

FOURTH ANNUAL EVANGELICAL-JEWISH CONVERSATION

The fourth annual Jewish-Evangelical Conversation took place in Washington, DC on June 4-5, 2012 attended by 45 Evangelical and Jewish clergy and laypersons. The four topics discussed were: Reflections on the Israel-Palestinian Conflict; How to and Not to Criticize Israel; Faith Affirmations and Religious Liberty in American Polity; and the Evangelical Theological Understanding of the Continuity of the Jewish People and the State of their Covenant.

Rabbi Steve Gutow and Dr. David Neff were co-chairs. Ethan Felson, Rev. Dr. Joel Hunter, Dr. David Neff, Rabbi Yehiel Poukko and Dr. Ron Sider were the conveners. Dr. Tony Campolo and Prof. John Phelan presented their views on the Israel-Palestinian conflict with Prof. Chris Seiple and Rabbi Noam Marans responding. Professors Galen Carey and Saul Berman offered their views on religious liberty in America and Prof. James Butler discussed the meaning the Covenant with the Jewish people. Prof. Ruth Langer responded.

At the Monday evening session, Prof. Amy-Jill Levine discussed the new *Jewish Annotated New Testament* which she and Prof. Mark Brettler have just edited. She urged the importance of this volume because it is a Jewish text; it casts light on events and personalities of the Second Temple period; it fosters better understanding of Jewish origins at the same time that it cultivates greater Jewish appreciation of Christianity; it is a vital cultural and religious treasure that needs to be read and appreciated not just by Christians. Prof. Joseph Castleberry responded and offered his positive reactions to the new enterprise. He singled out the various essays at the back of the volume and their value to the readers and students.

Tony Campolo noted that having been traumatized for so many centuries, it is understandable that Israelis are nervous about the direction of the Arab Spring. But the Palestinian Arab population, many of whom have lived there for centuries, have also been traumatized especially since 1947. Campolo noted the distinction between Evangelicals and the Dispensational group that view the return to Zion as the necessary forerunner of the return of Jesus. Evangelicals have some problems dealing with the Christian Zionist or Dispensational groups whose views on the Middle East situation is often at variance with their positions. He urged that we heal the deep wounds by these steps: 1) We must listen to each other's narrative; 2) The right of return of the Palestinians is legitimate but we must also remember the over 800,000 Jews from Arab lands who lost everything and found a haven in Israel. But the return of millions of Arabs would spell the end of the Jewish state and that is unacceptable. He rejected the Kairos document and reaffirmed his belief in a two-state solution. He also mentioned the condominium proposal whereby there would be two states with capitals in Jerusalem. People could live anywhere they choose and remain citizens of either the Arab or Jewish state.

Prof. John Phelan discussed the legitimacy of criticizing Israel warning that critics may never question the legitimacy of the state. The use of biblical texts by some critics of Israel smacks of supersessionism and is therefore unacceptable. Criticism must be grounded in the history of the region—e.g., the Balfour Declaration, the League of Nations' mandate, the vote of the UN in 1947, etc. He acknowledged that the separation wall came in response to the bloody suicide bombings and has been most effective. We

should encourage dialogue partners to discuss these issues with respect and sensitivity, listening to one another, assuring the right of Israel to live in security and safety, and beware inflicting unintended wounds.

Rabbi Noam Marans responded that both peoples are suffering and desire peace. The best solution is a two-state one. While criticism is always useful, we should beware criticizing in an inappropriate way. We must avoid demonization and double standard criticism and de-legitimization. The terms “Apartheid state” and the threat of boycott, divestment and sanctions summoning the South African example are inappropriate. Marans conceded that the settlements pose a problem and much of the Jewish community is highly critical of the settlement policy, but the core issue is the right of the Jewish people to its own land.

Dr. Chris Seiple urged respect for each other before one criticizes or disagrees; real friends are honest with each other. We need common goals and values if we are to enter a common theology. We want a free and pluralistic society for Israel marked by reconciliation and a healing process; not one of tolerance but one of respect. And the real threat, in his view, comes from terrorists on both sides.

Dr. Galen Carey stressed that religious freedom and separation of church and state are basic principles of the Evangelical churches. For this reason, they opposed the attempt to ban circumcision in San Francisco and oppose government determination of staff in institutions that receive government funding. The new requirements of the Obama Administration regarding contraception, abortion, women’s health issues and such may compel church-based organizations to do things they consider morally wrong and this concerns the Evangelical groups very deeply.

Prof. Saul Berman posed three questions: 1) Does Jewish law create duties to work for a just social order? 2) Do these laws apply only to the Jewish nation? 3) How does this process work? He cited Maimonides’ *Moreh Nevukhim* 3:17 which states that the totality of the *mitzvot* seeks three goals: 1) Teach truth and avoid falsehood; 2) Develop personal virtues; 3) Produce a just social order. The Torah created the government structure of four tiers: kings, Sanhedrin, priests and prophets whose purpose was to help implement the vision of a just society. For example, the Jubilee Year, the opposition that developed to capital punishment and certainly for property crimes and aid for the poor and immigrants. These laws apply to Israel and other nations who must abide by the seven Noahide Laws and are accountable to God for their behavior. Every society possesses heroic virtues, truths and values—ideals toward which we strive. The line between the required and the desired is often in flux—e.g., the right to privacy.

A discussion followed on the question of a possible Mormon president for America. Evangelicals have urged that Mormon theology *not* become an issue in the forthcoming election. Several urged, however, that we should scrutinize closely the Mormon positions on various key issues. The group also discussed the matter of vouchers. Galen Carey noted Evangelical support for vouchers in Arizona. Saul Berman indicated he had long opposed vouchers because of the teachings in Catholic schools regarded as anti-Jewish. Since Vatican II, however, so much has changed for the better that he now supports a voucher system.

Rev. Dr. Joel Hunter joined the group late that morning because had had just come from the White House and a meeting with President Obama and his staff. The

President is most anxious for religious leaders to express to him their views on issues regarding church and state.

In the final session, Prof. James Butler discussed the many Evangelical opinions on the notion of covenant and salvation for Jews. One group holds to the supersessionist doctrine: the Jews have been displaced by the Christians in God's plan. But the Dispensationalist group sees the Jewish return to the land of Israel as essential for the Second Coming. He analyzed the Willowbrook Declaration (1989) and the Lausanne Covenant (1984), both of which expressed the view that Israel is no longer God's chosen having been superseded by Jesus and the new church. Both documents reaffirmed the need to convert Jews to the true faith.

Prof. Ruth Langer noted that more recent documents, recognizing that such an attitude has led to violence and forced conversions, denounce "cultural genocide." Christian "love" has usually meant convert the Jews by any means necessary, she observed.

Prof. Butler stated that the old doctrine of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (no salvation outside of the true church) is no longer accepted except in Southern Baptist circles. But Evangelicals do have trouble with the concept of two covenants rather than one. Dr. David Neff and others affirmed that the Willowbrook generation of thinking is now passé.

The NCS members who attended and participated included: Rabbis Alvin Berkun, Gilbert Rosenthal, David Sandmel, Julie Schoenfeld, Jeffrey Wohlberg, and Prof. Ruth Langer.