

Islam and Current Realities in the Middle East

by Dale F. Walker*

First of all, I want to thank the planning committee of the Ministry Conference for choosing to focus on the challenge of Islam in today's world – a vitally important theme. And thank you for the invitation to speak with you today. As usual, when an invitation comes to prepare a talk on a particular theme, the process helps me clarify in my own mind some of the issues I think are important. Whether I can be successful in passing on this clarity to you is something we'll have to see during the course of this lecture. One of my friends asked me how I was going to present this topic. I answered that I might have to read the morning newspaper to make sure what the current realities are. This is just a warning to remind us that anything we say today may be changed by events tomorrow. I doubt it though. I imagine most of you have had the experience of picking up a newsmagazine in a doctor's office, leafing through it, reading some interesting bits, then suddenly realizing that the magazine is two or three years old! News of the Middle East seems to stay basically the same, from week to week, from year to year, from decade to decade. But my hope is that tomorrow's events may seem a little clearer to us because of the background we can discuss today.

We as Americans, and we as Christians, are finally learning to give some attention to the Middle East. We have tended to think that in the modernization and the Westernization of the world, the people of the Middle East would develop and become something like us. This comes through very clearly in the mission literature of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The Missions established schools in all the Middle Eastern countries, educating a new elite, which in another generation or two, they thought, would take control, bringing the people to Western Christianity and the countries into the modern world.¹ Well, the new elites did take over, without much change in their Islam, and with some strange twists in their modernization, which was hardly recognizable.

I myself hadn't paid much attention to the Middle East, except insofar that the lands of the Bible are located there, with also a general awareness of modern Israel and its national development. Like many of us, I suspect, I could more easily relate to the names and places of the Bible and the ancient Near

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Eastern world, than to the names and places of the modern Middle Eastern reality. My wife and I were missionaries in Indonesia for thirty years, where we dealt with Muslims, and Islam, everyday. But this was an Islam far removed from the theoretical Islam of the Middle East, or so we thought. I hadn't given the Middle East much thought until seven years ago when I was asked to prepare a course on Missions to Muslim Peoples at Asbury Seminary. This was still pretty much theory, until September 11th, 2001, wham! The theory became reality. And we all had to learn quickly that the Middle East is very much a part of our world. An aside here – historians in the future will be grateful that such a watershed event took place right at the beginning of a century. And this may be seen as a defining moment of the whole 21st century.

It is still rather difficult to say with any confidence what the Middle East is and what it is not. The past few years have given us more and more experts, often debating with very shrill voices. And where the Middle East is concerned, wherever there are two or three experts, there are bound to be four or five different opinions. But it's very fashionable to begin with some negatives, explaining what the Middle East is not. I'll follow this method too, discussing some common misconceptions about Islam and the Middle East, then showing some of today's interplay of Islam, society, and political currents, then, I hope, turning to some ways we as Christians can relate to what is going on.

The Middle East, Islam, and Arabs

We tend to equate the Middle East, and Islam, and the Arabs, but these three terms need to be carefully distinguished. One prevalent misconception is that all Middle Easterners are Arabs. An obvious exception is Israel, where Arabs do live, but as a minority. There are other less evident exceptions. Turkey is usually considered part of the Middle East, though it bridges Asia and Europe, and many Turks desperately want to be in the European world, not a part of the Middle East. What is clear is that the Turks are not Arabs. Both sides would be horrified at any suggestion like that. It's been only a few generations since the Turks ruled most of the Arab peoples, in the Turkish Empire, and memories are long in the Middle East. Though the Turks are strongly Islamic, they are not likely to look with favor on Arab solidarity or Arab power.

Another non-Arab part of the Middle East is Iran. Iranians are descendents of the ancient Persian Empire, conquered by the Arabs very shortly after the time of Muhammad in the 7th century. The Persians were quickly drawn into the orbit of Islam, and for centuries were the leading lights of Islamic

civilization, but retaining their own language and culture. In our time, the ethnic bond is often stronger than that of faith: remember the horrific warfare between Iran and Arab Iraq during the 1980s. By the way, this was when the wise heads in Washington, in order to counteract the Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, decided to build up a new two-bit dictator they'd found, Saddam Hussein.

So not all Middle Easterners are Arabs. The next general misconception we have to deal with is that all Arabs are Muslims. They are not. Except for Israel, of course, Muslims dominate in all the Middle Eastern countries, but in many of these places there are substantial Christian minorities. Or at least there were. One of the tragedies of the current Middle East is that religious minorities have been decimated in most of the countries. For instance, it has been estimated that in Palestine and Jordan, about 25% of the Arab population in 1900 was Christian; in 2000, only 3% remained. In Syria in 1900, 40% were Christian; in 2000, only 5%. In Iraq, the figure of Christians was 35% in 1900, less than 2% in 2000.² Most of the decrease in the percentage has been due to emigration, especially to Europe and North America, but the ratio decreased also because of extremely high population growth among the Muslim Arabs. Although there was discrimination, and at times outright persecution of Christian minorities in all the countries, most of the people were able to emigrate, and were not simply killed, except for the Armenian Christians in Turkey; around one and a half million Armenians were massacred by the Turks in the early 1900s.

The great decrease in the Christian populations of the Middle East was tragic for the countries involved, especially since the Christians were generally better educated, and made up a large part of the middle class and professional classes in many of the countries, and thus could not participate in national development of the 20th century. So doctors, nurses, teachers, etc. were in short supply. Having said that, we should realize that Christians still play vital roles in several of the Middle Eastern countries. Some very prominent people are Christians. Among these is a former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Boutros Boutros-Galli, an Egyptian Christian.

By the way, evangelical Christians in North America tend to look down on the traditional churches in the Middle East: the Coptic Church in Egypt, the Maronite Church in Lebanon, and the various Orthodox churches. We see them as so ritualistic, so "catholic," many of their people so nominal in their faith. This is very true. But there is life, and renewal, in many places. And in spite of all their faults, these churches have survived discrimination and often persecution through fourteen centuries under Islamic rule. We ourselves, under

the most favorable conditions of freedom, have a hard time passing on the faith to the next generation. Maybe we have things to learn from each other.

The reality is that Christians are now small minorities in many of the Middle Eastern countries. And in several of the countries there are very few Christians at all: in Turkey, and in Saudi Arabia and the whole Arabian peninsula. The few Christians who are there, often as secret believers, need our prayerful concern.

The third misconception I want to mention is the impression that all Muslims are Arabs. We have already seen that Turks and Iranians are non-Arab Muslims. In fact, only less than a quarter of the Muslim population of the world is Arab. Even though the first Muslims were Arabs, in the 7th century, and Arabia in many ways remains the center of the Muslim world, the vast majority of Muslim peoples are non-Arab. The four largest concentrations of Muslims are in Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India. These countries contain well over half of the 1.2 billion Muslims in the world today. Closer to home, we know that only a small part of the Muslim community in the United States is Arab: most American Muslims are African-Americans or people from South Asia: Pakistan and India.

An important question now is, who speaks for Islam? Who can represent the religion to the world? People of Arab background, south Asians, or African-American newcomers to the faith? Many assume that the authentic Muslim voices are those from the center, Arabs from the Middle East. Egyptian scholars and writers have often claimed this role. Others look to Iran for intellectual leadership at the present time. Many of the famous, older books on Islam were written by Pakistanis (Ameer Ali and Fazlur Rahman are examples).³ Indonesian Muslims have hardly been heard from on the world scene, yet they have definite ideas about what Islam should mean in the present century. African-American Muslims are beginning to assert themselves, saying that if Islam is to be a worldwide religion, we cannot just look to the Middle East to define what the faith should be. In the 21st century, we *might* see much freer discussion among Muslims themselves about what Islam is and how it should relate to the modern world. For instance, American Muslims might start shifting the meaning of *Dar'ul Islam* (the House of Islam). It is usually assumed that for Islam to be practiced freely, there has to be Islamic political control. But American Muslims are beginning to say that they already have more freedom to practice Islam than Muslims in tightly controlled societies have ever had. A person's "islam," surrender to God, can be more meaningful when it is a free choice.

It's this last point of defining Islam that I want to focus on in a little more depth. We have seen that the Middle East does not automatically mean Arab, that Arab does not necessarily mean Muslim, and that the Muslim community is much wider than the Arab community. Nevertheless, Islam is still a determining factor, perhaps *the* determining factor in everything that happens in the Arab world, and in the Middle East. Even though some of the present leaders are the purest secularists, and some, such as Saddam Hussein of recent memory, are regarded as very bad Muslims, and none measure up to what the radicals think a Muslim leader should be, nothing is said or done in these countries without regard to the various currents of Islamic thinking and the mass opinion of Muslims throughout the region. In order to understand something of the hold which Islam has on the whole Middle East, we need to go back in history to see how some of the present-day attitudes developed.

The interplay of Islam, society, and political currents

Although Muslims often like to think that the religion began with Abraham, the first person submitted to the one God, Islam as a new religious force began, of course, with Muhammad, who received something of a prophetic call around the year 610 AD, near Mecca. Preaching for several years amid growing persecution, Muhammad gathered some fellow believers, and they emigrated from Mecca to the town we now call Medina, a couple hundred miles away. This was in 622, which later became year 1 in the Muslim calendar. In Medina, Muhammad became not only the spiritual leader, but also the political leader and cultural arbiter, the final and absolute spokesman for God. By the time of Muhammad's death, in 632, the new faith had spread to virtually the whole Arabian peninsula.

Within the next ten years, Muhammad's followers had taken control of neighboring countries: Egypt, Persia, and the areas we know as Palestine, Syria and Iraq. We need to mention a common misperception at this point. Though the Muslim armies went with sword in hand, they often did not need to use it. In Egypt, the Coptic Christian masses welcomed the Muslim armies as liberators from the hated Byzantine Greek rulers. The same thing happened in Damascus and Jerusalem. The people were generally not forced to become Muslims. Although Christian and Jewish subjects were not given full citizenship, and there was steady and sometimes relentless pressure to become Muslim, some of the areas did not have a Muslim majority until several hundred years later.

During the early years, the Christians probably did not look on the Muslims as having a new and different religion. They took note that the Muslims stressed that God is One; Jesus was an important part of the Muslim

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teaching, as well as the Virgin Mary, the only woman to be mentioned by name in the whole Qur'an; and there seemed to be some kind of acceptance of the previous Scriptures. The whole Islamic system at that time probably did not seem any more peculiar or outlandish than many of the other Christian and semi-Christian sects. In fact, the earliest accounts of Islam by Christian writers talk about it in terms of a Christian heresy. In fact, there is still some validity in comparing Islam to other quasi-Christian sects, such as Mormonism: a new prophet, a new revelation, a new book, etc.⁴

At any rate, Islam spread very quickly through North Africa, Spain and into France, within 100 years after Muhammad. There was also rapid expansion into central and south Asia. Expansion into the Balkans, into southeast Asia, and into sub-Saharan Africa came a little later, as well as some reverses: a loss of France, later of Spain, and footholds in Italy and Sicily.

Besides the rapid expansion of Islamic control, what came to be known as Islamic civilization developed very rapidly at the same time (roughly 650-1250 AD). We are used to thinking of the development of Western Civilization as a straight line from Greece to Rome through the Dark Ages, and to Western Europe in the Renaissance. Our Dark Ages, however, were the Ages of Light in the Muslim areas. The Arabs took over the science and philosophy of the Greeks, built on this and developed a powerful and forward-looking civilization.

It was in Spain that Western Europeans were first in close contact with Muslim culture. Huge numbers of scientific and philosophical manuscripts were translated from Arabic into Latin. Thomas Aquinas developed a new theology, based on the philosophy of Aristotle. But he learned Aristotle through the Arab philosophers. Other Western scholars did the same. Many other influences of the Muslim civilization came through the Crusaders. The Arabs regarded the Crusaders, mainly 1100-1300 AD, as uncouth, uncivilized, and barbarian. When the Crusade armies were able to reach their goal of conquering Jerusalem, it was with a tremendous slaughter of the inhabitants, some 30,000, according to the Crusaders' own accounts. Eighty years later, when the Muslim general Saladin recaptured Jerusalem, orders were given that no person was to be harmed, a deliberate attempt to point out the differences between Muslim civilization and what they saw as the Christian counterpart.

I'm drawing these comparisons to show that at the time, the Islamic culture and civilization was very far advanced indeed. In fact, present-day Muslims look back at these centuries as the Golden Age. Islam was expanding everywhere; the culture was developing rapidly in every direction. The armies were victorious. The only setbacks, in Spain, and in Palestine during the Crusades, were due to disunity among the Muslim factions. As soon as the

Muslims could be united, in Syria and Palestine, the Crusaders could be pushed into the sea, from whence they had come. When we hear present-day Palestinians using the same language about Israel, this simply shows that the Arabs consider the nation of Israel a temporary intrusion, as the Crusader kingdoms proved to be.

Even until the 1500s, Muslim scientific progress, measured by the weaponry of the armies, was on a par with that of Western Europe. But at that point, Western scientific development took off, while Muslim civilization began to stagnate. There was very little further scientific and cultural development, and today the stories about the glorious times of the heroes are all about people and events of several hundred years ago. Various attempts have been made to catch up with Western development. The Turkish Empire borrowed Western military models, but found that these didn't quite work. Educational models were imported; these never reached the masses; industrial, economic and political models from Europe were imported, adapted, and basically discarded. Nothing seems to work to counterbalance the almost complete Western domination of the Middle East.

The obvious question is, "What went wrong?," to borrow the title of Bernard Lewis' book on this theme.⁵ How did the bright, flowering culture of the Middle Ages stagnate so quickly, and so deeply that no one can get out of the morass? More often the question becomes, "Whose fault was it that the Golden Age passed away?" Here some possible answers lay close at hand. The Mongol invasions from central Asia in the 1200s destroyed Baghdad, which was the leading city of the whole civilization. The Mongols eventually became Muslims, but the impact of their invasions was a setback from which the culture only gradually began recovering. Arabs see the impact of the Turkish Empire, from the 1500s to the early 20th century in the same light. But mostly the blame shifts to the Western colonial domination, beginning in south Asia and southeast Asia in the 1500s, then to the Middle East with Napoleon, around 1800, and continuing domination by France and Great Britain throughout most of the Middle East until the mid-20th century.

There is some truth in all these assessments. Colonial domination does suck the wealth of the conquered nations, giving little in return. And the spirit of the subjugated peoples is often so broken that the culture stagnates. This is why most nationalistic movements begin with renewal of language, literature, and other cultural values. But this cannot be the only answer. The colonized nations have been their own masters for at least a couple of generations now, and matters have not improved for most of the people in most of the countries.

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The blame is shifting now. We can't get out of the mess we are in, people say, because of Western economic and cultural dominance, especially from America.

Coca-cola, McDonalds, Hollywood, CNN, the oil companies: these are the new symbols of economic and cultural domination from America. And now for the past 15 years, American infidel soldiers on the holy soil of Arabia! Such degradation had not occurred since the times of Muhammad! Everything seems to be getting worse, not better. Are the Middle Eastern countries destined to be just a part of the global American colonial empire, at least until the oil runs out?

But there is one thing the West cannot take away from the Middle East, and that is Islam. So goes the thinking of a lot of people; national cultural renaissance has to begin with a revival of Islam in our midst. There seems to be general agreement on this. Few would dare suggest that renewal could come through scrapping the Islamic heritage. But how is Islam to be revived in the present Middle East? What should be the relation between Islam and modern life? How can Islam guide society and culture at the present? These are major questions, and there is no agreement on the answers, or even on the approaches to be taken.

Turkey has tried a purely secular national state, since the 1920s. Though people are staunchly Muslim, there has been no Islamic presence in the constitution, the government, or in political life. Religious political parties, and most Muslim organizations, have been banned, until recently. Religion has been a private, home affair. Even the wearing of Islamic dress is forbidden, at least in schools and public offices. Turkey has become one of the more modern, developed countries of the Middle East, but the route it has chosen with regard to the role of Islam is anathema to most of the other peoples in the Islamic world. And even in Turkey itself, there are recent changes, questioning, and even reversing, this "secular" stance.

Iran has chosen another way, since the revolution of the 1970s: a "theocracy" of the mullahs, the religious leaders. This made some sense in Iran, following the Shi'ite variety of Islam, where the religious leaders do have some priestly functions, unlike the majority Sunni Islam, where religious leaders are basically teachers, and have very little governing authority. The Iranian model was followed in Afghanistan, by the Taliban, with disastrous results. In Iran since Ayatollah Khomeini, the model has been further nuanced and developed, and seems to be working to some extent in providing a viable political process. It remains to be seen, however, whether modern national development can be sustained with the theocratic model.

Saudi Arabia is ruled by a king, who follows a very strict puritanical sect of Islam, the Wahhabis. Wahhabi teachings, from a teacher and reformer of

the 18th century, control all religious and cultural rulings, and influence to some extent political decision-making, though I suspect that oil economics plays a larger role.

Other countries have experimented with all sorts of models of basing political, social, and cultural life on the teachings of Islam, none of them very successfully. At least, none have emerged as ways to be emulated by the rest of the Middle Est. All kinds of Muslim organizations have emerged, with Islamic ideas that can be characterized as fairly liberal, as conservative, or as reactionary. Let's take a closer look at one of the reactionary movements, variously called revolutionary, or Islamist, or fundamentalist.

The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in Egypt in the 1940s. The Brotherhood violently opposed President Nasser in his attempt to mold independent Egypt according to Western models. At times persecuted, at times free and honored, the Brotherhood is probably the largest and most influential radical organization today, and at present represents a voting bloc of 20% of the seats in the Egyptian parliament.

A writer who belonged to the Brotherhood was Sayyed Qutb, who was killed, or martyred, by President Nasser in 1966. Qutb's life mirrors that of many other radicals. He started out in the mainstream. A prolific writer, he developed commentaries on the Qur'an, and many other books, with the purpose of relating Islam to modernity, in order to build up a modern culture based on Islam. He lived and studied in the United States for two years, 1948-1950, and was radicalized in the process, by the racism he found, and also seeing what was happening in the secularization of Western culture. He was especially shocked, he later said, because of the role America had in the establishment of Israel and the mistreatment of the Palestinians. By the way, Qutb had very interesting comments on the secularization of the churches he had visited. He thought they were doing everything but proclaiming the Gospel!

Qutb returned to Egypt, and became a radical Islamist leader until his imprisonment and death. His later books continue to be influential. Though they are generally banned throughout the Middle East, they are passed along in the radical underground, and are readily available in the West. His best-known book, *Milestones*, is fascinating reading.⁶ Qutb rejects any "watering-down" of the Islam found in Muhammad and the first generation of his followers. The Qur'an and the Hadith, traditions and sayings of Muhammad from the first two or three centuries of Islam, are to be the only sources and patterns for life today, which is to be governed completely by the Shariah, the law based only on those sources. There is to be complete separation from all Western and modern influences. If the government today is not following this, it is the duty of every

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Muslim to rise up and overthrow it, in order to establish the Shariah as the rule of law. Islam is to be aggressive and militant in extending this rule of Shariah throughout the world. These sentiments got Qutb killed by the Egyptian government, but it is easy to see how Osama bin Laden and other Muslim radicals can read *Milestones* and follow Qutb's program as a major part of the ideology today.

There is no doubt that this type of thinking is now very widespread throughout the Middle East, and throughout the world of Islam, and seems to be getting stronger. Just how influential it is, no one knows. Certainly no outsider can really gauge something like this; what I do not see is Muslim teachers openly criticizing it. Most estimates from Muslims themselves, that *Milestones* is just a passing fad, not very important, or that *Milestones* is the wave of the future, sound like special pleading of what the speaker *wants* to see happen. But at least here is something we can grab hold of, in an attempt to understand how a large number of Muslims see themselves and the future of the Middle East. It is not a very pleasing scenario, but I would say to Muslims who disagree with Qutb's analysis, "Show us where he is wrong, and draw us a different picture."

Christians and the Middle East today

In a very sketchy way, I have tried to show some of the Middle Eastern realities and how Islam is at the center of everything that happens in the Middle East. I want to turn now to some questions that rise concerning our own relationship to Islam, as Christians, and particularly as evangelical Christians. Our record since 9/11, at least in the public eye, hasn't been too edifying. How can we understand more of what Islam is, and how can we give our Christian witness concerning this system of belief?

Let's start with the question always asked in relation to recent events: Is Islam a religion of Peace? President Bush, pushed by Middle Eastern realities and the niceties of diplomacy, proclaims that it is. Many evangelicals, pushed by combative and confrontational tradition, loudly assert that of course it isn't. How should we think about this question? As usual with broad either/or questions, it depends a lot on how we define the terms. So what is Peace? Muslims confidently point to the Arabic word *salaam*, which means "peace" and is related to the word *shalom* in Hebrew. In Semitic languages, the determining sounds are the root consonants of a word, and the same consonants *s-l-m* are in *salaam*, and are in the word *Islam*, as well as in the word *Muslim*. So, it is said that Islam means "peace," and a Muslim is a peaceful person. The relationship between the words is not quite that simple: *Islam* technically means "submission, surrender," and *Muslim* means a person who is in submission, or

surrendered, that is, to God. It is fairly easy to involve the word “peace” if you want to say that a person is at peace through surrender to God. Meanings of words, however, are tricky, very slippery. A biblical study of the Hebrew word *shalom*, for instance, should include the paragraph beginning in Deuteronomy 20:10: your army surrounds a city and offers “peace” to it. If accepted the populace becomes your slaves; if this kind of “peace” is not accepted, you fight, kill all the men, and take the women and children as the spoils of war.

What can it mean to say that a whole religious system is one of peace? Are we talking about ideals? We want to see the whole world at peace in the Kingdom of God; Muslims want to see the whole world at peace in the *Dar’ul Islam*, the House of Islam. Are we talking about the past record? No religion has very clean hands. Muhammad and the early Muslim leaders did not come up with anything new in the military and political realm. They could have learned it all from the example of Constantine and his successors in the Byzantine Empire. In history, the most dangerous situations have been the wedding of a religion, *any* religion, to temporal, political power. Whenever it has occurred, there has been a tremendous amount of bloodshed, suffering, and has led to a revulsion against all religion. The principle of separating religious and political power was first learned in Europe of the 17th century, and was later enshrined in the American constitution. When tempted to ignore it, look at what is happening in Israel, among other places, today. Muslims will eventually have to learn, as people of other religions have been slowly and fitfully trying to learn, that we all have to scale back our ultimate goals of power in order to live together without killing one another.

Another question which is always asked, especially in religious circles, is: Are God and Allah the same or different? For many people, Muslims as well as Christians, the answer is obvious, they are not the same. Many Muslims do not want to use the English word *God* to refer to *Allah*, because of the feeling that the word *God* does not convey the Oneness of *Allah*. On the other hand, many Christians say that Allah is a different deity, mainly, I think, because of the feeling that we should demonize Islam in any way possible.⁷

Other cooler heads, Muslim as well as Christian, have realized that there has to be some close relationship between the words. Etymologically, the Hebrew *Elohim* in the Old Testament is certainly related to the Arabic *Allah*. Also, there is the realization that in many parts of the world, the question of identity would never be asked. Through much of the Middle East, when Christians worship, they pray to *Allah*, since that is simply the Arabic name for God. In other places too, such as Indonesia and Malaysia, Christians have simply borrowed the Arabic name to express the One God. Recently, however,

the government in Malaysia, spurred by Islamic radicals, has passed laws forbidding Christians to use the word *Allah*, and several other theological words, in effect copyrighting the name of God for Islam. These laws affect Christian discourse in public and in publications, but cannot really be enforced further than that.

If we worship one God, and Muslims worship one God, we have to be talking about the same entity. We may have different understandings of what God is like and how God is revealed to humanity, but if there is to be any discussion about this, we have to be at the same starting point. Part of our witness can then be how that one God became flesh and lived among us, in Jesus the Messiah, or in Arabic, *Isa al-Masih*. For me, it is very telling that many Muslims who become Christians testify not that have discovered a different God, but that they never before understood who God was, and now they know God through Jesus Christ.

Many other matters of faith will come up for discussion when we are talking to Muslims. Many Christians shy away from witnessing to Muslims, since there seems to be so much fanaticism and often-violent reactions to Christian teachings.⁸ But many Muslims love to talk about faith; many are as eager to witness to you, as you are to witness to them. There can be fruitful exchange if we learn to listen to what the other is saying, and then speak respectfully and confidently about our faith. It may be long before fruit is seen, but our Lord is calling us to plant the seeds.⁹

One other set of questions that I must mention here is so important since it colors everything else in the current realities in the Middle East. Also, we as evangelical Christians are very much involved in the issue, and must think clearly about the practical issues involved. These are the questions regarding Israel in the present Middle East.

Arabs unanimously regard the founding of the modern state of Israel as an intrusion into the Middle East; it represents a new Crusade of the West / Christians against the Arab / Muslim world. The expansionist policies of Israel since its establishment only prove to them the diabolical nature of the intrusion, and the complicity of the United States in using Israel as an anti-Arab / anti-Islamic tool. Actions of Israel since 1967 and 1973 concerning land and Palestinian rights fly in the face of world opinion, except in Israel and the United States, and become convenient seedbeds for the growing of every movement of unrest throughout the Middle East. Osama bin Laden may not really care about the Palestinians; he probably doesn't. But when he mentions their mistreatment, the whole Middle East responds with gut feelings of anger and frustration. The big question the Arabs ask is: "Why should we have to

suffer in order for the West to right the wrongs of Anti-Semitism in the Holocaust?”

Many Christians, on the other hand, have been at least sympathetic with Israel. And many have been trying to provide theological justification not only for Israel's existence, but also for its expansion, something the Zionists themselves didn't do very much. We don't know just how much influence evangelical Christianity had in President Truman's decisions to vote for the establishment of Israel at the United Nations in 1947, and to recognize the new government in 1948, but he was at least aware of dispensationalist interpretations about the establishment of a new Israel. Since then, these interpretations have grown more numerous, and more strident, especially since Israel gained control of the Temple mount in 1967. We have seen evangelical leaders in full, uncritical support of the Israeli state as the fulfillment of biblical prophecies, with no consideration of the means involved. Arabs, including Christian Arabs, are treated as if they were not present in the Holy Land.¹⁰

The various Wesleyan movements and also the strong Calvinist churches were never very much involved in dispensationalist thinking. But recently it seems that among many churches, there is uncritical acceptance of claims of this type of biblical interpretation. Much of this, however, needs to be questioned. Should modern Israel be regarded as a continuation of biblical Israel? Is the modern nation-state of Israel what is meant in the various prophetic writings in the Bible? Either way, shouldn't modern Israel be called to live up to a commitment to the Old Testament covenant with Israel? One of the characteristic features of that covenant was neighborly concern for the stranger and the sojourner in the land; surely that might somehow include the Palestinians.

These issues are very complex, and we can hardly deal with them in one short paper. But what I would like to see is Christians, and especially evangelicals, as well as our national government, evaluating the questions of Israel and Palestine in a more even-handed way, recognizing the problems and the truth on both sides.

Summarizing

It's time to sum up, which can't really be done. It would mean a summary of a summary. But I would like to stress the need for awareness that these are all issues of our present world that should be aired and discussed fully. The answers and mistakes of history should not be just accepted and repeated. Instead, where is the Lord leading us as Christians today? And in what direction should our nation be moving?

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In the days of the Wild West frontier, at least in the Hollywood version, the symbol of authority was a Colt revolver, called a “Peacemaker.” I’m afraid we are still too much imbued with this idea! Surely our Lord had something different in mind when he said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.”

¹ Much of this story is told in Lyle L. VanderWerff, *Christian Mission to Muslims: The Record* (South Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1977).

² Estimates from 1900 are compiled from various sources. Present-day estimates are from P. Johnstone and J. Mandryk, *Operation World* ([Minneapolis]: Bethany House, 2001).

³ For example, Ameer Ali, *The Spirit of Islam: A History of the Evolution and Ideals of Islam with a Life of the Prophet* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1978) and Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

⁴ This was recognized long ago. A book on the Mormons published around the end of the 19th century had the intriguing title, *America’s Islam*.

⁵ Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁶ Sayyed Qutb, *Milestones* (Indianapolis: American Trust, 1993). The Arabic original was published in 1964. There are several editions and translations, some with different titles.

⁷ Unfortunately, most books on Islam which are available in the Christian bookstores present this confrontational viewpoint. A number of more helpful books are available from evangelical publishers. Look for books by Phil Parshall, Bill Musk, Colin Chapman, Christine Mallouhi among other evangelical authors.

⁸ A practical call to neighborly concern is a little book by Shirin Taber, *Muslims Next Door: Uncovering Myths and Creating Friendships* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

⁹ Christians will need greater understanding about Islam and what Muslims believe. An excellent book for this is: Roland E. Miller, *Muslim Friends: Their Faith and Feeling* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1995). Miller goes on to discuss Christian witness to Muslims in his

recent book, *Muslims and the Gospel: Bridging the Gap* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2005).

¹⁰ A good source for this history is: Stephen L. Sizer, *Christian Zionism: Road-map to Armageddon?* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2004).