

Bearing witness: A challenge to Christian Zionism

by [Paul Alexander](#) in the [January 9, 2007](#) issue

While visiting friends in east Texas my wife saw a message on the sign of the Assemblies of God church in which she had grown up. It declared, “The Bible Says the Land Belongs to Israel.” This was during the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in August 2005.

I had recently returned from a Christian Peacemaker Teams delegation to Israel/Palestine. I had taken hundreds of pictures and had been sharing stories with various groups, such as the Pentecostal Charismatic Peace Fellowship. During the course of our phone conversation Deborah said, “You need to call the pastor and talk to him about this.”

I had been to the West Bank, but *this* scared me. Though I may be a fourth-generation Pentecostal, born and bred in the Assemblies of God, I knew better than to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian situation in a church with that sign out front. I told her I would pray about it—a classic way out.

Deborah’s call had interrupted the movie I was watching—*Gandhi*. I went back to watching the amazing story of Gandhi’s nonviolent confrontation with the British empire in India.

The next day I realized that if Gandhi could stand against the British empire, then I could call my brother in Christ and ask to share the story of my trip to Israel. So I did. The pastor promptly invited me to come the next day and to speak at the Sunday morning service. I immediately regretted calling, because now I actually had to do this.

The next morning I made the two-hour drive to the church. As I walked into the foyer I was taken aback: an eight-foot-long Israeli flag was hanging on the wall. I then discovered that the pastor had just completed a yearlong study of the end times and of Israel’s right to the land. He had commented along the way that “there will never be peace until Jesus comes back.”

I took my text from Luke 4. I highlighted Jesus’ emphasis on Elijah’s compassion for the foreign woman in Sidon and Elisha’s ministry to the commander of the invading army of Syria. These stories challenged Jesus’ listeners, who tried to murder him because his vision of God’s mercy included outsiders and foreigners.

I said Jesus was a Jew and a Palestinian. Jesus was a Palestinian Jew. I talked about Palestinian Christians working with Israeli Christians and Israeli Jews working with Palestinian Muslims. I told them about Israelis who oppose the occupation of the West Bank and about the organization Rabbis for Human Rights. I explained the Bereaved Families Forum, which consists of about 500 Palestinian and Israeli families who have had a loved one killed, either by the Israeli army or by a suicide bomber. These Jewish, Muslim, Christian and secular families listen to each other’s stories and work together for a better future.

Simply put, I tried to reveal the humanity of the Palestinians, the diversity and complexity of Israelis’ opinions, and the gracious, merciful and controversial approach that Jesus took as he publicly addressed injustice and expanded the vision of his audience. I continually quoted the phrase that I heard while in the Middle East: “Keep hope alive.”

I concluded with an altar call, because that’s what we do in Pentecostal churches. I invited people to pray for the Palestinian and Israeli Christians who are working together, and for all those who reach out across ethnic,

religious and national barriers, seeking reconciliation. Several people came forward, and I knelt and prayed with them. One man came up, laid his hand on my shoulder and prayed that my words might be heard in many Assemblies of God churches and that the Spirit would strengthen me.

When I walked back to the pulpit to retrieve my Bible and notes, the pastor met me, grasped my hand in both of his, looked me square in the face with tears in his eyes and said, “Paul, I’m a Zionist. I’m so far to the right I think the conservatives are off. I’m a fundamentalist and proud of it. What you said today, I needed to hear. I’d forgotten. . . . It’s always just been ‘Those who bless Israel I will bless.’ So even if God had you here today for nobody else, he had you here for me. I needed this. Thank you.”

I said I appreciated the opportunity to share my experience.

The next day Deborah’s dad called to say that the pastor had taken down the sign about Israel. God works in mysterious ways? Maybe God works in clear ways. When we follow the Spirit, sometimes good things happen, sometimes not. Either way, we’re called to be faithful. And to keep hope alive.