

It's really a great privilege to be with you this morning. I'm very glad for this opportunity. I'd like to congratulate the Bethlehem Bible College for this wonderful conference and for the wonderful speakers who have taken part and the wonderful audience that is here. So I'm thankful to have been invited to share a few words at the end of this time together. I'd also like to thank my friend, Assis Mitri, for beginning this morning with an overview, more regional and more global and the way I have read the topic which has been given to me I see it about the more specific, the more local. The topic that has been suggested is "contextual theology as it deals with realities on the ground." So, the way I looked at it, what I'd like to do is focus on what we do on the ground.

In my own ministry, obviously I use the word "contextual" but I prefer to use the word "liberation" instead of "contextual." Now, obviously we begin with the context so we deal with the context, but the context for me is only the launching pad for doing theology and the objective is the liberation of the context. That is, Christ for us is the liberator, and so we try to begin by looking at the context, analyzing the context, and then seeing how God is leading us in addressing the problems, the difficulties within that context but essentially the objective is to find a resolution of the what's happening within the context. So, at the heart of our work is Christ the liberator. Christ is at the center of all of this. But when we address the context, we come to the context with a certain theology and so when we say, contextual theology or liberation theology that is dealing with realities on the ground that presumably we are beginning with a theology that addresses that context. Now, what is this theology, to begin with, and what is this reality on the ground and what have we done in the ministry of Sabeel to address this.

So, I want to say a few words about theology, but very few and if there are gaps in what I say, I hope that some of you will ask me questions. Because I think, especially when one is talking to evangelicals, one is trying to use evangelical language or evangelical concepts that they can identify with and maybe relate to so that there can be a communication between us and between them. I don't know whether I can succeed, because I see myself as an evangelical, but it depends on what you would define it to be an evangelical. One of the problems that I think that we face because with evangelicals, or with certain evangelicals, the whole emphasis is really on the land, and they begin by saying that the land was given to the children of Israel by God and so there is an emphasis on that part of the Old Testament that, for me, really reflects a tribal understanding of God and I see that tribal concept in the development of religious thought within the Old Testament itself. It is overcome; it is transcended by a much more universal concept of God. And that's very important and it needs to be addressed.

Now, one indication that might not be clear to many people is found in the end of chapter 1 of the Gospel of John. I have the reference in the latest book that I wrote and I think it was for me a revelation when I came across it in just reading the New Testament. You remember the story of Jacob's ladder? The ladder, according to the story in Genesis, was placed on the land. The ladder was on the land and the angels of God were ascending and descending. It's a very interesting story. At the end of Chapter 1 of John there is almost the same story, but now Jesus is conversing with Nathaniel. And it talks about the angels of God ascending and descending, but the ladder is placed, not on the land; it's placed on the Son of Man. The whole land issue is marginalized in the New Testament. The whole land issue is totally marginalized. The center is no longer the land; it is

Christ. Now, in any Palestinian liberation theology, this is the center. So, the land, within the New Testament, and I'm sure it has been discussed in this conference, because it's part of the heart of the whole theology that we have, the land loses its emphasis, its strength, its focus and so in our expression of a Palestinian theology of liberation we being with Christ, we end with Christ. Christ is the key to understanding the scriptures; Christ is the key to interpreting the scriptures and anything that does not fit with the standard of Christ is not authoritative or me, even if it is written in the Bible because, at the heart of the Bible for me is Christ. That's it. And I think in many ways, that critiques some more extremist views of some evangelical Christians. Now more specifically in a Palestinian theology of liberation, although here in the Middle East, when you look at the Orthodox churches and most of us, all of us Palestinians at one time or another probably belonged to the Orthodox church. We were Orthodox. My father's family was Orthodox. And all of us came from that. It was the original church of the land. Within the Orthodox churches of the land there is a great emphasis on the divinity of Christ. You go to the Orthodox churches, you go to the liturgies and the divinity of Christ is very much emphasized in all aspects of the liturgy. Although we continue to emphasize the divinity of Christ, in a Palestinian liberation theology our emphasis is also on the humanity of Christ. So, for us, Jesus was a Palestinian who lived in Palestine. And before 1948, and some of you might not realize this, but before 1948 all the people living in Palestine were Palestinians. Before the establishment of the State of Israel, all the people living in the land, whether they were Christians, Muslims or Jews, they were all Palestinians and they held Palestinian passports. So it's not like Palestinian Jews is a foreign concept to us. There were Palestinian Jews for 2,000 years until 1948 from the beginning of the 2nd Century there were Palestinian Jews and Palestinian Christians. The Muslims came in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, but at least for Christians and Jews, there were Palestinian Christians and Palestinian Jews from the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century. So, we emphasize the humanity of Christ. Jesus was a Palestinian who was born under occupation. Jesus lived under occupation. Everything he taught, everything he said was done under occupation, exactly the way we live today. You know, most of our people, the younger generation, have been born under occupation, so everything we do: our lives, our activities, our relationships, are all happening under occupation. And finally, Jesus was killed by the occupation forces. Now, this Jesus Christ becomes the author and finisher of our faith, and he is the center of our faith. And we don't, therefore, read the Bible in a flat way. I know some evangelicals read the Bible in a flat way. We don't. Christ is the climax and we begin rather with the New Testament and not the Old Testament. At least, that's the way we teach our people at Sabeel. We don't begin with the Old Testament because we can only understand the Old Testament when we interpret it through the eyes of the New Testament and through the eyes of Christ. And so, in many ways, Christ critiques many of the things in the Old Testament and critiques many of the things in the New Testament and critiques many of the things that happen in the church. So, to follow Jesus today is to follow one who has sacrificial love. And you know, in the New Testament actually, at the heart of it, it is not faith that is emphasized, it is love. And Paul is very clear about this. If I have faith to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And again, one of the critiques of some evangelical Christians is that their emphasis is on faith rather than love. And we Palestinian Christians critique that because

we believe in our life today (and I'll say more about that in a minute) we must live Christ's love in our life. And to follow Jesus Christ means to follow the path of non-violence because that's the way we understand Jesus Christ. We don't have time, but there are wonderful scholars in the West whom we have learned from and who have opened our eyes and taught us Palestinian Christians about the whole question of non-violence. And so today we walk the way of non-violence because we are disciples of Jesus Christ.

And we believe that the New Testament teaches us to resist evil. We must resist evil whether in our own lives and whether in the community. But, we must resist evil without using evil methods and that's what we believe to be at the heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. And so, yes, we teach our people to resist the evil occupation of Israel to the Palestinian Territories. This is clear because it is evil and it must be resisted. But we believe that it must be resisted through non-violent methods. Now, if you accept basically, in a nutshell, what I have just said, that our theology stems from Jesus Christ and is centered in Jesus Christ and Christ's love for people and Christ's love for all people and Christ's concern for the weak and the marginalized in society and it is the way of non-violence, then what we have tried to do is take this theology, translate it into actions, or into programs, and that's where we established the ministry of Sabeel.

So, this is our contextual theology, or, I would say, liberation theology. And the question is, "how can we translate it and help our people?" So, at Sabeel, Sabeel to begin with is a totally ecumenical organization. I am an Anglican priest but Sabeel is not an Anglican organization. Sabeel is totally ecumenical. We serve all the people of this land, all the Christians and beyond the Christian community. So, Sabeel is grassroots, ecumenical and what we have done is that we established this center and we decided from the very beginning that there are 3 areas that we want to emphasize because they have to do with the reality on the ground.

So, what is this reality? We saw that the reality on the ground has to do with Christian denominational divisions. So, the first reality has to do with the Christian community. The second reality has to do with the fact that we live among other religions whether we like it or not, and the third reality has to do with the whole question of injustice, with oppression, with what is happening in the political arena. Therefore, what we have done is infuse this theology within these three different areas that for me encompass our live in our land. So, Sabeel has a very strong ecumenical ministry in the community. We work with women, with children, with young people, young adults. We work with clergy of all the different churches and we work in order to strengthen the Christian community to build up the body of Christ. So, this is a very strong ministry, but we also teach them about the importance of non-violence and about being involved in the life of the community. This is a very important ministry of Sabeel and just about a month and a half ago, we had our third annual Clergy Conference. We had about 52 clergy representing all the churches of the land, inside Israel and the West Bank. We had representation from all the different churches and in this conference, actually if you look at the number of clergy in this country, in Israel and the West Bank, we almost had 1/3 of all the clergy present in the Jericho Sabeel conference. And we felt that that was very important, because in these conferences we try to strengthen the ministry of the church through working with the pastors of the churches. So, this is the way liberation theology is being translated into

building up the body of Christ. Because of the time, I need to just highlight these ideas without going into greater detail.

The second reality on the ground has to do with the presence of religions, and mainly for us here (I will say something later on about Judaism, about the Jews) but what I'd like to emphasize here is Islam, the religion of the Muslims. And here, our aim at Sabeel, in our theology, is to create greater understanding because we believe that understanding would lead us to greater respect for the other rather than just in our speech, because, unfortunately in the history of the church we blundered. We blundered. We spoke one way and we acted in a different way. And I believe today that they must see Christ in us, otherwise our words will not make any difference. We believe that this is the only gospel that they will read. This is the gospel of our life and this is the gospel that we use. So, we work with the Muslim community in that way. In the conference that I mentioned to you about the clergy, we dedicated one whole day for Muslims, so we invited 40 sheikhs and this is just the beginning. 40 sheikhs including the Grand Mufti who came to the conference, and we had lectures given by Muslims and Christians and discussion groups at every round table there were Muslim and Christian clergy speaking and discussing. It was one of the highlights of our conference and we hope that through that kind of relationship we will witness for Christ and that we can work together to address many of the problems that we have in our communities today and in our society.

The third area about the reality on the ground is the reality of the oppression by Israel. Israel is an occupier. It has occupied Palestinian territories. We cannot go into great details, but I think many of you are familiar with what has been happening, and we believe that the occupation must end if we hope to have peace. And so, looking at this reality, addressing this reality we know that the reality can be expressed not only in occupation, but through injustice, oppression, deception of the Israelis, racism, and some Israeli Jews themselves have been talking and writing that Israel today has become a racist state. And so in my writings, and there's one chapter in my latest book, it's about racism, Israeli racism. And I only quote from Jewish sources. If we quote from Palestinian sources they will not believe us, but when they see that their own people are beginning to detect, and it is more than detection, because it is being practiced today, this kind of racism.

So, in Sabeel we preach justice. Justice today is at the heart of our ministry. Truth, we must have a commitment to truth in everything we do. And, as I mentioned, our commitment is unflinching. It is non-violent because this is the way of Christ. And so we must resist, and today we have Friends of Sabeel in different parts of the world. I have just come back from the United States where we had 3 regional conferences and these 3 regional conferences make now 32 regional conferences during the last 7 years that Friends of Sabeel have done in the United States. And it is within this area that we work with the Jewish people. Every conference that we have, and I invite you if you come from the United States, we will have more regional conferences in whatever area you might be living. These regional conferences are unbelievable. In every conference we have Jewish speakers, we have Muslim speakers, and we have Christian speakers. And the only condition we place on speakers: they have to believe in non-violence. We will never, we will not invite any speaker who is going to preach violence because we do not accept and these are Sabeel conferences. And so, in San Francisco, Marin County, which was the last conference, we had to close down the registrations because we had

over 500 people that were ready to come to the conference. Thank God! Because it is in these conferences that we are helping people understand what's happening on the ground. But I tell you, my friends, I can see that within the last 7 years this ministry has moved from, just to begin with, from education about what's happening on the ground to advocacy. I believe we have now moved from advocacy to activism. And so the emphasis has been in the last 3 conferences on BDS, Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions that is because we believe that we must use non-violent methods. We think that Israel today is not listening. It's not even listening to the United States, its closest ally. In fact, Israel, in the minds of many people, seems to be stronger than the United States itself. So, it can shun the United States and do what it wants. And so, our friends are saying, "We must begin to act." For the sake of Israel and not just for the sake of Palestinians, and that is very important—for the sake of peace, for the sake of justice we must do whatever we can to put an end to Israeli oppression of the Palestinian people. In the forefront of this struggle are Jewish peace activists, and I thank God for Jewish activists. They have greater courage than we do in the way they speak and the way they act and we are grateful to God for what's happening. And, my friends, this is the challenge for all of us as evangelicals. We also need the evangelical voice to be courageous and to be lifted up against the oppression. God is a God of justice and justice is the other side of love. When we love, we don't commit injustice. And so, if we are concerned about the Jewish people and we are concerned about the Palestinian people we must work today for justice. And in the way we have worked it out for us at Sabeel, we work for justice because it will lead us to peace. But neither justice or peace are the end of the road for us because the end of the road for us is reconciliation. Christ has entrusted us with the ministry of reconciliation, but in order to get to reconciliation, we must work for justice and justice will bring about peace, and peace will open the way to reconciliation. And this is the ministry that God has laid on our hearts. Please pray for us and work with us so that we can achieve justice, peace and reconciliation.