

British Reactions – Christ at the Checkpoint

Daniel Nessim
May 2013
LCJE at Chrischona, Switzerland

Two factors have contributed to a strong reaction against the 2012 Christ at the Checkpoint conference in Britain. Firstly, one of the key organisers of the conference is a British Vicar. Secondly, since the Palestinian Mandate, Britain has long had a vested interest in what has now become the Israeli – ‘Palestinian’ conflict. For many Evangelicals, some of whom are Christian Zionists and some of whom are Messianic Jews, this is accentuated by the role of British Evangelicalism in the encouragement of Zionism and the Balfour Declaration of 1917.

Against this backdrop, CATC was not an issue of interest for the mainstream media, and was not reported on. None of the major news sources I surveyed made any reference to the CATC conference. I surveyed the BBC, which is known for its bias towards Palestinian claims and a frequent anti-Israel slant in the way in which news is reported. No coverage. I surveyed The Telegraph, which is generally a balanced and responsible paper, the Guardian, which is known for its support of Palestinian viewpoints, the Daily Mail and the London Times. None of these reported on the CATC according to a web search of their archives.

A similar story is seen when surveying Christian media. Evangelicals Now, Christian Today, and Inspire – none of these reported on the CATC according to a web search of their archives.

Why the fuss? Many British Evangelicals just do not care enough to want to engage with the debate. Political views in the British Church are in my estimation across the board a reflection of general British attitudes. This is an issue for stakeholders and activists, both of whom did truly engage.

Paul Wilkinson is a Christian Zionist pastor in Cheshire who has just such a vested interest. He has written to counter Stephen Sizer's caricature of Christian Zionists in *Zion's Christian Soldiers* (2007) with his own monograph, a rendition of his doctoral dissertation, entitled *For Zion's Sake* (2007). He made a point of attending CATC and produced a thorough analysis of it¹ titled *The Church at Christ's Checkpoint* (2012) that at times borders on the sensational and personal, but makes a significant, thoroughgoing critique that should not be ignored or taken lightly. Wilkinson's verdict quotes Jeremiah 33:24: "Have you not observed that these people are saying, 'The Lord has rejected the two clans that He chose'? Thus they have despised my people so that they are no longer a nation in their sight" and asks:

Whose 'Checkpoint' did people pass through in Bethlehem? I believe that the fundamental issue is this: by revising Middle Eastern history and spiritualising God's prophetic Word, 'Christ at the Checkpoint' speakers are guilty of propagating a theological or spiritual form of anti-Semitism which is damaging the Church, demonizing Israel, and dishonouring the integrity and Name of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

A strident response also came from the Messianic community, and was aired via the blogosphere at *The Rosh Pina Project*² and *Harry's Place*³. On 15 March the blog's criticised the conference just held saying:

- 1. CATC releases a replacement theology-driven manifesto mentioning Messianic speakers Wayne Hilsden, Richard Harvey and Evan Thomas, implying that the conference had agreed to the manifesto.*
- 2. CATC alters its manifesto, and acknowledges that it was only endorsed by the conference organisers.*

A year later, the position is unchanged as the bloggers look forward to a future CATC.

Christ at the Checkpoint III – 2014 is being planned to be held in Bethlehem on March 10-14, 2014. and the bias we saw at the previous two conferences is on display again.

¹ This is available from Hazel Grove Full Gospel Church, 68 London Road, Stockport, Cheshire, SK7 4AF. UK. Tel. +44 (0)161 456 8393 grainforthe famine@hotmail.co.uk.

² <http://roshpinaproject.com/>

³ <http://hurryupharry.org/>

The theme will be Your Kingdom Come and although they claim: "Our call as Christians is to be peacemakers and to lovingly challenge all forms of injustice" the reality is CaTC III will only challenge Israeli faults and not the injustices the Palestinian Authority and Hamas perpetrate upon their own people and the Israelis.

The Jewish reaction, picking up on the issues involved, was direct. The British Board of Deputies, the main communal organisation that handles such matters, took action. The following is from their website:

Revd Stephen Sizer is the Vicar of Christ Church in Virginia Water, Surrey. He is now the subject of a complaint by the Board of Deputies to the Church of England, for making statements that the Board and most of the Jewish community find utterly offensive...

Under Church law the Board's complaint has to be brought under an Act of Parliament, the Clergy Discipline Measure 2003. The complaint is therefore for misconduct consisting of 'conduct unbecoming or inappropriate to the office and work of a clerk in Holy Orders'...

Sizer is also a speaker at the provocatively named Christ at the Checkpoint conference, which features a theology called supersessionism which has antisemitic overtones. It seems that Revd Sizer has few qualms about keeping company with anyone who shares his hostility to Israel, however dubious.⁴

To be fair, it should be noted that the Board of Deputies would not have been likely to complain about Sizer at all if it were not for the repeated and persistent links to anti-Semitic websites on his Facebook page. But it is also fair to note that his participation in CATC did not escape their attention and that they did not leave it undocumented.

Likewise, the Jewish media, of which the Jewish Chronicle is the chief organ, reported on the issue as a matter of concern in an article titled *Evangelicals against Israel: a grave trend*:

Its provocative name was matched by the provocative logo of a church behind barbed wire, next to Israel's security barrier. Last week, some 600 Christian clerics, activists and academics gathered in Bethlehem for the Christ at the Checkpoint conference. They discussed why, in their view, Christians who support Zionism have got it wrong. There were sessions with titles such as 'Seven Biblical Answers to Popular Zionist Assumptions'. This was delivered by the programme director Stephen Sizer, pastor of Christ Church in Surrey and author of Christian Zionism: Roadmap to Armageddon. There was predicable outrage in Jewish circles.⁵

I do not think more needs to be said.

⁴ http://www.bod.org.uk/live/content.php?Item_ID=540

⁵ <http://www.thejc.com/comment-and-debate/analysis/65177/evangelicals-against-israel-a-grave-trend>

BOOKS:

Sizer, S. R. (2007). *Zion's Christian Soldiers?: The Bible, Israel and the Church*, Nottingham: IVP.

Wilkinson, P. R. (2007). *For Zion's Sake: Christian Zionism and the Role of John Nelson Darby*, Milton Keynes: Paternoster.

Wilkinson, P. R. (2012). *The Church at Christ's Checkpoint: A Response to the Second 'Christ at the Checkpoint' Conference in Bethlehem, 5-9 March 2012*. Hazel Grove, Stockport: Hazel Grove Full Gospel Church.