

Money, morals and Israel: An exchange: Divestment strategy is unwise, ineffective

by [Barbara G. Wheeler](#) in the [February 8, 2005](#) issue

This response is the second part of a four-part exchange on the divestment policy of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The other three parts are:

[Vernon S. Broyles III's statement](#) of his position

[Ira Youdovin's response](#) to Broyles

[Broyles's reply](#) to Wheeler and Youdovin

The decision of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to take steps that could lead to divestment of the church's holdings in companies doing business in Israel caused consternation among Jewish organizations and their leaders, here and abroad. The fact that the Presbyterian approach to divestment is "selective" (only companies whose products or services play major roles in implementing military and political policies that the church disapproves will be targeted) and "phased" (activist investor tactics will be used first and sale of assets will be proposed to the assembly only if other measures are unproductive) did not seem to most Jewish groups to soften the blow.

A number of Presbyterian sessions (governing boards of local churches) and members have also stated their disagreement with the denomination's action. I am one of those members. Here is why I think that the move toward divestment is a mistake.

By its very nature, divestment is a strategy that can be effective only if widely adopted. Any single investor, even a billionaire like the PCUSA, gives up its leverage to influence a company's policy the moment it sells its stock. If the seller has been trying to steer corporate action through meetings with management and stockholder resolutions (as the Presbyterian procedure requires before divestment), the sale of shares, probably to an investor who has no policy goals except maximizing return,

will come as a relief, not a punishment, to the divested company.

For divestment to “alter corporate behavior,” which Vernon Broyles says is its goal, and especially for it, through corporations, to affect the policies of governments, there has to be a broad-based boycott. Many investors must agree to sell or not to buy certain stocks, lowering the competition for shares and their price, and thus (perhaps) influencing company decisions about where and with whom to do business. The method of this kind of divestment movement is to create economic and political instability in the target country by withholding resources from companies operating in states that need the companies’ expertise and economic activity. If the divestment is successful, either policies that the boycotters disapprove of or the government that promotes them will change.

Destabilizing the government of someone else’s country is a drastic step. What merits it? Though Vernon Broyles declines the comparison, the classic case of broad-scale divestment aimed at causing substantial social change is South Africa. There the government, a racist structure dedicated to racist policies, was so deeply implicated in evil that the divestors—a multitude of religious, educational, charitable and public organizations as well as individuals—judged that it lacked legitimacy. It deserved to be undermined. However strenuous one’s criticisms of current Israeli policies, that cannot be said of the democratic government of Israel, whose existence the PCUSA supports. The divestment device is not a moral fit for this situation.

Nor will it be effective. Given the range of strong opinions in America about Middle East policy, a broad coalition of divestors from Israel is unlikely. The actions of the PCUSA will have symbolic weight only. Because the South Africa case defines divestment in the public mind, the Presbyterian decision signals extreme opprobrium for the Israeli government and its policies. Such a signal, as some Jewish peace activists have pointed out, feeds Israeli insecurities and heightens defensiveness, making the work of critics of current policies, including Jewish critics, more difficult. Thus the Presbyterian divestment decision makes it less, not more, likely that Israel will modify policies that afflict Palestinians and will take risky steps toward peace.

If not by divestment from Israel, how should the PCUSA prosecute its deep desire for peace in the Middle East, its longstanding concern for justice for Palestinians, and its support for the secure existence of Israel? American Presbyterians who care about

Middle East peace should, in their role as citizens, prevail upon our government, which has enormous influence on Israel, to reactivate peace efforts. Meanwhile, the denomination should befriend and support religious leaders and groups on both sides who are ardently seeking a peaceful and just resolution.

The PCUSA has durable relationships, through our historic alliance with Palestinian Christians, that can be further developed on the Palestinian side. Establishing working relationships with Jewish and Israeli groups is more of a challenge. To achieve that, we Presbyterians will have to change our tone. We talk as if we have superior moral status, as if we are in a position to define, as Vernon Broyles's statement does, what this conflict is "about" from a Jewish perspective, and even what God does or should "forbid" with respect to positions taken by Jews on Israel.

At the same time, we forget how deeply mainline Protestants have been implicated in anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, in America and around the world. Many American Presbyterians in the previous generation belonged to organizations that excluded Jews by policy. Some of us who are Presbyterians today attended elite colleges because better qualified Jewish students were excluded by quota. Presbyterians have acknowledged our complicity in "contempt for the Jews" in a study paper, but unlike the Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, we have never formally disowned and asked forgiveness for our anti-Jewish attitudes and practices. Presbyterians have not earned the right to pronounce with unqualified moral authority on matters of critical concern to the Jewish people.

Instead of delivering moralizing pronouncements and symbolic body blows, Presbyterians should offer partnership—listening, support and encouragement—to Jews, Muslims and other Christians who are working for reconciliation. Together we can bring to bear a common witness, not only zeal for peace, justice and social righteousness, but also recognition of a profound truth, a biblical one, that is missing in much of the current dialogue: *shalom*, God's will for the whole created order, which may require all parties to set aside some of their preferred outcomes.

The Israeli writer Amos Oz says the only alternative to a "Shakespearean" ending to the story of the Palestinians and the Jews, with bodies all over the stage, is a "Chekovian" resolution, "everybody a little disappointed." Restraint, humility, and respect for the best and most sincere efforts on all sides—if we Presbyterians cultivate these virtues in our own decisions and actions, perhaps we can, with others, contribute toward the end of suffering in Israel, Palestine and the rest of the world.