

Toward a Lutheran Response to Christian Zionism¹

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- “We are Israel’s best friend in the world because of the character we have as a nation.... This is not a political battle at all. It is a contest over whether or not the word of God is true.”
- “I stand before you today ... as an Israeli of the heart.... We hear your voice cry out in the desert, and we will never leave your side.”
- “The establishment of the nation of Israel is the fulfillment of biblical prophecy and the very essence of its fulfillment.”
- I am a “stalwart friend of Israel” — “their security is *sacrosanct*.”
- “There’s nothing that would bring the wrath of the Christian public in this country down on this government like abandoning or opposing Israel in a critical matter.”

The above quotations demonstrate a commonplace fact: there is a great deal of religiously-inflected energy within American politics surrounding the State of Israel. What may be more surprising is the identity of some of those by whom or where some of these were spoken. They were uttered, respectively, by Sen. James Inhofe (R-OK), in a December 2001 speech on the Senate floor;² by former House Speaker Tom DeLay (R-TX), in a July 2003 speech delivered in Israel’s Knesset building;³ by President Jimmy Carter (D-GA) in remarks made in celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the State of Israel;⁴ by Sen. Barack Obama (D-IL) during a February 2008 presidential primary debate;⁵ and by the late fundamentalist pastor, Jerry Falwell, in October 2002.⁶

The newest organization seeking to channel all of this religiously inspired political energy is Christians United for Israel (CUFI). CUFI is led by John Hagee, pastor of Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Tex. Hagee’s church, with a stated membership of 16,000, has given millions of dollars in recent years to various groups within Israel. In the summer of 2006, CUFI’s inaugural conference drew roughly 3500 Christian Zionists to Washington, DC.

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² James M. Inhofe, “Senate Floor Statement of Senator Inhofe: America’s Stake in Israel’s War on Terrorism,” 4 December 2001.

³ Tom DeLay, “Be Not Afraid,” 30 July 2003.

⁴ President James Carter and Prime Minister Menachim Begin, “30th Anniversary of the State of Israel Remarks at a White House Reception” (30 May 1978), available through *The Jewish Virtual Library*, available at http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/U.S.-Israel/Carter_Begin4.html (accessed 10 March 2008).

⁵ “Obama: Israel’s security sacrosanct,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 27 February 2008.

⁶ Quoted in “Zion’s Christian Soldiers: Conservative Christian Says Founder of Islam Set a Bad Example,” *CBS News: 60 Minutes*, 8 June 2003 (available at www.cbsnews.com). This story accompanied a rebroadcast of the original report from Bob Simon on 6 October 2002, in which Jerry Falwell declared “I think Mohammed was a terrorist. I read enough of the history of his life, written by both Muslims and non-Muslims, that he was a violent man, a man of war.”

CUFI is a highly organized and mobilized political organization. Emulating the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, CUFI envisions itself as a “Christian AIPAC.”⁷ The group’s initial policy statements included supporting Israel’s military strikes on Lebanon in 2006 and, within the context of the U.S. war in Iraq, a preemptive strike on the nuclear capabilities of Iran. CUFI’s clearest policy goals are articulated in relation to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. “The stated purpose of CUFI is to support Israel in matters related to our understanding of the Bible,” James Hutchens, a CUFI regional leader, is quoted as saying. “The implications of that include the fact that we do not support a two-state solution; we do not support ‘land for peace.’”⁸

John Hagee himself is a leading purveyor of religious rhetoric regarding U.S. foreign policy. Often, his ire is directed squarely at U.S. political leaders. In a sermon preached before his Cornerstone congregation, for instance, Hagee directed his message to national politicians: “For those of you who are in Washington, Jerusalem is not up for negotiation with anyone for any reason at any time in the future, regardless of what your Roadmap of Peace calls for. There are people in this nation who still believe the Bible takes precedent over Washington, D.C.”⁹ At the 2007 AIPAC policy conference, Hagee warned of a growing conspiracy against Israel: “I am concerned that in the coming months yet another attempt will be made to parcel out parts of Israel in a futile effort to appease Israel’s enemies in the Middle East. I believe that misguided souls in Europe, I believe that the misguided souls in the political brothel that is now the United Nations and sadly—and sadly even our own State Department will try once again to turn Israel into crocodile food.”¹⁰ A little over a year before, during a CUFI dinner addressed by the Israeli Ambassador to the United States, Hagee described Israel’s conflict with Lebanon as “a battle of good and evil” and reminded his audience that American support for the State of Israel was “God’s foreign policy.”¹¹

Calling support for Israel “God’s foreign policy” can sound quaint. Doing so while holding conferences addressed by sitting United States congresspersons (including Joseph Liberman, Rick Santorum, and Sam Brownback), addressed by former Israeli Prime Ministers like Shimon Peres and Benjamin Netanyahu and featuring a “Middle East Briefing” presented by former CIA director James Woolsey and former Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff Moshe Ya’alon indicates a movement that portends far-reaching consequences for global well-being.

It is a stretch, however, to say that Christian Zionist leaders actively shape U.S. policy toward the Middle East. Instead, we see a situation in which Christian Zionist leaders are open to being used by politicians, politicians who in turn see in Christian Zionist leaders access to an easily mobilized political bloc. In the end, Christian Zionist activism serves to maintain the status quo of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The status quo, however, is harmful, even deadly, for the vast majority of Israelis and Palestinians.

⁷ Ori Nir, “Christian Pro-Israel Lobby Gets a Boost,” *The Forward*, 3 April 2006.

⁸ James D. Besser, “Growing Acceptance Seen Of Fiery Pastor,” *The Jewish Week* (New York), 4 May 2007.

⁹ John Hagee, “Pastor John Hagee on Christian Zionism,” interview by Terry Gross, *Fresh Air from WHYY*, 18 September 2006. The rhetoric of official CUFI print publications are more analytical and less incendiary. See, for instance, John Hagee, “CUFI and the Peace Process,” in *The Torch: Christians United for Israel Magazine* (October 2007): 6–7.

¹⁰ John Hagee, “Speech at AIPAC Policy Conference 2007,” delivered 11 March 2007, available at <http://www.aipac.org/Publications/SpeechesByPolicymakers/Hagee-PC-2007.pdf>

¹¹ David D. Kirkpatrick, “For Evangelicals, Supporting Israel Is ‘God’s Foreign Policy,’” *New York Times*, 14 November 2006.

Christian Zionism is a politically mobilized strand of Christian fundamentalism committed to preserving Jewish control over all of historic Palestine to ensure the realization of the movement's own end-times hope. Both a political theology and a philosophy of history, Christian Zionism builds on the futurist system of biblical prophecy interpretation known as "premillennial dispensationalism," a system popularly expressed as "Armageddon theology" or "rapture theology." Christian Zionism places the State of Israel (and, often, the United States) at the center of God's purposes for "the end of the age." The label "Christian Zionism" refers to something quite distinct from well-intentioned Christian efforts to support Jewish well-being;¹² the movement is more than general Christian support for Jewish Zionism or the State of Israel.¹³

Of the many verses key for Christian Zionist biblical interpretation, two have figured prominently in Christian Zionist political commentary concerning the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The first is Joel 3:2—"I will enter into judgment with them there, on account of my people and my heritage Israel, because they have scattered them among the nations. They have divided my land." Christian Zionists expressed shock and surprise when Ariel Sharon, long seen as a champion of religiously-motivated Israeli settlers in occupied Palestinian territory, announced plans for Israel's unilateral "disengagement" from Gaza. The removal of Israeli settlers was undertaken in August 2005. In November of 2005, Sharon announced the formation of the Kadima party, perceived as more centrist because of its stance on unilaterally establishing a Palestinian state. Less than two months later, on 5 January 2006, Sharon was incapacitated by a massive stroke. That day, on *The 700 Club*, televangelist Pat Robertson pronounced that although Sharon was "very likeable," the prophet Joel tells us that "God has enmity against those who 'divide my land.'" Robertson then went on to say that the 1995 assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was "the same thing." Sharon, Robertson concluded, "was dividing God's land, and I would say woe unto any prime minister of Israel who takes a similar course to appease the E.U., the United Nations or United States of America. God said, 'This land belongs to me, you better leave it alone.'" ¹⁴

Another consistent biblical favorite for Christian Zionists is Genesis 12:3—"I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse." Quite apart from the verse's biblical context this verse has long been understood by Christian Zionists as referring to the modern State of Israel, the primary catalyst for the prophetic countdown. Therefore, for Christian Zionists, our alignment with the State of Israel is the measure of our faithfulness to God's purposes.

¹² An overly simplistic definition is accepted, for instance, by Stephen Sizer, *Christian Zionism: Road-Map to Armageddon?* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 2004).

¹³ In this way, Christian Zionism is distinct from what has come to be known as "Holocaust Theology," which is a specifically post-Holocaust development in Jewish-Christian relations. This essay, therefore, does not address the efforts of important scholars like Roy and Alice Eckardt, Franklin Littell, or Franklin Sherman. For a discussion of these thinkers, and others, as representatives of a "liberal Christian Zionism," see Stephen R. Haynes, "Christian Holocaust Theology: A Critical Reassessment," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62:2 (Summer 1994): 553–85.

¹⁴ See "U.S. Christian broadcaster says Sharon's stroke divine retribution," *Agence France-Presse*, 5 January 2006; and Daniela Deane, "White House Denounces Robertson's Remarks on Sharon," *Washington Post*, 6 January 2006. A transcript of the remarks was posted by Media Matters for America (www.mediamatters.org). Soon after, it was announced that Robertson's plans for a biblically-themed amusement park in northern Israel would lose Israeli backing due to the offensive nature of his comments. See Greg Myre, "Israelis' Anger at Evangelist May Delay Christian Center," *New York Times*, 12 January 2006. The business deal was soon restored.

Christian Zionist policy analyst Michael Evans, who first rose to prominence after the 1981 publication of *Israel: America's Key to Survival*,¹⁵ has made extensive use of Genesis 12:3. His 2003 book, *Beyond Iraq*, was written to provide biblically-based arguments against the “Roadmap” for peace introduced in April 2003 by the Quartet (the United States, Russia, the European Union, and the United Nations).¹⁶ Instead of “forcing” Israel to enter into a land-for-peace settlement, Evans argues that “both the Old and New Testaments make abundantly clear that Christians must support Israel in every possible way.” To this end, Evans identifies Genesis 12:3 as a “selfish reason” Christians should support Israel: “When we support Israel we are supporting the only nation that was created by an act of God. We are declaring that the Bible is true.... Yet if we touch Jerusalem, which is prophecy, America will lose the blessing of God and America will tragically lose the war on terrorism.”¹⁷

To be sure, Christian Zionism is a political movement. It is, however, a political movement built on a particular theological system, namely a system called premillennial dispensationalism. Many aspects of this theological system can help explain the political manifestations of Christian Zionism.

Premillennialism was the first component of the system to develop in the nineteenth century. In the early nineteenth century, many evangelicals, following Augustine, did not subscribe to a literal thousand-year reign of Christ at the “end of the age” (a phrase drawn from Matt. 28:20). Others, who would soon become known as post-millennialists, believed that “the gospel would advance through the world until the establishment of the millennium” and that Christ would return “after that period of peace and prosperity.” In the 1820s, Edward Irving, a minister of the Church of Scotland, began teaching “premillennialism.” Premillennialism quickly gained adherents through its promise of an imminent return of Jesus to put right the ills and injustices of our sinful world; the system “transformed the whole outlook of its adherents,” giving “a heightened significance to everyday life and an added urgency to evangelism.”¹⁸

John Nelson Darby, of the Brethren movement, joined premillennialist hope to a system of “futurist” biblical interpretation. Instead of assuming that some “end-time” prophecies had been fulfilled, Darby insisted that all prophecies would be fulfilled in the future and that the timing of Jesus’ return could not be predicted. Apocalyptic events would take place only in the future as the dispensation of the “church age” expired and the calamities of the “Great Tribulation” commenced. The truly innovative component of Darby’s system—which came to be known as “premillennial dispensationalism”—was that true believers would not endure the seven-year period of the Tribulation. Instead, at an unexpected moment, in the twinkling of an eye (1 Cor.

¹⁵ A condensed version of the book was distributed by Mike Evans Ministries, Inc., in 1983. The cover of both editions depicts a scimitar with Arabic on the blade held by a hand wearing a Soviet, hammer-and-sickle ring, ripping through the joined flags of the United States and the State of Israel.

¹⁶ The full name of the peace plan was “A Performance-Based Roadmap to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.” Contemporary Christian Zionist literature suspects *each* of the non-U.S. members of the Quartet to be unabashed enemies of the State of Israel; for many, the U.S. is the only potentially righteous component of this group.

¹⁷ Michael D. Evans, *Beyond Iraq—The Next Move: Ancient Prophecy and Modern Day Conspiracy Collide* (Lakeland, Fla.: White Stone, 2003), 120–21.

¹⁸ David W. Bebbington, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 192.

15:52), they would be raptured, caught up to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thess. 4:17). The “second coming” of Christ, to inaugurate the millennium, would not occur until after the final battle of Armageddon following the Tribulation.

Tied together, Darby’s system of premillennial dispensationalism made for a highly dramatic approach to the Christian life: you conduct yourself properly at all times because the rapture could occur at any moment and you do not want to be left behind to endure the suffering of the Tribulation. Between 1862 and 1877, Darby traveled seven times to North America. During these visits, evangelical leader Dwight L. Moody was swayed to a premillennial dispensationalist perspective. The system was thus tied to one of the most dynamic proponents of evangelicalism within North American culture. The system was finally standardized through work of Cyrus Scofield published as the *Scofield Reference Bible* by Oxford University Press in 1909.

Premillennial dispensationalism is not by itself sufficient to produce Christian Zionism. Although it is, in a sense, a philosophy of history seeking to comprehend political developments, premillennial dispensationalism demands neither active engagement in worldly matters nor efforts toward political mobilization. The defining mark of premillennial dispensationalist Christian Zionism is not its theological system, but is instead its active engagement in political activity on behalf of Jews in order to serve the ends of that theological system.

The biblical literalism of British and American renewal movements often focused on the biblical promise that Jews would be restored to historic Palestine. These claims were often tied to domestic political implications; thus, Christian Zionism was always insipient in various forms of non-conformist Protestant faith. In 1621, for instance, King James I felt it necessary to censor a 200-page book titled *The World’s Great Restauration, or the Calling of the Iewes and (with them) of all the Nations and Kingdomes of the Earth to the Faith of Christ*.¹⁹

In the United States, the first robust political mobilization of dispensational faith was accomplished by William Blackstone (1841–1935), a Chicago-area businessman active in evangelical efforts to proselytize Jews.²⁰ Blackstone’s first book, *Jesus Is Coming*, was first published in 1878.²¹ For considerations of Christian Zionism, however, Blackstone’s more important contribution came with his first memorial, presented to President Harrison on 5 March 1891. Titled “Palestine for the Jews,” it appealed to the “Christian nations of Europe” to “now restore” the Jews of Russia to “the land of which they were so cruelly despoiled by our Roman ancestors.”²²

Blackstone was a visionary Zionist leader. Given the date of his first memorial, it is important to note that Theodor Herzl’s pamphlet, *Der Judenstaat*, widely accepted as sparking the movement of Jewish political Zionism, was not published until 1896. Christian Zionism

¹⁹ This episode is richly told by Victoria Clark, *Allies for Armageddon: The Rise of Christian Zionism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

²⁰ Yaakov Ariel provides an excellent introduction to premillennial dispensationalism, William Blackstone, and the equally influential Arno Gaebelein in his important study, *On Behalf of Israel: American Fundamentalist Attitudes toward Jews, Judaism, and Zionism, 1865–1945* (Brooklyn, NY: Carolson, 1991). See also Hilton Obenzinger, “In the Shadow of ‘God’s Sun-Dial’: The Construction of American Christian Zionism and the Blackstone Memorial,” *Stanford Electronic Humanities Review* 5:1 (1996), available online at <http://www.stanford.edu/group/SHR/5-1/text/obenzinger.html>.

²¹ Blackstone’s *Jesus is Coming*, often with the author simply listed as “W.E.B.,” went through many revisions and expansions. Of particular note is the 316 Yiddish translation published in 1927: William E. Blackstone, *Jesus Is Coming*, translated into Yiddish by Rev. P.M. Gorodishz (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1927).

²² A second, less influential, memorial was presented in 1916 to President Woodrow Wilson.

precedes Jewish political Zionism and is not dependent upon it. It is, in fact, its own movement, operating under its own motivations and to its own ends. Jewish Zionist leaders in the nineteenth century were aware of Christian Zionism; Jewish Zionist leaders like Herzl and Chaim Weizmann were aware of Christian efforts and discussed how Jews might best relate to those efforts. Jews are still involved in that conversation today.

Through the leadership of Blackstone and others, including Dwight Moody and Cyrus Scofield, premillennial dispensationalism and its derivative, Christian Zionism, began to affect the fabric of American religious culture. The literal interpretation of biblical prophecy was the foundational commitment of the premillennial dispensationalism and Christian Zionism expressed by Darby, Blackstone, Scofield and others. This commitment found support in the early twentieth-century movement of fundamentalism. When Volume 11 of *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth* was published in 1915, it included a paper from Christian Zionist writer Arno Gaebelein titled “Fulfilled Prophecy a Potent Argument for the Bible.”

The broad appeal of American evangelicalism, a product of the fundamentalist movement, helped infuse American religiosity with the theological and ideological commitments of Christian Zionism. Millions of American Christians accepted the 1948 founding and 1967 expansion of the State of Israel as fulfillments of biblical prophecy. In the month following the 1967 war, the editor of the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* offered this reflection: “That for the first time in more than 2,000 years Jerusalem is now completely in the hands of the Jews gives a student of the Bible a thrill and a renewed faith in the accuracy and validity of the Bible.” The pages of *Christianity Today* marveled at Israel’s military prowess and assured the world that Israel’s wars—defensive or offensive—were God’s will.²³ Following 1967, premillennial dispensationalism achieved new heights of popularity in U.S. popular culture. In 1970, Hal Lindsey published *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, an effort to wed contemporary headlines with prophecy interpretation; the book proved so popular that in 1979 it was made in a documentary film narrated by Orson Welles. 1995 saw the introduction of the Left Behind series of novels, written by evangelical powerbroker Tim LaHaye and Christian writer Jerry Jenkins. The Left Behind enterprise now “includes 16 titles in the adult series, juvenile novels, audio books, devotionals, and graphic novels. Seven titles in the adult series have reached #1 on the bestseller lists for *The New York Times*, *U.S.A Today*, and *Publishers Weekly*.” Since 1995, the authors have sold over 65 million copies of the adult books alone.²⁴ Far beyond what William Blackstone could have ever imagined, both *The Late, Great Planet Earth* and Left Behind have helped ensure that many American Christians, in agreement with Senator Inhofe, feel that foreign policy related to the State of Israel involves not only a “political battle” but “a contest over whether or not the word of God is true.”

The political narrative nurtured by Christian Zionism has been easily absorbed by certain elements of American political culture. Israeli scholar Yaakov Ariel credits this ease of translation to William Blackstone: “Blackstone devised a theory that ... the United States had a special role and mission in God’s plans for humanity, that of a modern Cyrus, assigned the task of restoring Jews to Zion and thus helping to advance the messianic timetable.... This vision of America ... enabled American evangelicals to combine their messianic belief and understanding

²³ L. Nelson Bell, “Unfolding Destiny,” *Christianity Today* (21 July 1967), 28. An editorial one month earlier carried this title: “War Sweeps the Bible Lands: Frantic Nations Forget that the Prophetic Vision of World Peace is Messianic,” *Christianity Today* (23 June 1967). There, it is noted that UN concerns are marginal compared to God’s prophetic timetable.

²⁴ Promotional information from the Left Behind website (www.leftbehind.com).

of the course of human history with their sense of American patriotism.”²⁵ Many, however, find repugnant Christian Zionism’s easy melding of fundamentalist faith and American nationalism. Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, in a Nov. 2007 interview with a British Islamic lifestyle magazine, accused Christian Zionists of being too connected to “the chosen nation myth of America, meaning that what happens in America is very much at the heart of God’s purpose for humanity.”²⁶ Canadian Lutheran historian Paul Merkley sees this “patriotic conservatism” as the foundation for the relationship between Israeli politicians and American evangelicals.²⁷ In 1986, Nimrod Novik, a former adviser to Shimon Peres, observed that “A most important instrument in American Jewish efforts to secure U.S. support for Israel has been the promotion of the idea of the two-dimensional link between the U.S. and Israel: first, the cultural-ideological-moral affinity; second, Israel’s potential and actual contribution to American interests.”²⁸

While there are many reasons for North Americans to support the State of Israel—it is the only democracy in the region; it is an ally against terrorism—the fundamentalist/nationalist nexus within evangelical Christian Zionism provides fertile ground for nurturing Novik’s “cultural-ideological-moral affinity” between the United States and the State of Israel. After Israel’s bombardment of Lebanon, a July 2006 Pew Research Poll found that “a 44%-plurality of U.S. adults say they sympathize more with Israel, while 9% sympathize with the Palestinians, figures that have remained largely unchanged in polls taken since late 2001.”²⁹ Later that same year, a Zogby International poll of likely voters in the 2006 mid-term elections found that 31% of Americans agreed or strongly agreed with a basic definition of Christian Zionism, that “Israel must have all of the promised land, including Jerusalem, to facilitate the second coming of the messiah.”³⁰ By contrast, the *Globe & Mail* reported in 2004 that 89% of Canadians “believe that both Israel and the Palestinians equally share responsibility for ongoing violence” in the conflict and that 83% of Canadians “believe Ottawa should remain neutral in its approach to the Middle East conflict.”³¹ These poll numbers show that, in the United States at least, it is relatively non-controversial for politicians to champion the State of Israel or for preachers like John Hagee to advocate military action on Israel’s behalf as “God’s foreign policy.” The theological commitments of premillennial dispensationalism and Christian Zionism have helped till the seedbed for this political reality.

²⁵ Yaakov Ariel, “How Are Jews and Israel Portrayed in the Left Behind Series? A Historical Discussion of Jewish-Christian Relations,” in *Rapture, Revelation, and the End Times: Exploring the Left Behind Series*, ed. Bruce David Forbes and Jeanne Halgren Kilde (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 137.

²⁶ Sarah Joseph, “The Archbishop of Canterbury,” *Emel Magazine* (Nov. 2007): 32–36.

²⁷ Paul Charles Merkley, *Christian Attitudes towards the State of Israel* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), 200.

²⁸ Nimrod Novik, *The United States and Israel: Domestic Determinants of a Changing U.S. Commitment* (Boulder: Westview, 1986), 71.

²⁹ Pew Center for the People & the Press, “Americans’ Support for Israel Unchanged by Recent Hostilities: Domestic Political Distemper Continues,” 26 July 2006, available at <http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/281.pdf> (accessed 4 March 2008).

³⁰ From the full report of the survey: “Those living in the east (66%) are the most likely to say they do not believe in Christian Zionism, while those living in south (35%) and in the central Great Lakes region (36%) are the most likely to believe. Protestants (40%) are significantly more likely to believe than are Catholics (19%). African Americans (40%) are more likely to believe in this than either Hispanics (33%) or whites (29%). Republicans (37%) are more likely to believe in Christian Zionism than are Democrats or independents (28% each).”

³¹ Jeff Sallot, “Neutrality on Mideast favoured, polls find,” *Globe & Mail*, 12 November 2004.

Christian Zionists of the premillennial dispensationalist variety often approach Muslims and Jews through the prism of their apocalyptic hopes. More detailed discussions of some of the interfaith implications of Christian Zionism are available in other venues.³²

Jews have an ambivalent relationship with Christian Zionism, a movement long suspected of being tied to clandestine proselytizing efforts. The most public evidence of this ambivalence came in 2007 when the thousands of Christian Zionists who arrived in Jerusalem for the Sukkot celebrations organized by the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem were shocked when the “chief rabbinate urged Jews to stay away from the event, saying some of the groups want to convert them to Christianity.”³³

The founding of Christians United for Israel (CUFI) initiated a spirited conversation among Jews about the proper Jewish approach to Christian Zionism, a conversation focused on the ultimate concern of Jews for communal survival. While some Jews have been willing to receive the material benefits of Christian Zionist support for the bolstering of the State of Israel, others are not so sure. Many Jews approach potential relationships with Christian Zionists very pragmatically. As one rabbi has said of John Hagee: “I don’t like his politics or his theology.... But we live in a time when friends of Israel are few and far between.”³⁴ Some prominent leaders within the organized Jewish community, such as James Rudin or Abraham Foxman, offer criticisms of Christian Zionists, but only on their domestic policy agendas. Other critiques are grounded in history as opposed to current political maneuvering. Israeli journalist Gershom Gorenberg is bothered by how Christian Zionists see “Jews as actors in a Christian drama leading toward the end of days.” He insists that “real Zionism, as a Jewish movement, is ... aimed at taking Jews out of the mythological realm and making them into normal actors in history, controlling their fate and acting for pragmatic reasons connected to the here and now. So what’s called Christian Zionism is actually very distant from Zionism.”³⁵

Christian Zionism is potentially dehumanizing to Jews; the movement also provides an ideological framework for maintaining the unsustainable status quo of life for Muslims and Christians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. CUFI executive director David Brog, who is Jewish, has written that while the U.S. is not fighting a particular “tactic – terrorism” or “religion – Islam,” Americans “are fighting a particular type of Muslim who has chosen to use terror—the targeted murder of innocents—as the tool with which to attack, demoralize and ultimately destroy Judeo-Christian civilization.”³⁶ Brog’s orientation toward the defense of “Judeo-Christian civilization” against even a “particular type of Muslim” indicates a presumed exclusion of Islam and Muslims from the possibilities of that civilization. This presumption of a civilizational divide—a divide between the Islamic and the western, “Judeo-Christian” worlds—

³² See, for instance, Robert O. Smith, “Interfaith Implications of Contemporary Christian Zionism,” *American Baptist Quarterly*, forthcoming. See also Robert O. Smith, “Jewish-Christian Difficulties in Challenging Christian Zionism,” *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 7:5 (May 2007), available online at www.elca.org/jle.

³³ “Rabbis told Jews to shun Evangelicals,” *Jerusalem Post*, 24 September 2007. For his part, John Hagee has been clear that conversion is not part of his agenda, a position that has some support in the details of dispensationalist theology.

³⁴ James D. Besser, “Growing Acceptance Seen Of Fiery Pastor,” *The Jewish Week* (New York), 4 May 2007.

³⁵ Fresh Air from WHYY, “Gershom Gorenberg on Christian Zionism” (September 18, 2006), available at www.npr.org. See also Gershom Gorenberg, “Unorthodox Alliance: Israeli and Jewish Interests Are Better Served by Keeping a Polite Distance from the Christian Right,” *Washington Post*, 11 October 2002, A37.

³⁶ Christians United For Israel (CUFI) Rapid Response Update (e-mail), 22 August 2006.

feeds John Hagee's perspectives on U.S. Middle East policy. "I would hope the United States would join Israel in a military preemptive strike to take out the nuclear capability of Iran for the salvation of Western civilization," he has said. "I don't believe that the Islamofascist mentality will ever respond favorably to diplomacy. Their agenda is the destruction of Israel and death to Jews and Christians."³⁷

The perceived anti-Muslim attitudes of some Christian Zionists have resulted in responses from various quarters. In April 2007, Rep. Betty McCollum (DFL-MN) rejected an invitation to speak at a regional CUFI event. In her letter to the event organizer, Rep. McCollum asserted, with documentation, that several "well publicized statements by Pastor Hagee demonstrate extremism, bigotry and intolerance that is repugnant." According to Rep. McCollum, Hagee's "toxic statements pollute the environment of peaceful religious coexistence, cooperation and respect that we strive to achieve in America, and especially in Minnesota, among Christians, Jews, Muslims and people of all faiths."³⁸

Palestinians, who stand to bear the negative effects of foreign policy ideologies advocated by Christian Zionism, have begun to take notice of the movement. In May 2006, Hamed al-Tamimi, a member of the Supreme (Islamic) Judicial Council within Hamas, and director of the party's department for interreligious dialogue, released a short article asserting that both Jewish and Christian Zionists "agree on hatred of Islam and the Muslims and on [the goal] to destroy them."³⁹

The most highly informed Palestinian responses to Christian Zionism have originated with Palestinian Christians, especially those with close ties to North American Christian communities.⁴⁰ The most consistent Palestinian Christian engagement with Christian Zionism has been from Munib A. Younan, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL). In January 2003, the ELCJHL newsletter noted the fact that Bishop Younan, speaking to a Danish newspaper, had declared Christian Zionism to be a heresy: "I hereby declare that Christian Zionism is not only a sick theology but it is a heresy, right along with Arianism and Nestorianism and others. I believe it is time we named this misinterpretation of Christ and the gospel for what it is." The newsletter identified three objectionable aspects to Christian Zionism, including 1) its promotion of Jesus "not as the Savior but as a military general," 2) its treatment of Jewish people simply as "characters ... in the so-called final battle," and 3) as "anti-justice, anti-peace, anti-reconciliation."⁴¹ Bishop Younan was one of the four signatories of the *Jerusalem Declaration on Christian Zionism*, issued in August 2006 by the Patriarch and Local Heads of Churches in Jerusalem.⁴² In May 2007, Bishop Younan published a major article on the theological and political implications of Christian Zionism in *The Journal of*

³⁷ David Horowitz, "Evangelicals Seeing the Error of 'Replacement Theology,'" *Jerusalem Post*, 20 March 2006.

³⁸ The letter, along with other documents, can be found on the website of Churches for Middle East Peace: http://www.cmep.org/Legislative_Issues/McCollum_Hammond_%20Letter.pdf.

³⁹ Hana Levi Julian, "PA Religious Group Says Christian Zionists Worship Satan," *Arutz Sheva*, 8 May 2006, available at www.israelnationalnews.com. The original article was translated and distributed by Palestinian Media Watch (www.pmw.org.il).

⁴⁰ See, for instance, Naim Ateek, Cedar Duaybis, and Maurine Tobin, *Challenging Christian Zionism: Theology, Politics, and the Israel-Palestine Conflict* (London: Melisende, 2005).

⁴¹ Bishop Younan's analysis is reproduced as a part of Ann E. Hafften, "Challenge the Implications of 'Christian Zionism,'" *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 5:5 (May 2005), available through <http://www.elca.org/jle/>.

⁴² Other signatories included Patriarch Michel Sabbah, Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem; Archbishop Swerios Malki Mourad, Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate in Jerusalem; and Bishop Riah Abu El-Assal, Episcopal Church of Jerusalem and the Middle East.

Lutheran Ethics, an online publication of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.⁴³ Bishop Younan seeks to proclaim his understanding that “My Jesus is never the Jesus of the sword. My Jesus is the Jesus of the cross.”

Some Christians in the West have been critical of Arab Christians who do not criticize Arab Muslims as they should. In some writing, it seems that if Palestinian Christians cannot be understood as suffering under the yoke of Islamic oppression, they must be comprehended as having “sided” with Islam and therefore as having forfeited North American Christian accompaniment and solidarity.⁴⁴ It seems that, for some western Christians, one’s strong self-identification as a Palestinian Christian indicates that one falls on the non-“Judeo-Christian” side of the civilizational divide. This rejection pains their Palestinian and other Arab Christian sisters and brothers to their souls. What is the proper response to Christian Zionists (and other Christians) in North America who have tragically allowed the political expediency of denigrating Islam to preclude the possibility of relationship between themselves and their coreligionists preserving the faith in the land where Jesus walked?

In 2007, the Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America voted, in part, to “acknowledge the Churchwide Strategy for Engagement in Israel and Palestine, including its call for ‘increased engagement with conservative Christians and a clearer and more forceful expression of Lutheran theology in the public debate.’”⁴⁵ The call to engage in this public debate, however, involves the ELCA in difficult conversations since consideration of Christian Zionism necessarily involves discussions of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In all levels of this conversation, we must remember our call to a ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18), a ministry that fosters reconciliation between neighbors whom we are called to serve and love. We are not called to be political pundits, espousing one “side” of a conflict in order to win the argument at any cost. That is not our call. Instead, we are called to be peace builders. That means that the task to which we are called is far more difficult.

Reconciliation is a difficult ministry, and in it we often fall short (Rom. 3:23). If it is not responsive to the demands of history, American liberal Christian criticism of the State of Israel can be shrill and one-sided. When that tone is struck, one can fairly ask, “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?” (Matt. 7:3) Lutherans, on the other hand, never have the option of engaging these conversations in an historical vacuum. Lutheran approaches to questions of Jewish-Christian relations, including conversations regarding the State of Israel, are always shaped by our historical context.

Specifically, Lutherans accept that participation in these conversations is informed by Luther’s writings on Jews and Judaism,⁴⁶ by our sinful quietism during World War II, by our

⁴³ Munib A. Younan, “An Ethical Critique of Christian Zionism,” *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 7:5 (May 2007), available through <http://www.elca.org/jle/>.

⁴⁴ “Accompaniment” is the foundational theological commitment of the ELCA’s approach to global mission.

⁴⁵ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “2007 Churchwide Assembly: Preliminary Minutes,” Plenary Session Eleven, 123. This portion of the assembly’s action was taken in response to a memorial from the Metropolitan Chicago Synod of the ELCA. The Churchwide Strategy, adopted at the 2005 assembly, has been implemented through the “Peace Not Walls” campaign (www.elca.org/peacenotwalls).

⁴⁶ For ELCA Lutherans, a good place to start is the “Declaration of the ELCA to the Jewish Community,” adopted by the ELCA Church Council in April 1994. Noting especially the “anti-Judaic diatribes” found in Martin

complicity in the Shoah, and by the entire history of Jewish persecution at the hands of Christians. Bearing witness to our historical burden, our first step in these conversations is one of humility and vulnerability. Nevertheless, even when reminded that what treasures we have are in clay jars (2 Cor. 4:7), we also bear witness to our call to speak truth and to build justice in God's world. It may be that addressing the challenge of Christian Zionism is a step toward taking the log out of our own American Christian eye.⁴⁷

So how exactly should leaders within the ELCA approach our Churchwide Assembly's call for "increased engagement with conservative Christians and a clearer and more forceful expression of Lutheran theology in the public debate"? A first step is to recognize that, as with all ecumenical and interfaith engagement, we do not need to be defensive or overly apologetic. We should instead offer a positive statement of what we believe, what we are, and what we are called to. Christian Zionism challenges us toward critical theological reflection and critical ethical reflection. Even more fundamentally, it challenges us to articulate how we read the Bible. That is why the *Book of Faith* initiative is so important for the ELCA.⁴⁸ Specifically, since Christian Zionism is based on an interpretation of the Bible, we have something to say about that as Lutherans. That is why Barbara Rossing's book, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*, is so vital to this conversation.⁴⁹

Another part of reading the Bible through the challenge of Christian Zionism is our own reclaiming of apocalyptic hope. We also hope in the return of Jesus; we confess that hope during every gathering of our worshipping assemblies. If we dismiss apocalyptic hope as a vital category of faith and fail to respond to the questions people have about the apocalyptic language common in American Christian culture, somebody else will gladly supply answers. From a theological perspective, how do we respond when apocalyptic hope is used not by oppressed, marginal groups, but by representatives of the Christian community situated firmly in centers of privilege and power? What does it mean that, in our time, the apocalyptic visions of Daniel and Revelation and Ezekiel—all written to sustain the weary with a word of hope—have been taken over by those in power, so that apocalyptic hope becomes a tool of empire, an apologia for imperialism?⁵⁰ What does it mean when we forget that Martin Luther had a vital, apocalyptic hope that informed his faith and drove his action throughout his life? With Luther, we confess that Jesus will indeed come again. We have faith, however, that this coming will not be one of fear and destruction, but one of hope. As the writer of Hebrews says, "Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him" (Hebrews 9:28).

Luther's later writings, the Declaration confessed "the complicity of our own tradition within this history of hatred" and expressed "urgent desire to live out our faith in Jesus Christ with love and respect for the Jewish people." See "The Declaration of the ELCA to the Jewish Community" (19 April 1994), available online at <http://www.elca.org/ecumenical/interreligious/jewish/declaration.html>.

⁴⁷ For this reason, critiques of Christian Zionism should not be a back door toward critiquing the State of Israel or Zionism. Such an approach would in fact be anachronistic since, as was established above, Christian Zionism is not at all an addendum to Jewish political Zionism; the former historically precedes the latter and is not dependent on it.

⁴⁸ "Book of Faith" is a five year initiative for ELCA Lutherans to read the Bible. See www.elca.org/bookoffaith/

⁴⁹ See Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in The Book of Revelation* (New York: Basic, 2005).

⁵⁰ For a challenging and wide-reaching engagement with these questions, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), esp. chapter 4.

If we imagine ourselves as mainline or mainstream North American Christians, we risk imagining premillennial dispensationalism and Christian Zionism as fringe movements; if we are in the center, they are on the edge. It has been estimated, however, that 10 to 15 million Americans are doctrinal believers in dispensationalism. The historian Paul Boyer, referencing people who revere the Bible but who don't get around to reading it all that often, says that this even greater population is "susceptible to popularizers who confidently weave Bible passages into highly imaginative end-time scenarios or promulgate particular schemes of prophetic interpretation."⁵¹ A more recent historian, Amy Johnson Frykholm, takes issue with the view that premillennial dispensationalism is a fringe phenomenon to which normal people might be susceptible: "Perhaps *Left Behind* forces us to confront evangelicalism as a central part of American culture, not hidden away in marginalized subculture, but fully engaged in creating and sustaining 'general' popular culture. In order to understand *Left Behind's* significance, we need to cease thinking of evangelicalism as an isolated and marginalized subculture that occasionally erupts into popular culture with events like *Left Behind*.... Instead, we need to recognize how influential conservative Protestantism has been in shaping the American cultural landscape that we all share."⁵² If Dr. Frykholm is correct, and I believe she is, we must accept premillennial dispensationalism and Christian Zionism as primary sources for the religious landscape of the United States.

So where does this leave us as the ELCA? How do we fit within the U.S. religious landscape? Some helpful analysis comes from an unlikely source: an article written sixteen years ago by an evangelical historian and published in a (generally) Catholic journal: Mark Noll, writing in *First Things* in 1992 on what he called "The Lutheran Difference,"⁵³ just four years after the founding of the ELCA. Noll begins with an extended analysis of how from one perspective, Lutherans in America are "quite ordinarily American," "inconspicuous" and, in fact, "remarkably unremarkable."⁵⁴ He observes, however, that these characteristics don't square with "the penetrating vision of Luther, the scholarly aplomb of Melancthon, the irenic efficiency of the Concord formulators, the surging brilliance of Bach, the passionate wisdom of Kierkegaard, or the heroic integrity of Bonhoeffer."

Noll then goes on to trace Lutheran non-contribution to the American religious scene from the reactions of theologians like Charles Krauth (1823–1883) and C.F. Walther (1811–1887) to the assimilating project of Samuel Simon Schmucker (1799–1873). Through these and other "like-minded confessionalists," Noll says, "American Lutheranism turned back toward Europe." In the late nineteenth century, American Lutheranism went underground. This, however, is a happy absence. Without dismissing Schmucker's vital contributions to theology and faithfulness, Noll argues that "by not following Schmucker's path into the wider worlds of nineteenth-century American evangelicalism," American Lutherans avoided the "disruption of ... evangelical Protestantism" in the modernist/fundamentalist split.⁵⁵ That Lutherans in America

⁵¹ Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1992), 3.

⁵² Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 26.

⁵³ Mark A. Noll, "The Lutheran Difference," *First Things* (February 1992): 31–40. See also Mark A. Noll, "American Lutherans Yesterday and Today," in *Lutherans Today: American Lutheran Identity in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Richard Cimino (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 3–25.

⁵⁴ Noll, "The Lutheran Difference," 34, 33, 31.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

did not contribute to this foundational development in American religious culture also means that Lutherans have not been entangled in that religious culture.

It is here that the history presented in the first part of this essay intersects with the history of American Lutheranism, though inversely. While Christian Zionism grows out of commitments that are intimate with the modernist/fundamentalist split, Lutherans were able to take different courses in North America, resulting in Lutheran communities that were not quite fundamentalist, not quite modernist. Lutherans fit uneasily with the dominant contours of the American religious landscape; our challenge, therefore, is to communicate within this context, but with an authentically Lutheran voice. As Noll puts it, “First, to contribute as Lutherans in America, Lutherans must remain authentically Lutheran. Second, to contribute as Lutherans in America, Lutherans must also find out how to speak Lutheranism with an American accent.”⁵⁶

The primary Lutheran resources Noll identifies as vital for speaking Lutheranism with an American accent are vital if we are to engage the challenges of premillennial dispensationalism and Christian Zionism. The first of these is the Lutheran respect for history: “Lutherans, who know something about the long view of history, should be insulated against the instability of innovation and the overconfidence of ignorance. Many of America’s most energetic Christian leaders have cried with virtually the same words: ‘I have found something new. You must accept it or be lost.’ Against this lust for novelty, the Lutheran sense of history stands as a sober witness. Its wisdom lies in the realization of how regular are the follies of humanity, how constant the grace of God.”⁵⁷ From the long view of history, Lutherans can remind themselves that Christian Zionism and its theological presuppositions are little more than nineteenth-century innovations. In a more recent study, British evangelical historian David Bebbington has noted that although “the premillennial second coming was the ideological glue of most of the fundamentalist coalition,” its nineteenth-century adherents “often went into battle for beliefs which they perceived to be part of the ancient deposit of faith but which in reality went back less than a hundred years. It was a number of novelties from the nineteenth century rather than traditional convictions that did most to stiffen theological conservatism in the next.”⁵⁸

The second resource Noll identifies is the Lutheran approach to political life. “The dominant pattern of political involvement in America has always been one of direct, aggressive action modeled on Reformed theories of life in the world,” he writes. “Like the early leaders of Calvinism on the Continent and the English Puritans, Americans have moved in a straight line from personal belief to social reform, from private experience to political activity. For the colonial Puritans and the nineteenth-century evangelicals this meant the mounting of crusades.” By contrast, Lutherans have a sense of irony in the Lutheran recognition that precisely at the point where we are confident we are at our best is when we are standing in the midst of sin. As Noll says, Lutherans know that “precisely when Christians mount their most valiant public efforts for God, they run the greatest risk of substituting their righteousness for the righteousness of Christ, and thereby subverting justification by faith.”⁵⁹ In its Christian Zionist application, Genesis 12:3 is an innovative substitution of a single work for the central article of justification by faith, apart from works.

Mark Hanson, Presiding Bishop of the ELCA, likes to emphasize the preposition in the name of his denomination: Evangelical Lutheran Church in [not *of*] America. In the same way,

⁵⁶ Ibid., 36–7.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 37.

⁵⁸ Bebbington, 213–14.

⁵⁹ Noll, “The Lutheran Difference,” 37, 38.

because of our historical position, Lutherans are *in* but not *of* our sea of American religiosity. As Lutherans continue to work at speaking Lutheran in an American accent, this work will be aided by a creative engagement with the challenge of Christian Zionism. If we take up this challenge, Lutherans can discover new ways of proclaiming their distinctive comprehension of the Gospel. The challenge of Christian Zionism can call Lutherans to affirm Luther's chief insight that Christian faith is founded on the love of God in Christ Jesus rather than on the fear of God's curse. Lutherans can offer a compelling counter-witness to those who claim that God will curse the United States if it fails to base its foreign policy on a Gospel-distorting interpretation of Genesis 12:3. As Luther wrote in 1521, "Christ does not horribly force and drive us.... Christ drives and compels no one. Indeed he teaches so gently that he entices rather than commands."⁶⁰ We do not place our hope in political systems; it is Christ alone who saves.

"A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is."⁶¹ When we encounter a theological system that does not care about the lives of real people living in the Holy Land, one that treats all of them—Jews, Christians, Muslims, Druze—as pawns in an end-times drama, it needs to be called what it is. We can boldly name Christian Zionism as a theology of glory that anticipates the destruction of all persons not adhering to its ideology. In it there is no hope for reconciliation or the redemption of this world—only escape from it while it is cleansed through the unleashing of evil and its eventual cleansing by a returned Warrior Christ. It is not a vision of hope, but a vision of injustice; it is a threat. I believe that we have something vital to say as Lutherans, both in response to the challenge of Christian Zionism, and also in the larger sphere of North American religiosity. We are called to speak in a way that is authentically Lutheran, *distinctively* Lutheran, but not triumphalistically Lutheran. As Paul wrote, "For we are not peddlers of God's word like so many; but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence" (2 Cor. 2:17).

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⁶⁰ Martin Luther, *Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels* (1521), LW 35:121.

⁶¹ Martin Luther, *Theses for the Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), Thesis 21, LW 31:40.