

**What Can Pentecostals and Charismatics *Do*
For Peace with Justice in Israel and Palestine?**

**Christ at the Checkpoint:
Theology in the Service of Peace and Justice**

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Thank you, President Awad and Dr. Awad, and all of the others who have worked so hard to plan and host this conference. I am deeply honored to be able to participate and I have great hopes for what we will be able to do together.

I used to be a Jesus-lovin', tongue-talkin', gun-totin', American-flag-wavin' Pentecostal Christian farm boy who cheered as the missiles flew and enthusiastically sang, "Bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb, Iraq" during the Gulf War of 1991. I told racist jokes, supported torture, and was a hardcore Christian Zionist. All in the name of Jesus, and all at my local Pentecostal church. Yet, my almost every night of my life until I was 18 my father would come to my bedroom and pray for me, our family, the church, and the world. I went to sleep many times hearing my father praying. His theological and practical advice that he has repeated repeatedly to me my entire life is simply, "Seek Jesus."

But in graduate school I quit believing God and I journeyed along as an atheist. Along the way I discovered nonviolent peacemaking and restorative justice seeking in my Pentecostal heritage and I slowly journeyed my way back to a deep Christian faith. When I learned that the majority of early Pentecostals were pacifists, committed to nonviolence, I thought this was about the dumbest thing I'd ever heard, but it intrigued me so I wrote my dissertation on the history of nonviolence, militarism, and nationalism in the American Assemblies of God. There was not a golden age back there, but it got me thinking because I saw a huge shift from commitment to Jesus and love of enemy to a Pentecostalism of warmongering, uncritical zionism, and theological defenses of injustice and violence in the American Pentecostalism of my generation. Along the way I also read a lot of John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas and eventually came to the conclusion that those early Pentecostals, as crazy as they were on a lot of issues, were right on track when they resisted war, took their stand as peace churches, and stood for justice for the disenfranchised. What was a fourth generation Pentecostal, whose father had always told him to "Seek Jesus," to do? I am a Christian again because I got to know the real Jesus; Jesus, well, saved me. Saved me from thinking that injustice and occupation, even in the name of God, is okay. I am now a pentecostal-charismatic, tongue-talking, Bible believing, Jesus-following, Spirit-filled Christian, trying to be a peacemaker and justice seeker.

I have been asked to reflect on what Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians can do to help bring justice with peace to the Israeli-Palestinian situation. We could dress ourselves and our children in “Free Palestine” t-shirts and wear keffiyehs and when asked “why?” we could explain the hope that is within us, hand out a copy of Alex Awad’s *Palestinian Memories*, and explain how we should work in the church and in politics for an end to the occupation and for a two state solution. That’s one important part of the strategy, and I encourage that, and do it myself, but I want to listen to the work that many of you are already doing, and reflect on my Pentecostal identity, and see what emerges. Pentecostals dance and sing with enthusiasm and believe in healing, hope, and miracles; it’s a religion of signs and wonders, emotion, stories, and testimonies – and the Israeli-Palestinian situation needs healing, hope, miracles, signs, and wonders.

I am painfully and intimately aware of the failures, greed, nationalism, Zionism, and violence perpetrated by my Pentecostal Christian family. I did it myself and some of my family and friends still do. Pat Robertson, an internationally known Pentecostal with millions of television viewers, said that Ariel Sharon suffered a stroke because he withdrew from Gaza. Yet despite all the problems of my tradition, I think we might have some gifts to bring to this party, we might also have some light to shine into the darkness, or to use a more appropriate analogy, if Palestine & Israel is a flower garden and peace and justice are flowers, we Pentecostals have some manure to provide as fertilizer to help the flowers of peace and justice grow because we Pentecostals are full of manure.

I’m an outsider to the Palestinian situation with limited knowledge, and I’m going to talk like an outsider – I have a lot to learn, that’s who I am. I only know what I’ve read, and heard, and seen in just the few weeks I’ve been in the West Bank. I can’t help but be an American, Pentecostal Christian. As much as I used to be ashamed of the Pentecostal part of my identity, I am now convinced that Pentecostal Christians **MUST** use their unique gifts and particularities and work for a just peace in Palestine.

Four Ways to Appeal to Pentecostals, or How to Structure a Pentecostal Argument

1) Pentecostals tend to respect and be persuaded by arguments that are biblically based.¹ That’s good news as it applies to this situation, for as so many of you have written and shared in your works and in your lives, working and sacrificing for a just peace is good biblical theology, as we’ve heard and will continue to hear at this conference, the Bible calls for peace with *justice* so the Bible is on the side of the those who work to end the occupation and work for a just peace in Israel and Palestine.

¹Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out On All Flesh*.

2) Jesus-centered – Jesus calls us to love our enemies while also nonviolently resisting injustice. When Jesus said to turn the left cheek he taught neither passivity nor violence, but a third way of engaging oppressors with hopes of redeeming and transforming them (and us) and changing the situation, the facts on the ground. Jesus loves everybody and Jesus is with those who work to end the occupation and work for a just peace.

3) Spirit-empowered – In Luke 4 Jesus declares that the Spirit of the Lord is upon him to preach good news to the poor, release the oppressed, and declare the year of freedom (Jubilee). That is the work of the Holy Spirit in Luke and Acts, empowering Jesus and his followers to take on entrenched, imbedded, status quo, oppressive systems. This morning Sami Awad mentioned that an issue in Palestine and Israel is spiritual warfare; Pentecostals often resonate with a call to rely on the Holy Spirit to take on seemingly impossible obstacles.

4) The fourth aspect of a Pentecostal argument is that it must be Intensely Practical – The Bible, Jesus, and Spirit empowerment have to matter in the real world – and Palestine is as real as it gets. It has to make a difference, it has to answer the question, “so what”? People want concrete actions that they can do, and keep doing, and get others to do. We actually want to make a difference.

Five Things Pentecostals Can Do

There is a lot that Pentecostals do poorly and foolishly and I could talk about those things a long time, but tonight I will focus on five things that Pentecostals can do well.

1) Pentecostals Can Do Social Movements

Philip Jenkins, the eminent historian at University of Pennsylvania, has called Pentecostalism the most successful social movement of the twentieth century, growing from zero to half a billion people in one hundred years. So Pentecostals can do social movements, and we need the continual empowerment and expansion of this social movement for Palestine.

What is a social movement?

“A group of people who are organized for, motivated by, and committed to a purpose which implements some form of **personal or social change**; who are actively engaged in recruitment of others; and whose influence is spreading in opposition to the established order within which is originated.”²

² Gerlach & Hine, *People, Power, and Change* (1970); AG Miller, “Beyond Deprivation Theory” (1996).

- 1) Face-to-face recruitment by committed individuals using pre-existing significant social relationships
- 2) Personal commitment generated by an act or experience separating convert from established order, giving new set of values; commits to changing behavior.
- 3) Real or perceived opposition from society at large or from established order from which it arose.

How do we get Pentecostals, who love to share their faith and who claim that they care deeply about the world, to care enough about Palestinians (and Israelis) to work for a just peace?

The Culture Theory of Social Movements

Culture theory says that bringing the injustice narrative (a counter narrative to the dominant narrative) to the forefront of a movement is necessary in order for the social movement to successfully mobilize people. This is done by developing an *injustice frame*, or *injustice narrative*. An injustice frame is a collection of stories, ideas, and symbols that illustrate both how significant the problem is as well as what the movement can do to alleviate it.

For many Christians, particularly Pentecostals and Evangelicals, this framing of injustice, or ‘wrong,’ must be done biblically with reference to Jesus. Many Pentecostals I know can tolerate the greatest of injustices if they think it’s okay with God.

- Successful reframing or re-narrating involves the ability to enter into the worldview of others. Pentecostals have to narrate the injustice here so that Pentecostals and evangelicals can understand it.

The Injustice Frame or Narrative includes three separate parts:

- **Diagnostic frame:** the movement frames or stories the problem and what they are critiquing

This is done continually by Palestinians and others and I need not repeat it all here – the illegal settlements, the wall not being built on the Green Line, the matrix of control, Christian Zionism, assassinations and violence by the IDF, unjust acquisition of natural resources, etc. etc. Israel is not following international law or upholding justice for the Palestinians, this reduces security for both Israelis and Palestinians and is terribly damaging.

However, the problem must be storied differently for different audiences. When I am talking to Pentecostals, and when many of you speak, we frame the problem in biblical, theological, and ethical ways that relate directly to Jesus Christ and competing interpretations of scripture.

- **Prognostic frame:** the movement frames or stories what is the desirable solution to the problem

Remove the settlers, a two-state solution. There is controversy about the solution even among Palestinians, but for a movement to gain significant momentum and reach the “tipping point” the solution must be simple enough to be understood and communicated easily. Again, for Pentecostals to listen this, and then convert others, the solution must be in line with scripture and Jesus as well as argued politically.

- **Motivational frame:** the movement frames or stories a "call to action" by suggesting and encouraging that people take action to solve the problem.

Alex Awad, and many others of you, do this in your books and ongoing work. Dr. Awad encourages the actions of educating yourself, educating others, working for change within denominational structures of the church, joining those already working on Middle East issues, embracing nonviolent public protest, donating finances for justice, and lifting up the situation through intercessory prayer.³

The Pentecostal movement has framed or storied some problems facing humanity in such compelling ways that it has led to the amazing growth of the movement. I want Pentecostals to listen to you and do our little part to frame diagnosis, prognosis, and motivational narratives to get people involved in this social movement and work for a just peace in Palestine.

2) Pentecostals Can Tell Stories

Pentecostals love to tell stories. Pentecostalism is a movement that is drawn forward by stories, it is a story motivated and story formed faith. Storytelling and music are two of the most powerful forms of human communication, and Pentecostals are said to specialize in both.⁴

Hawkins Assemblies of God story – Just returned from West Bank on Christian Peacemaker Teams delegation, Gaza pullout of 2005, Deborah sees sign at her home church an eight foot Israeli flag hanging in their foyer and a sign out front saying, “The Bible says the Land Belongs to Israel.” My furious and prophetic wife calls me. I’m watching Gandhi, had just watched the scene where they are beaten by the British and row after row of Indians resist, are beaten, and carried away. I paused the movie, laid down on the floor, and prayed, and cried like a baby. “If Gandhi can take that to expel the British, I can call my fellow Assembly of God minister and ask to speak in church.” Called the next morning, Saturday, left a message. Hope he doesn’t call back, he does. Pray and plan the rest of the day, drive two hours Sunday morning. Get there and the pastor says, “there’ll be no peace in Israel until Jesus comes back.” I respond that if a hungry family comes to your door you wouldn’t tell them that things will only get worse until Jesus comes back, we’d feed them, right? So there are things we can do until then to make things better. I started my sermon with Jesus and his love for the outsider in Luke 4 (the Syrian army commander, the foreign widow) and

³*Palestinian Memories*, 316-318.

⁴Tex Sample.

how that almost got him killed (thrown off a cliff), complexified the situation a little by talking about Palestinian Christians (Palestinian what?), simplified it by telling stories of how some Muslims and Jews are working together in the Bereaved Families Forum and the work that Holy Land Trust, Musalaha, and Bethlehem Bible College is doing, and had an altar call where we all got on our knees together and prayed for the Jews, Muslims, and Christians in the West Bank, Gaza, and Israel. This approach may not work in every situation, but it's the language they understood, and that I believe.

I am not one, I'm still working on this, but we must become experts at showing the faces and telling the stories that reveal the giftedness and dignity of people here in Palestine and Israel. Millions of people suffering – that's too much to comprehend. But we can tell the small stories, like we've heard yesterday and today, in the name of Jesus.

The church suffers without the stories of Palestinian Christians.⁵ We all need stories and testimonies of the good, the reconciled families, the human rights that bloom, the lights that shine. We also need stories of complaints, prayer requests, and stories that protest abuse, exploitation, and oppression. Pentecostals can protest. We call them prayer requests, but they can be seen as protests against suffering, injustice, and pain.

“Testimony and lament are two sides of the same coin.”⁶ These stories are protest/imonies – we're protesting and testifying at the same time and that can be truly prophetic.

The stories of the suffering must be told, the despair, and fear, and frustration must be expressed. For hearing the voices and seeing the faces of the injustice can evoke empathy,⁷ and empathy can lead to calling, and calling can lead to action, and action can lead to healing, and healing can lead to hope.⁸ I believe that God works through the practice of telling stories, and this can bring healing and hope to Palestine by evoking empathy, calling, and action.

We need to show, promote, and continually MAKE, movies like *With God on Our Side*. I am here right now with a documentary camera interviewing Palestinian Christians who are

⁵Scott A. Ellington, “The Costly Loss of Testimony,” 16 *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* (2000): 48-59.

⁶Ellington, “The Costly Loss of Testimony,” 50-51.

⁷Christine S. Davis, “Sylvia’s Story: Narrative, Storytelling, and Power in a Children’s Community Mental Health System of Care,” vol. 12 issue 6 *Qualitative Research* (2006): 1220-1243. “Authority and power are based on whose story is told, and whose story is seen as the moral one.... It is moral for all of us to see our responsibility in forming each other’s stories.” *Ibid.*, 1228, 1234.

⁸Nicholas Wolterstorff, a philosopher at Yale, recently shared his testimony about the philosophy of justice as a calling. He testified that when he met South Africans struggling against Apartheid and heard their stories he felt “called” by God to work with them against the injustice of the Apartheid system. Later when he met Palestinians and heard their stories he again felt “called” by God to work against the occupation and for a just peace in Palestine and Israel. Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Speaking Up for the Wronged” at the Sophia Forum, February 12, 2008 at Azusa Pacific University, Azusa, California. Personal files of the author.

ministering and working for justice and peace in Palestine – and I would love to interview you!

We, in all of our faith traditions, must be the people and find the people with the passion, who speak the languages of our particular expressions of faith and empower them!

Empower and enable our communities to tell stories and thus shine the light of God on Palestine.

Imagine a fundamentalist Christian televangelist, with millions of viewers around the world, preaching powerfully on the rights, gifts, and humanity of Palestinians. We need people with the televangelist's mass appeal preaching the peace with justice message of Jesus and the prophets. A continually flowing counter-narrative that can gently and humbly undermine, subvert, and replace the Zionist narrative.

Imagine a 24-hour television channel with Christian leaders and activists telling stories, showing the gifts of Palestinians to the world. Online TV channels, podcasts, YouTube, websites, radio, skits, drama teams, curricula; with stories, testimonies, preaching, teaching – real Christian people, referring to Jesus and the Bible, connecting the deep core of their own religious expressions and traditions to this concrete situation.

The Palestinian New Network does this with excellence, I think there needs to be more. For instance, there could be a North American Pentecostal-Charismatic show on human rights, justice, and peacebuilding that uses their particular Christian language – produced by Pentecostals and Charismatics (and evangelicals) who are passionate about this issue.

3) Pentecostals Can Testify

One particular way that Pentecostals tell stories is by testifying. We call them praise reports. I testify of the goodness of God who has saved me from continuing a life of theologically justified racism, greed, warmongering, Zionism, and injustice. And I have all kinds of additional sins that I'll hopefully be able to testify about in the future. I questioned whether I should share my testimony here tonight, but this is what Pentecostals do – we tell our narratives of transformation and this opens up continual narrative frameworks in which others can live.

I encourage every one of you here to think about your own personal testimony of your own journey with God, what has happened to you and in you – emotionally, spiritually, physically, experientially, rationally – that has brought you to this place. What is your story? Your story matters, it matters deeply, and people are motivated by personal testimonies of transformation and hope.

We need communities that cultivate persons of character and conviction, who through habits, practices, and actions live out the core of our faith. We then become the stories we tell that continue to shape our communities of faith and empower work for justice.

~How does this apply to the concrete, everyday, lived situation on the ground here?

I want to help share your testimonies, your stories, with Pentecostal and Evangelical Christians in the US. Pentecostals get to know each other by sharing our testimonies, and they can get to know you and this situation by hearing your testimonies.

4) Pentecostals Believe in and Work for Conversions

Pentecostals believe in conversions! Pentecostals believe in changed hearts, changed minds, and changed realities. They are willing to pray and work and see people change for the better – from substance abuse and destructive behaviors to healthy relationships and healthy lives.

Pentecostals believe that nothing is impossible with God, the impossible *is* possible. Holy Land Trust has a “Making the Impossible Possible” campaign and to me, that seems like a very Pentecostal way of looking at this situation. To continue to take on a situation as serious as this, there has to be a movement of people who believe in conversions.

I know Pentecostals and other Christians can move from fundamentalist, dispensationalist, Christian Zionist, uncritical support for Israel and disregard for Palestinians to Jesus shaped, Spirit empowered, love for Israel and Palestine and dedication to a just peace based in solid biblical theology because it happened to ME.

This brings hope. And hope is crucial. I’ve *seen* people change, so when doubters say that Christian Zionists or dispensationalists are stuck with their worldview, or that people don’t change, I just look in a mirror and at all the other Pentecostals I’m working with and think, “I don’t know how you can say that, here we are.” People can change their minds, they can learn something new, they can have the situation reframed and re-storied for them so that they understand it differently, and then they can work for social change.

Only 11% of Assemblies of God pastors in the USA believe that Israel should NOT be privileged over the Palestinians. I think that 11% is a prophetic minority and I think that number is growing and will continue to grow – people can change.

It *is* possible.

5) Pentecostals Believe In and Can Follow Jesus

Pentecostals believe in Jesus and can follow Jesus, it might be a Jesus with an M-16, but they do believe in Jesus. And we speak freely about Jesus, and that's okay as long as we're not using Jesus' name in vain. To have the kinds of conversions to peace and justice in Palestine that this social movement needs, I think we have to stick very close to Jesus. A "thick Jesus" whose life and teachings we take seriously.

Jesus taught neither passivity nor violence when he taught to turn the other cheek. When slapped on the right cheek of indignity one could either retaliate with violence or passively slink away and take it. Jesus taught his disciples to stand there and turn the cheek of equality, of dignity, of hope, offering a space for possible confession, repentance, transformation, and redemption. Now the oppressor can choose to either hit me on the cheek of equality which means I suffer yet still win, walk away because he will not see me as an equal, or repent and I can forgive and we can embrace and be reconciled. But the oppressed takes the initiative to transform the situation, this third way of cheek turning, this transforming initiative that flips the script, it is the way of Jesus and it is Spirit empowered, biblically based, and intensely practical. We must rediscover and practice the powerful teachings of Jesus.

I know to be careful not to take God's name in vain, but Christians working for justice must be willing to say what they think God thinks about the Israeli/Palestinian situation. And our understanding of God most clearly comes from Jesus. God is not simply a big exclamation mark agreeing with what we think is right or good; we should not use God to get what we want. However, God should use us to get what God wants – peace with justice, reconciled relationships.

Since God's name is invoked in vain to support the occupation, confiscation of land, suppression of human rights, exploitation, and destruction – we should invoke God's name not in vain but with honor and humility as we nonviolently and redemptively promote human rights and political solutions.

For instance, I can declare that Jesus does not want Israel to continue the occupation of Palestine. Some people can say, "I don't have to listen to your Jesus." They're right, they don't have to, and some Christians say they don't have to listen to UN Resolutions 194 and 242. So I should say to Christians who *are* supposed to listen to Jesus that the occupation is not okay, and never has been. Citing UN Resolutions is not authoritative for believers because they are not sacred texts, but scripture is, Jesus is. Preaching from a pulpit that "UN Resolution 242 says that Israel should withdraw and Palestinians should be compensated!" could evoke a response of "So what? That's just the UN" from many Christian people I know personally. They're not convinced. We need to be able to take a microphone and in a church, (or a mosque, synagogue, or temple if you're of a different faith) and tell why God cares, based on our scriptures and traditions, about the Palestinians and what God thinks can and should be done.

What should Pentecostals do? We should say what we think God thinks about the suffering and injustices in Palestine. Is God disgusted? Yes. Does God want God's creation, all humans, to be valued as gifts, regardless of their status? Absolutely! Many of us believe this, we should say it loudly and quietly and speak it powerfully and humbly. It is okay to ground our claims in transcendent authority, especially since Pentecostals (and evangelicals) believe in transcendent authority.

Some use religion, theology, and talk of "God" to avoid human rights and to perpetuate gross injustices, and these are theological issues for many of us disagree with other Christians about Zionism. Some say that God wants all the Palestinians to leave so the Jews can have the land. I argue that God does not want the Palestinians to leave and that believing that God does is less than faithful Christian theology. We have to do the hard (and rewarding) work of hermeneutics and discipleship, of calling a community to be faithful to Jesus and to scripture. This is what Pentecostals must do: commit to the challenging and inspiring work of exploring the depths of our faith to create communities that follow Jesus and who can't help but surpass the expectations of the UN Security Resolutions.

We do not expect too *much* when we ask Christians and Christian leaders to work for a just peace in Palestine and Israel, we expect too *little*. Here's a slogan, "Do less than what you're called by God to do: support the Palestinians." Human rights should be easy; love, mercy, compassion, and forgiveness are greater challenges and greater gifts. So Pentecostals can do the powerful and divinely bestowed task of calling our people to faithfulness, and this will help us accomplish the easier task of promoting a two state solution.

I may have little success telling certain Conservative Jews that based on their very own scriptures they should stand for the human rights of Palestinians in the West Bank. But I can share with American Pentecostal Christians that a good way to reflect the light of Jesus, and follow Jesus' teachings and example, would be to work for a better Palestinian/Israeli situation.

*One Little Strategy – What Pentecostals & Charismatics for Peace & Justice is Doing*⁹

Conclusion

I hope that I've been able to bring some manure to the flower garden, and I close by suggesting that Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians should glorify God and support the Palestinians by being themselves and by being prophetic. Prophets "speak for God to the world" – pointing out evil and calling us to justice, risking their lives by telling the truth, loving their enemies, and challenging injustice. We need religious leaders and communities

⁹<http://www.pcpj.org>

who humbly risk their careers and their safety to stand in solidarity with the suffering and tell the stories, in the name of God, *and* to carry their words and stories to the streets and to the halls of government and become part of the story as they risk it all for the glory of God and the health of Israel and Palestine. The prophet Joel said, “Your sons and your daughters will prophesy”¹⁰ and the time has come in human history for Pentecostals to speak and act prophetically regarding this present injustice and not relent no matter the cost, and to use every nonviolent weapon in our arsenal – stories, preaching, teaching, persuasion, music, movies, marches, prayer, jail, drama, patience, and even the giving of our lives.

My Pentecostal recommendation is for us to speak freely, humbly, powerfully, and continually in our own particular ways and tell the stories that prophetically protest, testify, and inspire to action; for the stories of painful protest and the stories of thankful testimony are often the same story, the story of Immanuel - “God with *all* of us.”

¹⁰Joel 2:28.