

DEALING WITH THE DILEMMA OF CHRISTIAN ZIONISM: A NON-DISPENSATIONALIST PENTECOSTAL POINT OF VIEW

By Tony Richie

Introduction

Christian Zionism (CZ) is a dilemma because it touches directly and deeply, and some would say, dangerously, on arguably the most difficult and volatile complexity on the globe: Israeli-Palestinian-Arab/Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations. Obviously, this issue is interwoven with interreligious, political, economic, and ethnic concerns on national and international levels. Also, CZ is a dilemma because equally intelligent and ethical people sincerely hold diametrically opposed positions regarding it. The temptation to demonize the “opposition” is strong on both sides but must be steadfastly resisted if progress is to be made.¹ A non-dispensationalist Pentecostal point of view may help because Pentecostalism’s background in dispensationalism, and its current transitional distancing from the same, provides a unique perspective on inherent tensional elements.² Furthermore, Pentecostal insights regarding resolving conflictive faith confrontations contribute to developing a positive approach to the currently existing impasse.

Dealing with the Dilemma of Christian Zionism

CZ is a broad designation for a diverse group. It is applied almost indiscriminately to individuals and groups ranging from those who generally support the right of the modern

¹ David Elcott, Executive Director of Israel Policy Forum and husband of Rabbi Shira Milgrom of Kol Ami Synagogue (very gracious and generous hosts to Sue and me!) shared with me a copy of *Sh’ma* (May 2007) devoted to CZ. Interpretations of and reactions to CZ ran the gamut.

² For my explication of a distinctively Pentecostal understanding of and aversion to classic dispensationalism see Tony Richie “Is Pentecostalism Dispensationalist? An Honest Answer to a Hard Question” on www.christianzionism.org/articles/RichieT01.pdf.

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State of Israel to exist and develop to those with radical political agendas involving America, the Mid East, and the world.³ The former are essentially benevolent and peaceful. They see themselves as opponents of an insidious anti-Semitism or defenders of a beleaguered people. The latter are the primary cause for concern. For purposes of distinction, I tend to identify this grouping as “radical” CZ. Even within this broad bunch, however, are differing degrees of radicalism. But concern comes because there is an aggressive element increasingly becoming more apparent. Could it lead to the use of force or outbreaks of violence in pursuit of an exclusive CZ agenda? Could it influence government policies toward the use of force and violence in the Middle East? An uncritical acceptance of the policies and practices of the State of Israel and a disturbing lack of compassionate concern for the plight of the Palestinian people, both undoubtedly due largely to an over identification of modern Israel with the ancient biblical nation of Israel, is a premium quality of radical CZ. In addition, especially “Christian” Zionism, as opposed to older and more traditional Jewish Zionism, builds on esoteric interpretations of apocalyptic biblical prophecy or classic dispensationalism.⁴ This feature tends to make for an unstable situation mixed with intense sentiments. Sometimes distinguishing between political and religious motives is most difficult.

³ E.g., Donald Wagner, “Defining Christian Zionism”, www.christianzionism.org/articles/Wagner02.html; cf. Stephen R. Sizer, “Chapter 1: Introduction: Christian Zionism Defined”, www.christianzionism.org/articles/Sizer05.html and John Hubers, “An Historical Analysis and Critique”, www.christianzionism.org/articles/Hubers02.html.

⁴ For an overview of dispensationalism see www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dispensationalism. A keynote feature of dispensationalism is belief in a literal second coming of Christ followed by the Battle of Armageddon, a climactic confrontation between Christ and the forces of evil (Antichrist) (cf. Rev 16:16). A belief not uncommon to many Christians and not without parallels in other world religions, dispensationalists nonetheless offer distinctive interpretations of events leading up to, surrounding, and following Armageddon. A critical question for the present crisis is whether CZ, especially in its overtly dispensationalist form, contains the seeds of a “self-fulfilling prophecy.”

A large part of the appeal of CZ lies in its attractive eschatology.

Dispensationalism sets forth a complex and detailed but logical and understandable portrait of a cosmic future including a violent conflagration of nations centered on Israel followed by universal peace and prosperity. Premillennialism, or the belief that Christ's coming will usher in a thousand years of God's kingdom on earth, is not limited to dispensationalism but dispensationalism is premillennial.

One need only consult the writings of John Hagee, pastor of Cornerstone Church, a mega-church facility, and founder of Christians United for Israel (CUFI),⁵ a strident Christian Zionist organization of immense national and international influence, to get the picture and see the problem. Although many premillennialists would more than likely agree that Armageddon is *ultimately* inevitable, they'd likely question whether it is *imminently* inevitable.⁶ Pastor Hagee consistently argues that nuclear war is inevitable and peace efforts futile. A main strategy seems to be an overt attempt to influence the political leadership of the United States and Israel to toe a hard line policy in the Mid East. Some accuse Christian Zionists of Hagee's stripe of being "anxious for Armageddon."⁷ Pastor Hagee is a nondenominational Evangelical and Pentecostal minister. Yet many Evangelicals and/or Pentecostals hold to overall similar views of end time events without arriving at aggressive ideology or actions. For example, Dale Coulter convincingly contends that Pentecostal ecclesiology militates against dispensationalism

⁵ See www.cufi.org for more information. CUFI obviously sees itself as contending against insipient anti-Semitism observable in "replacement theology," the view that Israel has no further significance or value in the purposes of God because it has been completely replaced by the Church.

⁶ E.g., John Hagee, *Jerusalem Countdown* (Lake Mary, FL: Frontline, 2006, 2007). The cover of my copy includes statements like "A Prelude to War", "Revelations of world powers on a collision course to World War III", "North Korea's and Iran's part in the Mideast confrontation", and "Why negotiations with Hezbollah and all Islamic terrorists are futile". These accurately reflect the contents.

⁷ E.g., Donald Wagner, *Anxious for Armageddon* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 2001).

in spite of historic attractions. Yet his basic eschatological understanding appears broadly traditional.⁸

Many so-called mainline Christians and Jews are concerned to minimize the CZ movement before it issues forth in fateful (or fatal) violent consequences. The Institute for the Study of Christian Zionism (ISCZ) is an example.⁹ A National Council of the Churches of Christ group task force is another.¹⁰ Additionally, there are numerous denominational and ecumenical groups addressing CZ with grave concern.

Unfortunately, the usual accepted approach seems to all-too-often be all out no-holds-barred doctrinal or political attacks. Charges of heresy abound. Sometimes personal attacks on prominent proponents, reminiscent of contemporary “dirty” politics, are indulged. I am convinced this tactic will fail. It will only alienate the general public, including numerous less extreme advocates of CZ, without convincing or converting anyone else. A favorite version is to ridicule belief in biblical predictive prophecy altogether.¹¹ Usually this is done without offering anything even resembling a viable alternative. What devout reader of Scripture would not be disturbed by such reckless rhetoric?

Yet the violence must be fought. How may devout Christians, including those who believe in predictive prophecy, perhaps even in premillennialism, but who deplore associations of their faith with force and violence, address this issue? How may Christians who do not have a premillennial perspective on Christian eschatology, still

⁸ Dale M. Coulter, “Pentecostal Visions of the End: Eschatology, Ecclesiology, and the Fascination of the *Left Behind* Series”, *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 14:1 (2005), pp. 81-88.

⁹ See www.christianzionism.org for more information.

¹⁰ In the interest of full disclosure, I am an active member of this NCC task group and of ISCZ.

¹¹ Cf. Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (NY: Basic, 2004). The first sentence of chapter one is “THE RAPTURE IS A RACKET” (p. 1). Many may be more offended than informed. A fair and balanced in depth attempt to understand the interpretative nuances involved is *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

interested in respecting the beliefs of those who do, join with them in working for justice and peace?

A Non-Dispensationalist Pentecostal Point of View

Traditionally Pentecostalism has had strong associations with dispensationalism, and, consequently, with CZ. However, a non-dispensationalist self-understanding is perhaps more descriptive of the ethos of Pentecostal identity.¹² From this perspective I offer three suggestions to colleagues for consideration. First, let's understand that the evil of religious violence is not solely traceable to a premillennial eschatological perspective. Unfortunately, that CZ, dispensationalism, or premillennialism has no monopoly on violent misbehavior can be fully verified historically. Second, let's explore the role that religion in general can and does play in the issuance of violence, particularly as it becomes enmeshed in ethnic or nationalist politics. This makes for a dangerously potent combination in any era or area. Third, let's outline an approach for more positively, and, I think, much more properly and productively countering violent political and theological philosophies. The third point is where I hope to contribute a more distinctively Pentecostal way of dealing with our CZ dilemma.

Baumgartner's *Longing for the End*¹³ shows that Christian apocalyptic eschatology, including premillennialism, has roots in pre-Christian Judaism and in Christ himself. Yet it was a peaceful teaching for more than a thousand years up until the Crusaders used millennial eschatology to support their campaigns in Palestine. In the centuries since, various forms of millennialism, including both premillennialism and postmillennialism, were repeatedly used by extremists to incite followers to use force in

¹² Cf. Richie "Is Pentecostalism Dispensationalist?"

¹³ Frederic J. Baumgartner, *Longing for the End: A History of Millennialism in Western Civilization* (New York: Palgrave, 1999).

pursuit of various agendas of societal reform. A few charismatic leaders with strong apocalyptic eschatological ideologies, from Thomas Müntzer to Jim Jones and David Koresh, have advocated the use of force and violence. The vast majority of Christians affirming apocalyptic end time scenarios, including the familiar rapture-tribulation-second coming-millennium paradigm, are aghast at such approaches. This apparent paradox of a pessimistic eschatological understanding involving a violent climax to human history joined with an essentially peaceful approach to this present life may be best explained from the teaching and practice of Jesus himself. Baumgartner asserts that for Jesus the end comes about “through God’s intervention, not human agency.”¹⁴ Accordingly, though one expects ultimate violent confrontation between good and evil to climax this present age ushering in God’s Kingdom, one does not conclude that human beings are to initiate or participate in bringing that about. Most premillennial believers appear to share Jesus’ sentiment. As a matter of fact, and in somewhat shocking fashion, all too often millennialists are victims of fear and violence more than their instigators or perpetrators.¹⁵

Jumping to conclusions that premillennialism is intrinsically or inevitably prone to violence is an injustice. But neither is it accurate to conclude that religion is innocently unconnected with violence. In fact, religion does sometimes play a decisive role in fueling violence. This includes Christian premillennial religion. But better than selecting a particular sect or tenet for pejorative tirades is exploring the general role of religion

¹⁴ Ibid: p. 20. Interestingly but tragically, secular reformers with idealistic dreams of transforming society, frustrated by failure and without the avenue of appealing to faith and hope in God, have committed some of the worst atrocities against humanity. Cf. Ibid: pp. 137-41.

¹⁵ Ibid: pp. 113-14. Cf. pp. 115-17.

itself in fomenting violence. Kimball's *When Religion Becomes Evil* is helpful here.¹⁶

Kimball argues that contained within the major world religions are inherent elements capable of being used for either great good or heinous evil. He identifies five main elements that may lead devotees of even noble religions into evil, particularly the evil of violence.

- Absolute truth—a rigid approach to exclusive truth claims that disregards or denies any evidence of truth in other traditions;
- Blind obedience—unquestioningly following a charismatic leader in his or her obvious departure from or distortion of the inner logic of their religious tradition;
- Establishing the ideal time—supposing that a period of paradise or an utopian age is about to be ushered in and that decisive action must be taken to assure its timely arrival;
- End justifies the means—otherwise unethical or even atrocious acts, such as the use of force and violence, are assumed appropriate if they help usher in the hoped for age; and,
- Declaring holy war—literally fighting against opponents of the group and its goals becomes synonymous with fighting evil itself.

Kimball uses actual historical incidents to demonstrate that all the major world religions have at times succumbed to these tendencies and their tragic consequences in spite of nonconformity with their inner beauty and incompatibility with their essential philosophy. In at least two ways Kimball's work here is applicable and utilizable for our consideration of CZ. First, we are reminded that the problem of religious violence is universal among the religions. We ought not to single out CZ as the sole source of our problem. That being said, second, we are provided with objective criteria by which to measure a religion in order to gauge its possible propensity to violence. This includes Christian Zionism.

I will give an admittedly informal and highly personal evaluation of CZ using Kimball's warning signs for religious violence. My only excuse for speaking thus is my

¹⁶ Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002).

lifelong membership in a movement more or less gravitating toward CZ. I suppose I am a critical insider or participant observer. In my opinion then, the first point definitely almost universally applies. The second occasionally applies. The third partially applies. I do not think the fourth or fifth apply at all.

CZ, especially in its more fundamentalist versions, is definitely dogmatic about its perception of truth.¹⁷ According to Kimball's categories, this could cause problems. At times, especially in my own Pentecostal-Charismatic tradition, intense leaders have inspired almost blind obedience. Yet this is not a consistent characteristic. More often than not the case is otherwise. CZs do ardently hope for an imminent age of peace, prosperity, and purity. However, that age is initiated by Christ at Christ's coming, not by human machinations. Few feel otherwise. No respectable Evangelical or Pentecostal I've ever known or heard justifies atrocious action under the guise of bringing in the Kingdom. Atrocious actions that have undeniably occurred are always viewed as aberrational. And none literally calls for a holy war against opponents. However, harsh rhetoric can easily be misunderstood as warlike. Nonetheless, this last one may call for further qualification. Aren't attempts to influence governments, such as that of the United States, toward preemptive strikes on perceived political enemies for theological purposes actually thinly veiled versions of a "holy" war? Though religious involvement may be indirect, it is still real.¹⁸

In a practical sense, the above analysis is enough to give me cause for great concern. It suggests that though CZ is not necessarily a violent force—it could be, and

¹⁷ Elsewhere I've argued for a view that affirms the reality of absolute truth but admits a relative dimension. I call this "a humble absolutism." See Tony Richie, "Approaching the Problem of Religious Truth: A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution" (*Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, forthcoming).

¹⁸ A Muslim analysis of fundamentalist or radical Islam or a Palestinian analysis of so-called suicide bombers utilizing Kimball's criteria might prove interesting too.

indeed it may be headed in that direction. In fact, at least in its most radical forms CZ appears to be becoming increasingly belligerent. If the right (or the wrong) combination occurs trouble and tragedy could swiftly follow. Accordingly, CZ needs to be straightforwardly addressed both from within and from without, and subsequently redirected. How that ought to be accomplished is another matter.

Probably I've already made it clear that I don't think a negative approach attacking CZ doctrinally, or its adherents personally, is the best way to go about dealing with the CZ dilemma. My struggle is *how to restrain the radicals without destroying the rest* (cf. Matt 13:24-30, 36-43). Resources in the classical Pentecostal tradition provide for a more positive and productive approach. Here I draw on Dale Coulter's intriguing research into an important strand of early Pentecostal ecclesiology.¹⁹ The rise of the Church of God (Cleveland, TN) was rooted in an ecclesiology dissatisfied with ceaseless creedal contentions and tiresome dogmatic debates between warring factions of the Christian faith. Early councils divided Christians and set them against each other over debates about their theological idols. A "reunion of Christians", a "rejection of Nicea", and a "recovery of the original ground of Christian unity, Christ's law of love" are the remedies.²⁰ Although by no means an outright rejection of the importance of Christian doctrine or teaching, spiritual unity based on Christian *koinonia* or communion was perceived as more primary.²¹ For the first three centuries Christianity had lived under the law of love before being lulled into an inappropriate "blending of spiritual and political

¹⁹ Dale M. Coulter, "The Development of Ecclesiology in the Church of God (Cleveland, TN): A Forgotten Contribution?" *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 29:1 (2007), pp. 59-85.

²⁰ Ibid: pp. 64-67, esp. 65.

²¹ Ibid: pp. 67-72.

power.”²² In short, a sense of Holy Spirit inspired and empowered *koinonia* is the basis for loving fellowship and relationship between Christians instead of adherence to dogmatic doctrinal formulations.

My concept is simple: rather than attacking advocates of CZ doctrinally and personally, let’s try the “law of love.” Here’s what I mean. Call a halt to calling them heretics. Stop poking fun at their prophetic beliefs. Quit taking cheap shots at the already obvious quirks of their prominent persons.²³ Let’s use the law of love. Start treating them like brothers and sisters. However, I’m not talking about some silly sticky sentimentality. Practical steps toward improved relations must be made.

First, let’s critique ourselves in love.²⁴ What is driving our fear and frustration regarding CZ? Is it all benevolent and compassionate concern? How much of its anger, envy, or intimidation? They are popular and powerful! Just why do we get so insanely acidic about them? Let’s get the “plank” out of our own eye before getting into the eye of anyone else (Matt 7:3-5). Second, let’s meekly try to help CZs critique themselves through a lens of love (Gal 6:1). Doesn’t Christian love demand concern and compassion for the plight of Palestinians (cf. Ezek 47:21-23)? Is an uncritical love of Israel tantamount to dishonest love? If “open rebuke” is better than “hidden love” (Pr 27:5), couldn’t, and shouldn’t, Christian relations with the State of Israel include the ability to discuss, debate, and even disagree (cf. Ezek 45:9)? Finally, what about the love of God? Didn’t God so love the world that he gave his Son for the world (John 3:16)? Does that include CZs? Does it include Jews, Christians, and Muslims? Does it include Americans

²² Ibid: pp. 66-67.

²³ I do not at all mean they should not be held accountable for ridiculous statements and acts!

²⁴ If I seem to be speaking out of both sides of my mouth here after identifying myself earlier as something of a CZ, my membership and participation in ISCZ and the NCC task group arise from real agreement and identification with very worthy goals of justice and peace.

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and Israelis as well as Arabs and Palestinians? Or does it include conservatives and liberals (or progressives)? And so on. Let us speak “the truth in love” (Eph 4:15).

Conclusion

In the global village that our world has become, spiritual and political forces driven by violence cannot be condoned or ignored. They pose a dangerous threat to us all. A positive approach to CZ based on Christ’s law of love will be more productive than negative doctrinal or personal attacks reminiscent of the dirty politics of American political parties. And prayer might help too.