

Munther Isaac's Speech: "Palestinian Christian Response to Christian Zionism" In Text Format



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Introduction to Munther Isaac

Our final speaker for day, for the morning, sorry, for the morning, it feels like that, so much information, wow, is Munther Isaac. (Applause) Munther Isaac is an instructor, vice academic dean, and the choir director at the Bethlehem Bible College. After obtaining a Bachelor of Science degree in civil engineering from Beizeit University, he studied theology and received his Masters of Arts in biblical studies from Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. He is currently a PhD candidate at the Oxford Centre for mission studies, his research on biblical theology of the land with a special reference to the Palestinian church, that is his focus. Munther is the author of a commentary on the Book of Daniel which will come out this year in addition to other articles. Since 2011 he has been the director of the Bible colleges International Conference, Christ at the Checkpoint, which means, Munther, you could change the title as much as you want today as well. It has been an honor for me to work with Munther, to learn from Munther, and two to see Munther grow as a true leader and follower of Christ in this land. So Munther, welcome to the stage. (Applause)

Munther Isaac's Talk to the conference

Thank you! And if you're wondering, those are my students trying to get

better grades. (Laughter) If I wish to change something as the conference director just to give myself more time, but I'm sure you want to head afterwards to lunch. Thank you everyone for this warm reception.

You cannot imagine how satisfying for me to see this great audience. As conference director for me this is the true success, you coming here to listen to us, to listen to the story of the Palestinian church, and we really really appreciate you

It is so hard for me to follow after three great speakers, three men of God, and what's there more to add on the topic having heard all of this? However, what I wish to add this morning, is a personal reflection, is my personal journey and my personal theology of the land. You see for us Palestinians, it's not an academic study the theology of the land, it is very personal. And that's why I will start with my context. And when I speak about my theology of the land, I will speak in the first person pronoun, because it is about my life.

I want to apologize in the beginning for two things. First, if you sense any anger in my talk, we've been through a lot. And the second thing I want to apologize for is generalization. In other words, I will use the term Christian Zionism very broadly, and I am very aware that there are different spectrums among Christian Zionists, and I apologize for that. It's hard in such a small talk to differentiate. But let me stress that I'm deeply grateful for the presence of many of our friends who might fall under the category Christian Zionists here, who came to listen and who came to say we are behind you even though we disagree in many theological political things. But believe me, we cannot afford being divided and just throwing past each other and talking theology. (Applause) And so, if you sense anger and any generalization I apologize, and I hope that I don't offend anybody.

Let me speak about myself. I am a Palestinian Christian, not invented. (Laughter) I was born in Bethlehem to an Arab Palestinian family. I can trace my family to at least the tenth generation that we have been living here in Bethlehem. And in fact we came from Arabia to a tribe that has been Christian from even before Islam. (Unintelligible) I am an evangelical Christian, a follower of Jesus, a sinner saved by grace. When I was 10 years old I opened my heart to Jesus. He filled my heart, and since then it's been a wonderful journey. My life has been shaped by the conflict. And if you have attended the morning session, the video you heard about my testimony crossing the checkpoint on daily basis to the University, a spiritual war rages inside of you, a war to hate, and you don't know how to respond. It was very difficult. And it was back then when I'd went again to the Bible studying the theology of the land, I read every book trying to make sense of the Bible. I read every theology of the land book. I studied prophecies. And by the way, I find the answers in the Sermon on the Mount. And whenever I spoke up about my situation, I was called anti-semitic. I am NOT anti-semitic, I am Semitic! (Laughter and applause) I do not hate the Jewish people. It is against my new nature in Christ to hate. It seems that if as I can no longer speak about my suffering without suffering the consequences of being labeled either anti-semitic, or a Replacement Theologian. And I believe that replacement theology today is a term, that has becomes a dirty word even, even considered by many

a heresy. And I'm not convinced that most of those who used the word define it as any theology that is different from Christian Zionism.

I'm grateful for Gary's presentation about replacement theology, maybe it's worth more workshops, but let me assert the following. I do not believe that God replaces a race with another. I do not believe that Gentile believers replace Jewish believers. I do not believe that the Church replaced Israel. I do not believe that God rejects the Jewish nation, or any nation today. God has a special plan for every nation. I do not reject but rather embrace the Jewishness of Christ, and the first church, while maintaining of course the universality of the Gospel and kingdom of God. And in fact I see both the Jewishness of Christ and the universality of the Gospel as related to each other. And there I say that replacement theology is not the problem. Anti-semitism is. And I understand that some replacement theology forms might be anti-Jewish and we must fob this and we must realize this. The rejection and persecution of Jews in Europe is tragic and shameful. The Church has rightly done a lot of soul-searching and revisited its relationship with the Jewish nation. But that does mean that any theology that is different from the theology Christian Zionism is anathema or a heresy. The problem is not in theology, the problem is in our conduct and ethics. (8:29)

Christian Zionism, in my opinion, in my observation, has ignored us Palestinian Christians at best, demonized us at worst. Whenever they speak about prophecy and Israel it is as if we don't exist! We are not mentioned in the books, in the films, in the theology books, in the theology conferences. And I believe this is because we cause a problem to many Christian Zionists. Why? Because we break the stereotype. Our mere presence and voice presents a dilemma for many Christian Zionists who still prefer the traditional simple black and white, or axis of God and axis of evil picture, and it keeps them safe when they speak and talk about the Middle East. We were at best ignored. And this conference by the way is an example when it comes to demonizing. Just go and read the negative stuff that was written about us, sometimes it was nasty sometimes was personal. Major Christian TV station had shows for 30 minutes that said lies about Petland Bible College just because of this conference. (I) never expected it to get this nasty and this personal. The world took notice just recently when Newt Gingrich said we're invented. We have heard this many times before from Christian Zionists, even in Bethlehem. They come to our house and they tell us "you don't belong here" because we should go to Jordan, forgetting by the way that Jordan is part of the Promised Land. (Laughter and applause) Many Christian Zionists say we should not divide the land it's against the plan of God citing prophesies from Micah maybe. But then they are silenced with a question, "what will you do that to the Palestinian if you don't divide the land?" Again it's as if I don't exist and I have no rights. It's one thing to have a theological position, it's another to ignore the question about the ethical ramifications of that theological position.

And again I must stop and say there are definitely exceptions, and many are of those exceptions are here and saying, "no we want to listen, and we realize your struggle." Whenever we also speak as Palestinian Christians, the issue of balance comes to the picture. Every time we speak, we Palestinians

must drink the other side of the story, or else we are considered as biased or not trustworthy now regardless of the fact that very little if any Christian Zionist conferences bring Palestinians to speak. In addition we are always criticized because we only blame Israel and mention Israel's wrongdoing without criticizing other nations and forces that destabilize the Middle East like Hamas and Iran and Hezbollah. But let us read between the lines here. The message is this: Only after we Palestinian Christians speak about all the wrongdoings in the world, then we have the right to talk about our own suffering. To me, this is insulting. It is basically saying to me that my perspective is invalid and that my suffering is not real but invented and imagined. How many times have I been humiliated in my life at a checkpoint? Yet please tell me how can I share about this in a balanced way and I will do it.

We have lost land from us, and I speak about my family, we lost land on the other side of the wall, it's not Jerusalem, it's yes the whole land, property we have documents, we lost it. How can I speak about this in a balanced way? I'm open to suggestions. And I can go on and on. I have an aunt and an uncle who were born here but who no longer were able to enter here, because Israel simply will not allow them to. In the same time any Jew who has was not born here can easily move here and take the land that was taken from us. Please tell me how to say this story in a fair and balanced way? I can go on and on, and by the way my situation is nothing compared to many other Palestinian Christians and what they have gone through.

In order to speak our story, we have become the oppressors. This is the irony for us. We have been made the oppressors just for speaking about the oppression that we go through. Please if we choose to describe our situation in terms like checkpoint, then please respect this. We have the right to express our situation in the way as we see it! Don't dictate to me what my problem is. If we say that the occupation is the core of the problem for us, then please respect this. This is how we see things. We are not inventing our suffering. The checkpoint is our reality. You cannot dictate the way in which we cry about our suffering. And I shared this by the way with Israeli officials and military leaders who summit me to interview about the conference, never expected this, and this like "why are you putting the wall in front of the churches. I've been to Bethlehem I've seen the wall. It's everywhere! Reality!

They're watching by the way. They told me they will have eyes, and I told them, "no need, I will broadcast everything live." (Laughter and applause) The question here is this: Why am I being silenced? Why are you attacking me, not my message? Why are you not responding to my theology, to my message, to my pain? You ignore the message, and attack the messenger! Why am I being silenced?

I would go back to this later. Let me very fast I don't have time to go through everything and humbly challenged Christian Zionist theology and maybe some evangelical misconceptions and I by no way declare or pretend that I have all the answers. Yes I am a theologian but I'm still struggling with this, none of us, really, can figure this out. I have by the way a simple straight theology, I see one plan. And please forgive me I will move very

fast now and if you're interested in these verses I can give them to you later. I see one plan now, one Shepherd. I read my Bible literally. You always tell me read the Bible and don't read it literally. And in my literal reading the offspring of Abraham is Jesus! And then I continue to read my Bible literally and it tells me that if I am in Christ then I am Abraham's offspring I am heir according to the promise! Again I choose to read this literally. In other words the land the blessing and indeed the whole world are mine in Christ who inherited all things. That I believe I just need to declare this through evangelism and expanding the kingdom of God which by the way is by no means postponed. The sphere of the kingdom is not limited. We must go from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and to the ends of the earth. And this is by the way in line with Old Testament prophecies that spoke about Jesus inheriting the ends of earth as His possession. And I believe this is how Paul understood the promises in the Old Testament as Gary Burgess said when he read Romans 4:13 and said that Abraham and his offspring would be heirs of the world, the whole world.

I am part of the descendant of Abraham. By the way I do not fall under the category child of Ishmael. It makes me angry when Christians called me such because biblically speaking spiritually speaking my new identity I am a child of Abraham. And by the way I am also this not comfortable with many Palestinians who try to say that if we go through the DNA we are descendants of Abraham. It's irrelevant. My spiritual identity is what matters. (Applause) And so according to Ephesians, I am member of the people of God members of the household of God according to 1st Peter I am part of the people of God and because of this I can boldly say the Old Testament song the Lord Yahweh is my shepherd the Old Testament tradition became mine Abraham Moses Jacob are my forefathers. And by the way, as Gary has observed this is not something only in the New Testament. Ruth is a great example. She was not Jew by DNA she became a Jew because of faith. And there are many other examples in the Old Testament and that's I believe why Paul says in Romans 9 not every Israelite is the real Israelite.

Now, am I teaching replacement theology here? I am NOT claiming that I replaced the Jewish nation, I believe I joined biblical Israel. We need not forget that Paul, Peter, indeed the first church were all Jewish believers, Messianic believers. I simply joined their tradition. Romans 11:17, and let us stress some of the branches not all the branches some branches were cut off and I was grafted, and key word here, I share. That's why I believe the Old Testament becomes mine. In other words, I did not replace Israel, I joined Israel.

I also believe that God did not reject and punish the Jewish nation and replaced them one with another. This is clear when Paul says, has God rejected his people? By no means he says! But what does he mean when he says by no means? We need to read further. When he says for I myself AM an Israelite and in other words, for Paul, the phrase "God did not reject His people" means they can still believe in Christ. For example, "look at me. I am a Jew. I believed in Christ." This is what it means for Paul that God has not rejected His people. He says, "Look at me. God did not reject me."

And then we come to a very difficult verse and I will by no means pretend

that I know the answer to what this verse really means, but let me try give some reflections. When it says that all Israel will be saved, I believe that this verse, before we try to interpret what does it mean, let us remember that nowhere in Romans 11 does it speak of a return to a land or a national restoration. Even the famous verse in 11:26 does not mention anything related to a return for ethnic Israel, because saved for Paul means faith in Christ. This verse, at best, predicts a national spiritual revival for the Jewish nation to which I say amen, may it be so. Regardless, notice that such a possible revival does not need a gathering of ethnic Israel in the land. God can save anywhere, anytime. In addition, I believe it is inconceivable to Paul to see such a plan take a place outside of the direct work of Christ and the Church.

So what about Old Testament prophecies? And I will have to be very fast. Old Testament prophecies such as Ezekiel 36 and 37, I believe it's a matter of hermeneutics whether they were fulfilled in Christ or not. However, let us stay attention to three key points when it comes to these prophecies.

Number one they were all conditional. Before we talk about Ezekiel 36 and 37 let's go back to Ezekiel 33 when he says if you continue your life even if you say Abraham was only one man yet he got possession of the land you want to continue in your own lifestyle in inbelief. Shall you then inherit the land, possess the land? You do all these things shall you then possess the land?

(Editor's note: Munther Isaac is paraphrasing Ezekiel 33:23-26.)

23 Then the word of the LORD came unto me, saying,
24 Son of man, they that inhabit those wastes of the land of Israel speak, saying, Abraham was one, and he inherited the land: but we are many; the land is given us for inheritance.
25 Wherefore say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Ye eat with the blood, and lift up your eyes toward your idols, and shed blood: and shall ye possess the land?
26 Ye stand upon your sword, ye work abomination, and ye defile every one his neighbour's wife: and shall ye possess the land?

Ethical responsibility is above any promise. For me when you say that the promises were unconditional, what is at stake is nothing less than the credibility of God. There is no cheap grace in the Bible. Even our salvation was earned, not by us, but by the obedience and sacrifice of Jesus.

The second point about these prophecies is that they were all spiritual in nature. And I highlighted key points. And this is what I challenged Christian Zionism: How do you confuse a political state today with a spiritual restoration? The prophecies talk about spiritual restoration, not a political state.

And finally, these prophecies seem to be almost always inclusive in nature. Ezekiel 47 says that the sojourner who resides among you shall be considered

as native-born. (Applause) And this is where I challenge my Christian Zionist friends, why isn't this happening now? In addition, if you see this is not happening around you, if you believe this is the actual fulfillment, why don't you challenge State of Israel to fulfill this now? You might wonder then what they say about policy about modern Israel?

By challenging any theological claim ethnic Israel has today to the land, I am by no means calling for the destruction of the modern State of Israel. The Jewish people suffered a lot throughout history, and they have the right for a state where they live safe and secure. And it is only natural that they seek this state in this land. The circumstances which the state came into being were unfortunate, tragic to us as Palestinians, catastrophic, but this is not the place and time to play the blame game and say who started what. What I'm saying is I recognize Israel today, and want to move forward, but please do not force me to accept a theological claim for Israel today as a test for my orthodoxy or as a proof that I am not anti-semitic, or as the precondition to reconciliation. (Applause)

One thing that really makes me angry about many forms of Christian Zionism, is its certainty and arrogance. I was very impressed by Wayne's presentation this morning, very humble. On the other hand, many other Christian Zionists when they present their theology they seem almost 1000% sure that what is happening today here is fulfillment of prophecy, just as they are 100 percent sure that Iran or Russia or China is the ultimate enemy, and the list keeps changing, and in the process many nations are demonized.

I know and I've heard the argument that right now maybe the picture is not, does not look nice. And that maybe in the end it will be more perfect. But let me say, the picture is very messy to us right now. The picture is incredibly painful to us right now.

The problem with many evangelical Christians is that they are prophecy fanatics, not prophetic. There is the lack of prophetic (???), an ignorance of Jesus's teachings, and indeed many Old Testament teachings about how to treat the poor, the widow, the oppressed. And this is serious. So many evangelicals have dealt with the conflict only through the lens of prophecy. And I wish, by the way, I wish I had the time to share with you the names of some of the websites that criticized the conference. "rapture ready", "rapture here", "the end times are here". We are obsessed with end times. Very little obsessed with being prophetic.

The way many evangelicals has dealt with this conflict really reminds me of the story of the Good Samaritan. It's the same old story of passing by a wounded and victimized person and looking down at him and doing nothing. One of the most typical and most common reactions we hear from many Christians Zionists when they are asked about the situation of Palestinians, you know what they say? "It's unfortunate." People look at the conflict, the death, the refugees, the wall, the daily humiliations. Tourists pass by the checkpoint past the refugee camp into the Nativity church they look at the wall and all they could say is, "unfortunate." No it's not unfortunate, that's the wrong word. If you have a mug of coffee and pull it down, that is unfortunate. People victimized in the name of God and the Bible, that is not

unfortunate. (Applause)

It makes me wonder whether we as evangelicals have lost our conscience. How have we become so apathetic to many of the sufferings of the world? Sometimes just for the right for the sake of being politically right, or simply that we have other religious duty and go visit the church. You know the two persons who passed by the wounded person were religious people. They had other religious duties probably. Maybe they didn't want to defile themselves thinking that he was dead, that person. So they passed by. Maybe they looked at the person and said, "it's unfortunate." The irony for us Palestinian Christians is that evangelicals with their over emphasis on prophecy have lost the capacity of being prophetic. You want to prove that the Bible is right? You don't do this by pointing to self-fulfilling prophecy, or by pointing to world events as prophecy fulfillment. This is not how you prove that Bible is right. We prove that the Bible is right by radical obedience to the teachings of Jesus, by proving that Jesus's teachings actually work, and that they can make the world a better place. Let us love our enemies forgive them which sin against us. Let us feed the poor, care for the oppressed, walk the extra mile, be inclusive not exclusive, turn the other cheek and maybe and only maybe then the world would start taking us seriously and believing in our Bible. (Applause)

My call for the Church today is be prophetic. In other words be the church. The world is in desperate need of a conscience. The world needs us. We are the light, the salt, get involved. There is a lot of energy in this room and I can see it and I saw it yesterday and the great present worship that we've done in all the seminars. Let us channel this great energy spirit-filled energy in the right direction. Promote a culture of peace. Be peacemakers yourselves, it is possible. We the evangelical community has a lot of potential within us empowered by the Spirit and by our obedience to the teachings of Jesus we can make a difference. Let us not underestimate what we have. Be radical. There is no hope in the world, and the political situation in this part of the world looks darker than ever. The world is in desperate need of radical people like us who preach peace and good news.

My last point is that we need each other. An Irish proverb says it is in the shelter of each other that we live. We cannot afford division anymore. Different theology, different interpretation of End times, we can dialogue about these, but let us not allow these things to divide us, let us continue with our dialogue and affirm our unity in Christ and work together for the kingdom. The Palestinian church must survive in Palestine. We must continue to be a light and provide hope in this part of the world. For this we need each other. Will you hold my hand? Will you help me stand? Will you listen to my cry? Would you walk next to me? Pray with me? Would you help me shine the hope of Jesus in this dark world? Thank you. (Tremendous applause)

Someday the YouTube will be deleted, but as long as I am alive and paying for this website, you will have the text!