

Reformed Church calls Christian Zionism 'distortion' of scripture: An obstacle to Middle East peace

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A popular reading of scripture embraced by evangelical giants Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, and played out in the top-selling Left Behind books, was declared a “distortion of the biblical message” by leaders of the Reformed Church in America.

The RCA’s annual General Synod, which met in Wheaton, Illinois, adopted a resolution June 8 that calls Christian Zionism—the belief that Israel must control the Holy Land before Christ returns to earth—an obstacle to Middle East peace.

“When it’s assumed that Israel has a divine right to the land, then [it] can’t be criticized,” said Jim Brownson, academic dean and professor of New Testament studies at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. “There has to be compromise, understanding and cooperation. [Christian Zionism] is a trump card that undermines that process.”

Some delegates voiced concern about alienating supporters of Christian Zionism, which influences the popular Left Behind book series. But Brownson said it is important for the church to speak against a harmful understanding of the Bible. “People are dying as a result of what we believe is a false interpretation of scripture,” he said. The synod also directed RCA staff to keep working with the Middle East Council of Churches and other ecumenical groups on the issue of Christian Zionism.

An RCA report stated that though Jesus was silent on the question of a restored Israeli nation-state, “he was not . . . mum about his desire to proclaim the good news and to see justice and mercy extended in human community.” On the basis of that position, delegates discussed how a new creed might be applied to the conflict in Israel.

The RCA is exploring endorsement of the Belhar Confession, which arose in the 1980s out of the apartheid struggle in South Africa, as its first new creed since the 16th century. The paraphrase of Gospel texts emphasizes reconciliation and unity.

“A central theme in the work of Christ is marked by the process of reconciliation between divided peoples,” Brownson said. The Belhar Confession would commit the RCA to “overcoming violence, hostility and division” wherever they occur. “The promise of Abraham is a promise of reconciliation, of hope, of blessing for the world.” -*Religion News Service*