



University Christian Church

C. Kutz-Marks, preaching

Coming in Glory?

1 Thess. 4:13-18

Nov. 9, 2008

Our scripture passage for this morning is considered by many scholars to be the very earliest writing that would later become a part of our Bible.

From the very beginning Christians were encouraging one another, saying,

16 For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

17 Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.

Or as the Apostles' Creed (used by a major Lutheran denomination):

The third day He rose again from the dead.

He ascended into heaven

and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

From thence He will come to judge the living and the dead.ⁱ

And though we Disciples do not promote the use of creeds to build faith or theology upon, this is one more example of the long tradition of resurrection hope that we hold.

In our weekly recited communion liturgy, we say “*We remember his death, we proclaim his resurrection, we await his coming in glory.*”

And as our closing hymn this morning we will sing, “with an earthy faith, we sing a song of heaven; all life fulfilled, all loved, all wrong forgiven. Christ is our sign of hope, for Christ is Risen.”ⁱⁱ

For, you see, Jesus’ resurrection and the disciples’ encounters with this Risen Christ confirmed their faith in their own resurrection, but at the same, threw a wrench in their understanding of how it would transpire.

It seems that the earliest Christians had absorbed from their Pharisee predecessors a belief in what we would call the “general resurrection.” That is, the belief that at the end of time the Lord would suddenly intervene, break into history and raise back to life those who had died.

The confusion for these early Christians is that while they expected the resurrection to happen all at once for every one, what they experienced was that only Jesus was resurrected on Easter, not everyone. So they quickly came to understand that Jesus Christ was the pioneer of the resurrection experience and that there would be another general resurrection at the end of time.

But, interestingly, it is my bet that most Christians today do not hold to the early Christian belief in the resurrection, *per se*. What most Christians today believe is that at the time of death, the spirit or soul leaves each person and their bodies are no longer a part of the plan. This is really an understanding that many of us Christians picked up, not from the Bible, but from Greek philosophy. You see, in conventional biblical resurrection thinking, at the end of time the Lord raises the body up again and animates it with the spirit again, so that we are no longer talking an afterlife that is so spiritual, a disembodied soul, an ethereal new life, we are talking some enhanced version of flesh and blood.

“Preacher, this is all just speculation,” I imagine some of you thinking. “What difference does it make, anyway?”

I would like to draw your attention to the fact that exactly how we understand this life to come does make a huge practical difference. How we understand the afterlife and Jesus’ Second Coming has implications even for our politics and foreign policy.

For example, I hope you had the opportunity to read Eileen Flynn's article in Monday's Austin American-Statesman, entitled *Israel Rally Reveals Complexities Among Christians, Jews*ⁱⁱⁱ. On the surface it is the story of two friends, a liberal Jew and a conservative Baptist, who traveled down to San Antonio for a “Night to Honor Israel” event staged by John Hagee, pastor of the Cornerstone Church and well known tele-evangelist. The article briefly mentions the phenomenon of Christian Zionism that is at the core of the Hagee event that evening. I have attached some very important articles about this phenomenon to this sermon file on our church website. Please take a few minutes to read those articles for better background on this movement.^{iv}

Christian Zionism grows out of a particular theological system called premillennial dispensationalism, which originated in early 19th-century England.^v The preaching and writings of a renegade Irish clergyman, John Nelson Darby, and a Scottish evangelist, Edward Irving, emphasized the literal and future fulfillment of such teachings as the Rapture, the rise of the Antichrist, the Battle of Armageddon, and the central role that a revived state of Israel would play during the end days. Darby and Irving argued that portions of the books of Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah and Revelation predict when Jesus will return and how the final battle of history will take place.

Darby brought these doctrines to the U.S. during eight missionary journeys. They captured the hearts and minds of those who attended Bible and prophecy conferences in the years just after our Civil War. Darby's teachings were then featured in the sermons of some of the great preachers of the 1880-1920 period: the evangelists Dwight L. Moody and Billy Sunday; and Cyrus Scofield. Scofield then applied Darby's view of the Second Coming of Jesus to his version of the Bible and provided an outline of premillennial dispensationalist notations on the text. That Scofield Bible published in 1909 gave dispensationalist teachings much of their prominence and popularity. The Scofield Bible became the Bible version used by most evangelical and fundamentalist Christians for the next 60 years.^{vi}

How does it become political? For one thing, Christian Zionists insist that all of historic Palestine -- including all the land west of the Jordan which was occupied by Israel after the 1967 war -- must be under the control of the Jewish people, as one of the necessary stages prior to the second coming of Jesus. Among their other basis tenets:

- God's covenant with Israel is eternal, exclusive and will not be abrogated.
- The Bible speaks of two distinct and parallel covenants, one between God and Israel, one between God and the church. The church is a "mere parenthesis" in God's plan and as such it will be removed from history during an event called the Rapture and they use this morning's 1 Thess. 4^(13-17; 5:1-11) passage and the following chapter as their scriptural basis. At that point, Israel, the nation, will be restored as the primary instrument of God on earth.

- Further, Christian Zionists say that the Genesis passage, "I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you" (Genesis 12:3) should be interpreted literally -- which leads to Christians providing maximum political, economic, moral and spiritual support for the modern state of Israel and for all the Jewish people regardless of the claims of others – such as the Palestinians- for justice.
- Apocalyptic texts like the Book of Daniel, Zechariah 9-12, Ezekiel 37-8, I Thessalonians 4-5 and the Book of Revelation refer to literal and future events, and become the basis of legions of books like Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* scenarios that sold over 35 million copies and was translated into 54 languages, and such as the so called biblical basis of Tim LaHayes and Jerry Jenkins' 16 book *Left Behind*^{vii} series that has sold over 65 million copies^{viii}.

These Christian Zionists rejoice at the establishment of the state of Israel, and expect:

>the rebuilding of the Third Temple in Jerusalem on the site of the Temple destroyed in 70 C.E.;

>the rise of the Antichrist and the buildup of armies poised to attack Israel as signs leading to the final end of times battle and

>Jesus' return for his thousand-year reign. This Christian Zionist movement looks for

> the escalating power of satanic forces aligned with the antichrist that will do battle with Israel and its allies as the end draws near.

>Judgment will befall nations and individuals according to how they "bless Israel."

These active Christian Zionists probably number only about 15% of the evangelical Christians in the U.S., but if you follow the news and watch what's happening you'll see that they have an inordinate effect on American Middle East foreign policy for their numbers, just as they have an extraordinarily strong presence on Christian radio and television broadcasting.^{ix} And some of their thinking is now even infiltrating mainline congregations.

While studying in Jerusalem in Oct. of 2004, I had the pleasure of meeting and then worshipping with a small group of dedicated Palestinian Christians at their center named Sabeel^x in Jerusalem who have faced first the corrosive effects of premillennial dispensationalism. Sabeel was founded by Dr. Naim Ateek, a saintly, highly revered figure to many in that part of the world, who was at that time working on a book on the history and nature of Christian Zionism. The final paragraph of the introduction to that book^{xi} reads:

God is not the God of Armageddon but the God of Golgotha. This is the God who continues to call us to a loving service of our fellow human beings. Ultimately, it is only by the grace of God and the toil of dedicated people throughout the world that we can address not only the heretical teachings of Christian Zionism but all the evils and myths that are preventing us from a just peace in Israel-Palestine where Palestinians and Israelis can live as neighbors in peace and

security and share the land under God. We call on all people of faith to pray and work for the achievement of this goal.

Though last Monday's Statesman article described Christian Zionism as an interesting religious perspective, I quite frankly, agree with Dr. Ateek and find it a frightening and threatening perspective because it has already influenced American participation in Middle East in powerful but mostly unhelpful ways. Underlying elements of this perspective that upset me are:

- a blanket, uncritical support for anything that buttresses the self-interests of the State of Israel;
- it's determination that all Arabs and Muslims are God's enemies and that they will be at the final battle of Armageddon siding with the adversaries of Israel and thus the Christian Zionists consistently portray Arabs and Muslims in the most negative light ^{xii};
- This perspective is hampering any movement towards a two state solution between the Israelis and Palestinians because its proponents are adamant that all of the land that was described in Bible times as belonging to the Israelites because it was God's gift must be kept sacrosanct,
- Oh, and by the way, according to the scripture passages they rely on, in addition to holding on to all of Palestine, they have deemed it necessary for the Jews to also be in control of all the territory that is present day Jordan, all of present day Syria, and half of Iraq all the way to the Euphrates River. ^{xiii}
- Further, beyond that claim, they are convinced that that there must also be a war waged against Iran, before Jesus Christ can return again. ^{xiv}

Scary stuff! And all this proceeds from a premillennial dispensationalist reading of the Bible. It does matter what we believe about the 2nd coming of Christ & resurrection.

ⁱ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apostles%27_Creed

ⁱⁱ Chalice Hymnal #703, “When All Is Ended”

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.statesman.com/search/content/life/stories/faith/11/03/1103zionists.html>

^{iv} Challenging Christian Zionism <http://www.christianzionism.org/>

Dr. Naim Ateek intro to Christian Zionism book <http://www.sabeel.org/etemplate.php?id=25>

Christian Zionism Distorts Faith And Imperils Peace <http://www.warc.ch/update/up134/01.html>

Churches speaking out on “Left Behind” theology <http://www.christianzionism.org/churchesN.asp>

How Should Christians Relate to the State of Israel? (by Rich Nathan)
<http://blog.beliefnet.com/godspolitics/2008/01/how-should-christians-relate-t.html>

Donald Wagner presents an hour long lecture on contemporary Christian Zionism and its effects at:
<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=4515761169636548436>

^v This section of the sermon is largely lifted from the most insightful article, “The Evangelical-Jewish Alliance” by Donald Wagner June 28, 2003 issue of *The Christian Century* magazine, found at <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2717>

^{vi} For an example of this thinking and timelines, see
http://religiononline.org/Documents/Bible_Prophecy/Antichrist_part1.htm##2-BRIEF%20OUTLINE%20FROM%20ISRAEL'S%20REBIRTH

^{vii} <http://www.leftbehind.com/>

^{viii} [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Left_Behind_\(series\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Left_Behind_(series))

^{ix} “Christian Zionism has significant support within Protestant fundamentalism, including much of the Southern Baptist Convention and the charismatic, Pentecostal and independent churches. The movement can also be found in the evangelical wings of the mainline Protestant churches (Presbyterian, United Methodist and Lutheran) and to a lesser degree in Roman Catholicism. Its reach is broad, since premillennial dispensationalist themes are advanced through Christian television, radio and publishing. The National Religious Broadcasters organization, which controls almost 90 percent of religious radio and television in the U.S., is dominated by a Christian Zionist orientation” From “The Evangelical-Jewish Alliance” by Donald Wagner June 28, 2003 issue of *The Christian Century* magazine, found at <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2717>

^{xi} <http://www.sabeel.org/etemplate.php?id=25>

^{xii} See articles at this website for background <http://www.jewsonfirst.org/>

^{xiii} <http://blog.beliefnet.com/godspolitics/2008/01/how-should-christians-relate-t.html>

^{xiv} From Donald Wagner’s video present at an Oct. 21, 2006 Conference hosted by Sabeel
<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=4515761169636548436>