

Key Issue #16 Why Christians differ

Introduction to Table of Factors behind basic attitudes of Christians toward Israel

From the beginning of history people reflected on God, the world and human existence. The Bible is evidence for this. Even Job and his four friends had each their own theology. Among Christians this is no different. In the best of cases theologies are the product of divine inspiration by the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's influence on the human understanding of the text.

Theologies can be compared to buildings. They serve a certain purpose and reflect a certain period of history. They have a certain size. They consist of their own building material and they stand on their own foundations. (The Apostle Paul underlines that there is only one foundation for the building process and that is Jesus Christ). In the case of mental constructions the building process is more complex than for most material ones. The reason is the origin of the workers, their training and their gifts, their goals and motivations. These differences are part of the culture and the worldview of each individual. If theologies are meant to demarcate the faith against 'other gospels' and unbiblical ways or manners of thinking, it follows that each culture ought to have its own theology. In other words, there is no single theology that can be valid for everybody everywhere at all times. Theologies are conditioned by a number of factors that can be listed and discussed.

Every theology – every dogma or confession of faith – must be tested. *A biblical theology recognizes the biblical text as its final point of reference, as test stone without which there is no reasonable discussion possible.* The more a theology corresponds to the divine nature and content of the biblical text (OT / Tenach and NT/B'rit Hadashah), the more the archeological evidence and the facts of the life of the

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interpreter are in harmony with it the closer that theology will be to the truth. Conversely, the fewer the number of biblical texts is that do not fit the particular theology, the greater the probability that we are dealing with a truly biblical theology – a theology that is sensitive to what the Spirit is saying to the Churches (according to the Apostle John in his letters to the seven Churches in the Book of Revelation – Chapters 2-3).

The top floor that carries the roof of the theological construction is technically called the Eschatology or the Teaching of the Last Things. This concerns the biblical end time prophecies. To put it simply, there are different end-time views according to whether the biblical text is interpreted literally or non-literally, for instance in the case of chapter 20 of the Book of Revelation (the Millennial Kingdom), or whether a text is considered to be central as for instance in Romans 9-11 (the Salvation of Israel) or whether it is just a parenthesis of lesser importance. Differing eschatological views are one of the reasons why Christians in certain areas of faith and practice differ from each other.

One may ask the question what would be needed to bridge the gap between the most important evangelical positions; what could contribute to reduce the tensions and to facilitate reconciliation – for instance between the factions that apparently are mutually exclusive in their convictions as is the case between those who believe that there is nothing more important in this world than the missionary mandate for world evangelism and those who are convinced that the proper relationship to Israel is the key that will open the floodgates of blessings from heaven. May we remind ourselves that Jesus' established the priorities when he said "beginning in Jerusalem" and beyond, and that Paul summarized the strategy with his formula "to the Jews first." Yet this principle that would solve most of our problems does not find universal agreement. Perhaps it is therefore helpful

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to analyze the various elements that constitute the building process – and thereby make up the eschatological convictions.

It is our proposition that the common ground of agreement in matters of eschatology could be considerably broader if the representatives of the various positions were willing – at least for the sake of the argument – to look at the core issues of the biblical teaching. If, for instance, we could all agree that the State of Israel in light of its recent history is not a product of chance, then the gap between the various positions could almost be closed. For, if the reemergence of this State is the result of Divine intervention and therefore the consequence of prophetic fulfillment, replacement theology (RT) would no longer be justified. RT stands for a number of theologies in which Israel has no more role to play in history. The Church is taking the place that Israel once had but lost due to its rejection of the Messiah. If RT could be recognized as the product of the historically conditioned arrogance of a triumphalist Church, many would get the opportunity to change over into a different theological building. In other words, at least the pre- and post-millennialists would find a common ground for world evangelism and for recognizing at the same time that Israel is part of the Divine plan of Redemption. In that case, the controversy as to whether it is more important to reach the world's metropolises with the Gospel or the ethnic minorities in the remotest corners of the globe could be considered a question of personal calling and thereby could be ended once for all. One would no longer need to demand the Jews to become members of a Church if they are ready to accept Jesus as their Messiah. This question could be removed from the agenda of theological quarrels and could be relegated to a question of missionary strategy.

The eschatological tension between those for whom the terrestrial kingdom is right at hand and those who still need more time to fulfill their calling could be confidently left to

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the Sovereignty of God the Father of Jesus who is the Head of the Church. The key for this new theology: the concession that the eternal covenant that God made with Israel was renewed at the Cross for the Jews and for the Gentiles alike and did not annul the promises that God made to Abraham and his offspring. There seems to be no compelling reason why pre- and mid- tribulationists, pre- and postmillennialists need to go their separate ways regarding God's plan for Israel, the Church and the Nations. After all, they share a futuristic view of prophecy.

The following analytical table of factors involved in the making of a theology is based on the paper of the Catholic theologian M. Perko,¹ who described the various groups from his perspective. The following table retained the main categories and the most pertinent remarks but enlarged the paper's inventory of factors considerably (in italics). The uttermost column on the left enumerates the specific factors belonging to the so-called hermeneutical circle – the process of interpretation that applies the very filter it created for itself.

In reference to the above the three following facts are worth remembering:

- 1) The construction of a Theology – including any biblical one – regardless of whether it was formed in the past, is being formed now or will be formed in future – is always based on a number of convictions and opinions (hypotheses) that precede the building 'process.'
- 2) The building process of every theology has a number of personal and political consequences.

¹ „Jerusalem in Slavery:“ Christians, the Bible, and Contemporary Israeli/Palestinian Politics. F. Michael Perko, S.J. <http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/articles/perko03.htm> Prof. Perko is Director of the Center for Higher Studies on Christianity and Culture at the Loyola University of Chicago. This paper that was published with the kind consent of the author, was presented on April 2 2003 to the Annual Meeting of the Association for Israel Studies.

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- 3) Sorting out the various theological positions is not meant to imprison those who hold them into locked drawers. The construction of theological views is a lifelong process. May the following presentation help to activate it.