

FORUM

These articles have been published in anticipation of the forum titled: “Upon Zion’s Hill: Imagining a New Jerusalem” to take place this Thursday, February 5 at 11am in the chapel. This forum will include a presentation by Rikk Watts discussing the relationship between the modern state of Israel and the nation of the covenant from the Old Testament. You are encouraged to attend.

THE ETHICS OF SUPPORT

by Bryn Stephenson

Nearly 1,300 people have died in Gaza in the last few weeks as a result of the conflict between the state of Israel and the Palestinian group Hamas. The vast majority of those who have perished were Palestinians, many of whom were women, children and other non-combatants. Before we even begin to place blame on one side or the other for this tragedy, let’s just take a minute and recognize it for what it is: a tragedy. The violent deaths of nearly 1,300 people who, for the most part, were nothing more than victims of their circumstances can be recognized as nothing but a tragedy. And despite our modern categories of combatant and non-combatant, I find the death of a young Israeli soldier who was the victim of a roadside bomb to be as tragic as the death of a Palestinian child in the hospital that was bombed by Israeli warplanes. They both have mothers who grieve their deaths.

My purpose in writing this short paper is to hopefully incite some reflection on important issues that get neglected or glossed over. The schema for addressing these questions can be summed up under the larger question, “What is the Christian response to what is going on in Israel right now?” Should we be, like many in the ‘evangelical’ fold, Christian Zionists? Should we be pro-Palestinian? Is it enough to say that we are ‘for peace,’ or ‘for justice’? Leaving the Zionism issue aside for the moment (Rikk Watts will be addressing it at length in a forum you are all encouraged to attend Thursday Feb. 5 at 11am in the chapel), this paper will address the issue of the use of violence by Israeli forces in response to the attacks from Hamas, and whether or not it is legitimate or supportable from a Christian perspective.

The reason I frame the issue this way, with the responsibility seeming to lie on Israel, is for two reasons. First of all, Israel is a legitimate state recognized by the United Nations (excluding several Islamist nations). As a legitimate and democratic state, Israel is accountable to the international community for its actions towards those within and without its state borders. Hamas, on the other hand, despite being elected to the leadership of the Palestinian Authority in Gaza, is recognized by most countries in the United Nations (including Fatah, the ruling party of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank)

as either a terrorist organization or an organization to limit interactions with in order to fight terrorism. In other words, Israel can and should be expected to behave like a state, whereas Hamas is, unfortunately, expected to behave like a terrorist organization. (To its credit, Hamas has often acted like a state, setting up hospitals and schools in the Gaza strip.)

Secondly, while I recognize that all violence is abhorrent, when discussing ethical matters magnitude does come into the picture to some degree. Looking back to that number of 1,300 mentioned earlier, it is important to note that well over 1,200 of those people were Palestinians who died as a result of Israeli military action, whereas fewer than thirty of the people who died were Israelis. Does this mean that the Palestinians were justified in killing the Israelis? Certainly not. It also does not mean that Israeli lives are worth almost 40 times more than Palestinian lives. This is merely to say that, in the interest of limiting the degree of death and violence that we currently see in the region, a cease-fire on the Israeli side would go a lot further, quantitatively speaking.

How, then, should the Christian respond to the issue of Israeli violent action in Gaza? For the most part, Christian ethicists are divided into two camps regarding the use of violence by states. There are those who are called just-war theorists, such as Oliver O’Donovan, who argue that a state can legitimately seek justice using forceful means provided that their actions meet a specific ethical rubric to achieve a better and lasting peace. Such a conflict, they argue, is justifiable and can be supported by Christians. (This is a simplistic representation of the argument. For a more complete discussion see O’Donovan, *The Just War Revisited*.) The other camp is known as the pacifists, or proponents of non-violence. These scholars, including John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas, argue that, based on the gospel message, it is not possible for a follower of Jesus’ teachings to in any way endorse violent action. (Yet again simplistic. See Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, or Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*.)

Regardless of which camp you consider yourself a part of, I argue that Israel’s current action in Gaza is unjustifiable because the intention of the state of Israel, based on the evidence that I

have, is not to bring about a better, lasting peace in the region. If that were truly the intention of the state of Israel, then when, on April 21, 2008, Hamas offered an agreement stating it would respect the borders of Israel pre 1967 (six day war) as long as Palestine could form a nation in the Gaza strip and the West Bank (where the vast majority of Palestinians live, and not many Israelis), one might think that Israel would have accepted. This being the case, whether you are a pacifist (who would not agree to any violence anyway) or a just-war theorist (who should only condone violent action based on the right intentions, or the meeting of the specific requirements), I don't believe it is a tenable position to support the state of Israel in its actions in Gaza.

By no means, however, am I a supporter of the terrorist activities or any other violent actions of Hamas. Their intentions are no more just or noble than those of Israel. Also, I am not against the state of Israel. Israelis, in many ways, have as much of right to be there as anyone. In the interest

of promoting a better and lasting peace, however, I believe that the international community should place more pressure on the state of Israel and that Christians everywhere should condemn the acts of violence carried out by both sides.

So how should we at Regent College respond when hearing that the state of Israel has carried out violent military actions against people living in the Gaza strip as a response to rocket attacks from Hamas? First of all, DON'T IGNORE IT! It is important to be aware of these issues and to thoughtfully consider them. (This goes for all conflicts around the world.) Secondly, I believe that Christians should seek unity on these issues and try as much as possible to speak with one voice to encourage peace and justice and to condemn violence and oppression. Finally, pray. Pray for peace, and pray for the grieving mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, friends and lovers of those who perish in violent conflict. Pray and mourn. Let us mourn this for what it is: a tragedy.

ACCOUNTABLE TO WHOM?: A RESPONSE

by Alex Abecina

Bryn writes that we may hold Israel responsible for the recent conflicts because it is a legitimate, democratic nation and a member of the UN. Israel is "accountable to the international community" and is therefore expected to "behave like a state". Meanwhile, we are *not* to consider Hamas responsible in the same way as Israel because, strictly speaking, it does not govern a "state" and is simply acting as a terrorist organization is expected to act.

Whilst Bryn is right to focus on Israel's responsibility for its excessive actions in Gaza, his suggestion that we set Hamas' responsibility for their "terrorist" activities off to one side is not necessary and I'm not sure what it adds to his overall argument. Gaza, despite all of the difficulties associated with it being governed by Hamas, is just as accountable to the international community and to international law as Israel, irrespective of its relationship to the UN and we should not downplay that. For this reason Bryn's article, which aimed to answer the question, "*What is the Christian response to what is going on in Israel right now?*" really should have been *two* rather than one-sided. My fundamental point of disagreement, it seems to me, stems from the fact that Bryn wants to equate the "international community" directly with the UN. But, in my mind, these two are not the same thing.

I think that Bryn is quite right to see that a key issue of concern in the recent conflicts has to do with the areas of international community and the moral accountability of the

nations, however I think he could have gone further to express their explicitly theological foundations. Bryn hasn't gone far enough to identify to whom it is that *both* sides of the conflict are ultimately accountable, namely, God. For if it is to the UN that the nations are ultimately accountable (which I trust isn't Bryn's view) then lasting peace between Israel and Gaza will remain a fantasy, a misdirected hope. What is needed for peace is someone who can mediate between both sides of the tragic conflict between these two, one who transcends earthly politics.

So, I'd like to add a more overtly theological voice to Bryn's provoking article, as one far removed from the tragedy of these recent events, but nevertheless deeply distressed, confused and concerned over what has happened in Israel and Gaza over the past month. I offer points for dialogue and reflection, not a solution: International law, which the UN aspires to command for the sake of peace, depends upon the reality that God's natural law is already mediated amongst *all* the nations. And to this law *both* Israel and Hamas are accountable. The international community, which the UN gestures toward, finds its ultimate reality only in the kingdom of God and it is to this kingdom's authority that Israel, Hamas and indeed all the nations are held accountable. Since peace between Israel and Palestine must be God's peace, graciously mediated on earth through such organizations as the UN, and through the Church, Bryn's call to prayer needs to be heard.