

Thoughts on the conflict from a reconciliation point of view

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To both Israelis and Palestinians, the current conflict in Gaza has brought nothing but pain and suffering. It has also caused friction among some believers as they choose to pledge sole allegiance to their own people group. Some are even expressing an unabashed hatred for the other side through articles, e-mails and graphic content on Facebook.

From the Israeli point of view they pulled out of the Gaza Strip in the name of peace and an Islamic regime took over. Israel's justification for going to war was to protect its citizens against Hamas launching rockets on the communities in the Negev. Soldiers continue to mobilize along the Gaza border as they prepare to defend their people and country against terror. They claim that others would have acted more quickly and aggressively. Their reasoning is that it is necessary to attack now before Hamas has longer-range missiles.

The Palestinians claim that though Israel left the Gaza Strip in 2006, the army is still controlling the borders making it the biggest open-air prison in the world. In the last 18-months, 1.5 million Palestinians have been under siege and were prevented from receiving sufficient water, medical aid and food supply. For the Palestinians, Israel's withdrawal from Gaza was just an excuse to expand their control in the West Bank and build further settlements. The Palestinians also believe they have a right to self-defense. For them, the Israeli reaction is disproportionate. The number of Israelis killed cannot be compared to the hundreds of Palestinians killed.

Each player in the conflict places the full responsibility of the cycle of violence on the other side. There is a general unwillingness to enter into peace talks on ideological or political grounds. For example, Israel will say Hamas is an ideological religious organization that doesn't recognize Israel as a Jewish state. Palestinians, on the other hand, say the Palestinian Authority has entered into concessions and nothing substantial has evolved; all that increased were settlements and checkpoints.

So, what is our role as believers in this situation? How can we be a model of Messiah as we move forward in the reconciliation process? Are we too busy challenging the moral and ethical position of the other side that we are unwilling to take responsibility? Because our societies have chosen war and violence, there is a great need for reconciliation. We can accomplish this through taking on a priestly role of intercessor and prophetic role of speaking the truth.

While the conflict has divided some believers, there are those taking a stand and fulfilling their priestly role. I was greatly encouraged last week to hear a Messianic pastor lead his congregation in a prayer of repentance, especially emphasizing that in a time of war, repentance is necessary from both the Israelis and the Palestinians. We must begin by examining our own sins, failures and shortcomings and seek God's forgiveness and direction.

Applying Joel 2, he read, "Return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity" (Joel 2:12-13). God desires us to grieve from within and turn our hearts back towards him. As we as believers intercede on behalf of the people in our societies we

need to invoke the nature of God and beg for his mercy and compassion to fall upon us because we have sinned before him. We must also cry out for God's mercy and compassion to fall upon the other side.

In time of war we are also called to take on a prophetic role. The prophet was a representative of God who brought a message primarily to effect social change. The prophet spoke the truth and reminded us to care for the widow, orphan and stranger. When speaking the prophetic word, we need to be blunt without any hidden messages, and we need to have the courage to speak out when our people are wrong. In the prophetic role we are reminded that we must not only speak out against the injustice which has been committed against our own people, but also against others. We have a duty to speak out against the misuse of power and the blood of the innocent shed whether it is Israeli or Palestinian.

The world views war as war. Some will say, "in war the innocent also die and we cannot help it." My son was greatly distressed when his friend told him exactly this. I shared with him that in war we need to speak up for the innocent. We cannot justify the act of killing innocent people and say it was in self-defense. Yet, we cannot justify killing someone with a weapon just because they're holding a weapon. Even killing in war for self-defense should be taken with caution and reverence. The enemy carrying the weapon is also a person who has also been created in the image of God. Especially in a time of war we need to speak louder and clearer against the misuse of power by our governments and their justification of power and violence. War doesn't mean giving a free hand without any moral and ethical boundaries and limitations.