy from the biblical covenant.

Michael Prior described the Book of Exodus as "a con-job". He suggested that the *exodos* ('out of Egypt) should never be dealt with unless one also deals with the *eisodos* ('into' Canaan), for the land that flowed with milk and honey also flowed with the blood of the indigenous peoples: "It is an abomination, it seems to me, in moral terms, only to emphasise the liberation of people in servitude without dealing with the mandate to exterminate the indigenous people of the land into which the escaped - according to the narrative - escaped slaves would come. If that is not a moral problem for a person with moral and religious sensitivities, I don't know what is." This statement was met

with applause. Personally disturbed that such a "dodgy" narrative lay at the heart of Christian celebration as well as the sacred Scriptures, Prior described the land traditions of the Bible as "morally suspect". His problem was not only with the way in which these texts had been employed by extremists, but with the content of the texts themselves!

Prior (below with Gary Burge) suggested that these biblical narratives were not historical. Early narratives concerned with the promise of the land, and the *exodos* and *eisodos* as he put it, were part of the "myths and legends" relating to human origins. As for the authors of the biblical narratives, Prior gave the following critique: "It seems to me that they were very narrow minded, xenophobic, perhaps militaristic...pin-headed bigots....The Church is full of them, full of them!" This, too, was greeted with laughter. Prior went on to describe Joshua as "the patron-saint of ethnic cleansers" and "a continuous genocidist", and concluded his paper with this appeal: "Biblical scholars must clean up their act and approach their texts with what I would call an ethics of accountability and an ethics of responsibility. It seems to me that scholarship, biblical scholarship, theological scholarship, and so on, should concern itself with the moral transformation of society, and should not be expending its energies on trying to prop up, under the guise of either theological or biblical studies...such an enterprise as political Zionism."

During the Q&A, Gary Burge challenged Michael Prior: "Michael, I don't know what to say. It's probably a good thing, from the audience's perspective, that I'm sitting on the right and you're sitting on the left. It sort of symbolizes perhaps the theological diversity that we have here in Sabeel....I think from my point of view you present me with some remarkable problems.



That's to say, I'm committed to living in a confessional framework [he's a Christian]. I have an understanding of canon [66 divinely inspired books of the Bible]. I'm a biblical scholar who also understands that there has been a whole history of interpretation...and so therefore I'm not sure that it's helpful to me to step inside my community and talk about Joshua as a genocidal maniac. It isn't helpful to me necessarily to toss out major sections of the Old Testament necessarily either....I also, with all due respect, Michael, do not want the audience to come away with the impression...that archaeology has created a consensus that all pre-kingdom history in the Old Testament is fiction. I am surrounded by professional Old Testament scholars on a daily basis....I know that there is not a consensus like that....At any rate, as a pastor long committed to my church I don't know if I can walk into my congregation and describe Joshua in your terms."

Prior responded by suggesting that he was merely "trying to rescue God from the obvious moral implications that He is mandating genocide". He concluded, "I would just say that somebody who reads the biblical narrative and contends that these particular traditions have an historical character has a real problem, or ought to have a problem it seems to me, with the nature of God." People applauded.

I was then given the opportunity to put a comment and a question to the speakers. I suggested to Gary Burge that he was guilty of the same oversight as Sizer and Wagner in not taking into sufficient account those who were writing about the restoration of the Jews to the land from the late 16th century onwards. Gary Burge acknowledged something of what I was saying. I then quoted back to Michael Prior some of the comments he had made, but directed my question to Sabeel: "I do not understand why Michael Prior is sharing a platform with Stephen Sizer, Donald Wagner, Gary Burge. The question he has is not about Christian Zionism, it's about the Bible, it's about the authority of the Bible, and it's about who God is, and I cannot understand what contribution is being made here." The moderator of the session quickly moved to another questioner.



Extracts from other Speakers

- **Azmi Bishara**, an Arab member of the Israeli Knesset and the most prominent Palestinian politician in Israel (recently charged with supporting a terrorist organisation), delivered a public lecture during the conference in which he described the Bush-Sharon Letters¹ as a second Bal-

four Declaration. Bishara portrayed Christian Zionism as the real anti-Semitism, and suggested that the most potent form of racism in the world today was Islamophobia. He suggested that there was, in actual fact, no conflict of religions, no contradiction in theologies, and no terrorism in the Middle East – how can a people who are denied their basic freedom be guilty of acts of terror? The real conflict, Bishara suggested, was against colonialism and the occupation. It was in the interest of Europeans and Americans, then, to rid the world of the Bush administration. His lecture was received with a standing ovation.

¹ An historic exchange of letters at the White House (14 April 2004) in which Bush backed Sharon's disengagement plan concerning Gaza, and stated that Palestinian refugees from the 1948 war, along with their descendants, should be resettled in a future Palestinian state, and not in present-day Israel. Bush also pledged US support for Israel's right to "defend itself against terror".

- **Professor Barbara Rossing**, an ordained pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and lecturer in New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, expressed her desire for the Book of Revelation to be read "through eyes of liberation". The Book of Revelation did not portray Jesus as a returning warrior, according to Rossing, but as a non-violent lamb replacing the lion. Rossing condemned Christian fundamentalists for not getting past Rev.19 (though she herself never referred to this chapter). The key to the book, in her estimation, was 'the healing of the nations'. Events described in Revelation were not to be taken literally but as mythical representations serving to contrast the evils of Empire with the New Jerusalem vision of God that applied whenever people are liberated. Revelation was not prophetic in the sense of being predictive of the future – it was a wake-up call to humanity.
- **Jeff Halper**, an American Israeli who described himself as a "self-hating Jew", expressed his personal despair and outrage at the Bush-Sharon Letters and the Archbishop's address. He spoke about keeping conflicts political, suggesting that whenever they are portrayed as a clash of civilisations or religions there can be no solution other than a 'Final Solution'. He commended the paper given by Michael Prior, described the Torah as "genocidal", and described the present conflict as emblematic of a more universal conflict, the solution to which rested in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Only then could the Jews truly take their place as part of the human family. International courts and covenants were therefore essential.
- **Rosemary Radford Ruether**, Carpenter Professor of Feminist Theology at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, and author/editor of 38 books, described the Archbishop's address as "unconscious Christian Zionism", not liberation theology. She commended Michael Prior's paper, and expressed her dismay at how the Palestinian people had been made to pay for the sin of western Christianity against the Jews. She also described ethnocentric claims about God as being unacceptable to western Christianity, calling on Palestinian Christians to help free their western brethren from their theological myopia.
- **Revd Dr Bishara Awad**, President of Bethlehem Bible College, favoured the term 'Zionist Christians' (a subtle change of emphasis) in describing those he claimed were guilty of deceiving and being deceived. He not only believed that the promised restoration of the Jews had taken place in their return from Babylonian exile, but that "true restoration" had occurred at Pentecost. Awad asserted that there was no earthly dimension to the Kingdom of God.
- **Dr Jenny Te Paa**, Dean of Te Rau Kahikatea (an Anglican Theological College in NZ), Convener of the Global Anglican Peace and Justice Network, and Moderator of the World Council of Churches Working Group on Ecumenical Theological Education, brought "An Indigenous Woman's Perspective from the South Pacific". Speaking of "mother earth", Te Paa suggested that "oneness with the land" was at the heart of the Gospel message, and that only "the arrogant", who made creation secondary to redemption, limited the Gospel message to "oneness with God". She described Christian Zionism as "a manifest evil" and an "insidious presence".

- **Phyllis Bennis**, a Fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington D.C. and co-chair of the U.S. Campaign to end Israeli Occupation, gave an impassioned plea for churches to rally together against the Bush Administration. Her optimism was based on the emergence, in recent times, of a second Super-Power, "Global Public Opinion". Bennis believed that a global peace movement was the only way to effectively combat the Christian Zionist policies of President Bush. She also called on churches to show greater concern for the most persecuted people of the 21st century, the Muslims

- **Stephen Zunes**, Politics Professor and Chair of the Peace and Justice Studies Program at the University of San Francisco (a Jesuit institution), focussed on the origins of the Christian Right in the U.S. during the 1970s when the struggling Republican Party recruited men like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. Zunes described Christian Zionism as a sub-set of Manichaeism, an early Church heresy which taught that reality consists of two great opposing forces: Good (God, Truth, Light) and Evil, or Darkness (Matter). Christian Zionists had no interest in the Jews per se, but only in this great cosmic battle, which would culminate in the Second Coming.
- **Fr Peter du Brul, S.J.**, an American Jesuit and teacher of Scripture, philosophy, and cultural studies in Bethlehem for 25 years, began his 'Bible study' with the comment, "the gods must be crazy". His 'study' was a philosophical (and nonsensical) treatment of Genesis 12:1-3, full of references to Aristotle, Wuthering Heights, John Donne, Mel Gibson, Paul Ricoeur, Robert de Niro, Karl Rahner, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. On two occasions de Brul used profanity, which seemed to amuse a number of people.

Sabeel Conference Press Statement

In its press statement released 18 April 2004 in the wake of Israel's assassination of Abdul Rantisi, Sabeel spoke of the commitment of over 600 delegates from over 30 countries participating in the conference "to return to their countries to pursue a political solution to the conflict in the Holy Land that is based on the enforcement of international law and existing UN resolutions." A statement entitled "Challenging Christian Zionism" was attached. Based on Jesus' words, "Blessed are the peacemakers.... (Matthew 5:9)", the statement contained Sabeel's categorical refutation of Christian Zionist doctrines as "false teaching that undermines the biblical message of love, mercy, and justice." A commitment was made to the following principles:

- We affirm that all people are created in the image of God and called to honour the dignity and respect the equal rights of every human being.
- We call upon people of good will everywhere to reject the theology of Christian Zionism and all parallel religious and ideological fundamentalisms that privilege particular people at the expense of others.
- We are committed to the power of non-violent resistance to defeat the occupation and attain a just and lasting peace.
- With renewed urgency we warn that the theology of Christian Zionism is leading to the moral justification of empire, colonization, apartheid, and oppression.

Affirming that a just and lasting peace must be based on the *Jerusalem Sabeel Document: Principles for a Just Peace in Palestine-Israel (2004)*, available on its web-site, Sabeel's vision "embraces two sovereign states, Palestine and Israel, that will enter into confederation or even a federation, possibly with other neighbouring countries, where Jerusalem becomes the federal capital." Sabeel claims that by standing on the side of justice "we open ourselves to the work of peace – and working for peace makes us children of God."

Conference Visits

Day 3 of the conference was spent in Ramallah where lectures were given at a local boys' school to give delegates the opportunity to meet local Palestinian people, especially the children. The 'cultural event' put on by the children simply fed the pro-Palestinian euphoria that was so evident that day. We were then taken to the Muqataah, the compound where Yasser Arafat has been confined by the Israeli government, and where other Palestinian terrorists have sought refuge.



A private audience had been arranged by Sabeel. Naim Ateek (right) expressed our "unanimous" support to "his excellency" Yasser Arafat, who was physically embraced by Revd Edmond Browning (left), former Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church of America. Michael Prior later presented Arafat with a book about Israel's security fence, or 'Berlin Wall' as some conference speakers referred to it. Stephen Sizer has contributed to this book. Arafat and Dr Hanan Ashrawi, a professing Christian and one of the most influential Palestinian politicians (centre), not surpris-

ingly condemned the Bush-Sharon Letters. They expressed their delight and hope, however, in seeing 'the Church', as represented by Sabeel delegates, express such solidarity with the Palestinian cause. Many stood to applaud Arafat, shook his hand, and even had photographs taken with him.

It is important to recall that on 15 February 2000, in an historic meeting at the Vatican, Pope John Paul II and Yasser Arafat signed a covenant one month before the Pope's visit to Israel (which included the dedication of the Notre Dame Conference Centre). The covenant stipulated that Jerusalem should be an international city based on international resolutions, recognized a *Palestinian* state in the land of Israel, and paved the way for the establishment of "full diplomatic relations with a Palestinian state when it is founded".



The following day, after being taken to see sections of Israel's wall, we were addressed by members of the Waqf on the steps of the Temple Mount. Sabeel had been given permission to enter the site, including the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque. In return the Waqf asked for a group photograph (top of report) and the opportunity to address conference delegates. In their address they challenged the claim that the Temple had ever stood on the site, and affirmed *our* belief in the same God by portraying Islam as the fulfilment of Judaism and Christianity. Naim Ateek again expressed *our* solidarity with those he referred to as "our Muslim brothers". Within the Dome itself Muslim women were kneeling down in 'worship'. Up above them, around the inside of the Dome, was inscribed in Arabic, "There is only one god. His name is Allah, and he has no son." This clearly presented few problems to those 'Christians' who joined with others to pray underneath the rock itself.



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Sabeel's 10th Anniversary Celebration

Revd Edmond Browning and his wife, along with the Presbyterian Church USA, were honoured by Sabeel during the celebration. A thanksgiving address by Naim Ateek then followed, in which he described Sabeel as "a yeast that is slowly affecting the dough and drawing attention to a more effective way [than Hamas, which emerged around the same time] of resisting the occupation." Addressing the evils of Empire, as exemplified by the United States, and drawing from the Book of Revelation, Ateek concluded: "Where you and I reject the lies and violence of Empire, and are faithful to the *sabeel*, to the way of God, we are living in New Jerusalem. Revelation exhorts its readers to **come out of Babylon, come out of Empire**, and dwell in New Jerusalem." Ateek later informed delegates of the assassination of Abdel Rantisi, news that was greeted with an audible groan in the auditorium. After a minute's silence I stood up, with my Bible raised aloft, and brought the following word I believed was from the Lord:

"You hypocrites! You mockers of Jesus Christ! You distorters of the word of God, the word of His truth! You are in a house not built by Jesus Christ; you are in a house that is being built by Antichrist. This has nothing to do with the Lord Jesus Christ. You have been weighed in the balance and you have been found wanting. And those of you who do know Jesus Christ, the Lord says, 'Come out, come out of her, so that you do not share in her sins and in her plagues.' And Gary [Burge], I appeal to you, I appeal to you to come out, Gary. I appeal to you who the Lord has troubled this week, come out! You who shook hands with Yasser Arafat; you who applauded Michael Prior; you are not Christians if you can do these things. The shame is on you, and you will know."

Not surprisingly the word was received with hostility, especially evident when the vast majority in the auditorium stood in one accord and began singing, "We Shall Overcome", the anthem of the civil rights movement:

*We shall overcome, We shall overcome,
We shall overcome some day.
Oh deep in my heart, I do believe,
We shall overcome some day.*

Concluding Remarks

I did not attend the final day, which was given over, in part, to panel discussions and strategy groups aimed at combating Christian Zionism on an international, political, theological, ecclesiastical, and biblical level. It had been the deliberate policy of Sabeel not to invite Christian Zionists to share the platform, although delegates were provided with a pamphlet containing 'representative' material. This was a significant failing of the conference. The representation of Christian Zionism was prejudiced and misleading as speakers lined up to ridicule and tear down what was, in fact, an extremist position. To portray as "the real anti-Semites" Christians who *do* believe in the literal fulfillment of prophecy concerning Israel's restoration, but *do not* give Israel unconditional support and *are* concerned for the Arab people, was not only irresponsible but perverse. Despite congratulating each other in the process, the speakers established nothing of any (biblical) substance in place of the 'straw man' they had constructed, called to the stand, and convicted without fair trial.

What was far more significant, however, and distressing to say the least, was to witness first-hand the union of mainstream Protestant churches with Rome and the Islamic world. This is the hour of deception and compromise, and it is time for those who truly bear the name 'Christian' to come out from this harlot and contend earnestly for **the faith** once and for all entrusted to the saints (Jude 3). Michael Prior's blasphemous comments substantiate what many within the Church have been saying for years, namely, that the end-time apostasy is being fulfilled in our day, and a one-world religious system, headed by Rome, is coming together at an alarming speed, drawing in mainstream churches and preparing the way, ultimately, for Antichrist. Sabeel is indeed a "way", the broad way that leads to destruction.

This conference had not been an assembly of independent minds offering personal, unrelated reflections. Many of these speakers have shared platforms in the past, appear alongside one another in a variety of publications, and contribute to, or are quoted in, each other's books. Michael Prior and Stephen Sizer are very much at the forefront of this movement. I believe the Lord had given me the opportunity to see for myself something of Mystery Babylon, with over 30 nations getting drunk on "the maddening wine of her adulteries" (Rev.18:3). The following scripture was shared by the minister of my fellowship during a day of prayer and fasting after the conference. May we heed what the Lord is saying to us at this time:

"Get yourself ready! Stand up and say to them whatever I command you. Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them. Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land – against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you,' declares the Lord." (Jer.1:17-19)

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