I give you warning in advance. In the near future, people may accuse you of being anti-Semitic. When the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) meets in a couple of weeks, the report of the Middle East Study Committee will be on its docket. Before it was even made public, conservative Jewish groups were denouncing it and labeling Presbyterians anti-Semitic. The Simon Wiesenthal Center said, that with this report, our denomination is “declaring war on Israel.” It goes on to say that we have “launched a dangerous campaign to use theology to delegitimize the Jewish State and her supporters. They (the Presbyterian Church) may be only days away from putting the policy of a large Protestant denomination on a collision course with Israel’s survival.”

I understand that political organizations often use inflammatory remarks to induce supporters to increase their donations, but those words totally misrepresent the report. The report consists of more than 150 pages, including theological reflections, historical analysis and recommendations. You can read the entire report on the Presbyterian Church (USA) website.

At the beginning of the report are letters addressed to various groups. One of the letters is addressed to “Our American Jewish Friends.” I want to read to you paragraphs 2, 3 and 4: “We want to be sure to say to you in no uncertain terms: we support the existence of Israel as a sovereign nation within secure and recognized borders. No “but,” no “let’s get this out of the way so we can say what we really want to say.” We support Israel’s existence as granted by the U.N. General Assembly. We support Israel’s existence as a home for the Jewish people. We have said this before, and we say this again. We say it because we believe it; we say it because we want it to continue to be true.”

“And, at the same time, we are distressed by the continued policies that surround, sustain, and consolidate the occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, and the Golan Heights, in particular. Many of us come to this work out of a love for Israel. And it is because of this love that we continue to say the things we say about the occupation, the settlement infrastructure, and the absolute death knell it is sounding for the hopes of a two-state solution, a solution that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has supported for more than sixty years.”

“We also want to make it clear that what we say in moral criticism of policies and actions of the Israeli government should not be used as a battering ram against Israel’s right to
membership in the community of nations nor to deepen anti-Semitism or any categorical blame
of the Jewish people for the ills of the world. As those whose faith originated in the synagogues
of the Fertile Crescent, our love of our common heritage is precious. Anti-Semitism has no place
in faithful Christian expression.”

I am thankful the report clearly denounces anti-Semitism because the Christian Church
has a history of hostility toward Jews. The church has routinely forgotten that Jesus and the first
Christians were Jews, not Gentiles. The Gospel of John, which frequently refers to the Jewish
religious leaders as “the Jews,” has often been read as a justification for vilifying the Jewish
people and blaming them for killing Jesus, even though he was crucified by the Romans.

The anti-Semitism of the Church has led to the persecution and killing of Jews on too
many occasions in various parts of the world – such as the Spanish Inquisition – and it helped lay
the foundation for the Holocaust. As justification for their butchery, Adolf Hitler and other Nazi
leaders quoted Protestant Reformation leader, Martin Luther, who had called on Christians to
“get rid of Jews.”

Because of our history, it is important for us to be on guard against anti-Semitism in the
church. However, it is also essential, that we distinguish between being anti-Jewish and being
critical of policies of the Israeli government. In the same way that criticizing the policies of our
own government does not make us un-American, criticizing the policies of the Israeli
government does not make us anti-Semitic.

Undoubtedly, it would be easier for us if our denomination had not waded into the
controversial waters of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, I am proud of our church for
wrestling with real life issues of justice and peace that impact million of people’s lives. Our
church does not shy away from serious concerns because they are difficult or controversial. The
Presbyterian Church supported Civil Rights in this country before it was fashionable and
opposed apartheid in South Africa before it was popular. Our church will not always get it right
and its views will not always coincide with my own, but thanks be to God that our church has the
courage to go beyond individual spirituality and personal morality to address major problems
wreaking havoc in our world today.

Most people assume that in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict you must be either pro-Israel
or pro-Palestinian. I do not believe that those are the choices before us. As followers of Christ, I
believe we should be pro-justice and pro-peace.

In my mind, there is no question that Israel needs security. Camilla and I have spent
hours in the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D. C., and the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum
in Jerusalem. We have stared at the grisly photos and wept at the black and white videos of Jews
being rounded up and executed. We have walked through the remains of the concentration camp
in Dachau and pondered the horror of the Nazi’s extermination campaign. We will never forget
the mammoth atrocities that have been committed against the Jewish people.

Today, the modern state of Israel has enemies who claim it has no right to exist. This is
unacceptable. I believe we must help to insure their continued existence. However, my support
of the nation of Israel does not mean I must give unwavering support to the policies of its
government - especially when I become convinced that those policies are bad for the future of
Israel, a threat to our own nation’s security and inhumane to Palestinians.

This morning’s Scripture reading from Acts tells of the conversion of the Apostle Paul.
Initially, his name was Saul and he was a devout Jew who strictly obeyed the Torah. For a
handful of years after the death of Jesus, he persecuted Christ’s followers. Our text says that one
day as Saul was traveling to Damascus, “a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the
ground and heard a voice say, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’” Saul was blinded by the experience and had to be led into the city. For three days, he could not see. Then, a man named Ananias was directed by God to visit Saul and to help him regain his sight. When Ananias laid his hands on Saul, something like scales fell from his eyes and his sight was restored.

After the scales fell from Saul’s eyes, he saw the world very differently. He became a follower of Christ and the greatest missionary the church has ever known. Perhaps you remember a time when the scales fell from your eyes, and you no longer saw the world from the same perspective. Many Americans grew up in a racist environment where blacks were treated as inferior people, but one day the scales fell from their eyes and they recognized their prejudice and from that day on, they viewed people differently. Some spent much of their lives condemning gays and lesbians, but one day the scales fell from their eyes and they were liberated from their bias.

For several years I have known that the Israeli army occupied the West Bank and Gaza, and that Jewish settlements were being built on Palestinian land. But during our trip to Israel/Palestine last November, the scales fell from my eyes and I began to see what is happening as never before. Now I see the urgency for opposing the Israeli government’s policies of occupying Palestinian territory, of building settlements, of diverting natural resources, of destroying schools, hospitals and businesses in Gaza and prohibiting the reentry of medicines and building materials. I am alarmed that we are approaching a day when there may no longer be any Christians in Bethlehem, Nazareth or Jerusalem; the land in which our faith was born.

Unfortunately, the American media has portrayed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in such simple terms that many Americans are blind to its complexities. Many have such opaque scales covering their eyes that they think the word Palestinian is a synonym for Muslim terrorist. They know nothing of our fellow Palestinian Christians who constantly strive for a just and peaceful solution in which Jews and Palestinians can live and work side by side.

There is no one voice that speaks for Jews and no one voice that speaks for Palestinians; just as there is no one voice that speaks for Americans or Iranians, Afghans or Argentineans. Every nation has hawks and doves, moderates and malcontents, secularists and religious believers, people who rally behind such slogans as “My country, right or wrong” and people who distrust every action of their government. The less we know about a foreign nation, the more we try to paint its people with one broad brush stroke, but societies are comprised of a diversity of individuals.

There is an amazing amount of diversity within Israel. Did you know that a significant portion of Israeli Jews oppose their government’s policy on building settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem? Did you know there are numerous Israeli peace groups that constantly strive for justice for Palestinians? Did you know there are peace groups in which Israelis who have lost family members to suicide bombers and Palestinians who have had family members killed by the Israeli army sit down together and work on ways of supporting one another and bringing an end to the violence?

When people ignore the complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they drift toward supporting one side or the other. They label people as pro-Israel or pro-Palestinian. We should not be lured into either position. We should be pro-justice and pro-peace which means we will support and oppose positions taken by both sides.

The report of the Middle East Study Committee is not perfect, but it will cause scales to fall from many people’s eyes. It cannot happen soon enough because we are living at a time when the window of opportunity for a just peace and a two state solution is rapidly closing.
The report includes several pages of recommendations which include the immediate end of violence by all parties, the end of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, an immediate freeze on Jewish settlements, the relocation of the Separation Barrier to the 1967 border, a shared status of Jerusalem, the resumption of negotiations toward a two-state solution, an end to the blockade of Gaza. It calls for the Palestinian political parties to pursue an ideology of nonviolence and to work for peace with Israel, for all parties in the Middle East to refrain from nuclear arms proliferation and a number of other recommendations.

As I said, the full report is on the Presbyterian Church (USA) website. The eight pages of recommendations are on the literature table in the main hall, if you would like a hard copy.

Some leaders within the Presbyterian Church (USA) endorse this report, others are critical of certain portions of it. Whether or not it is affirmed by the General Assembly, it is not binding on any individual. Each of us has the right to agree or disagree, to study it or to ignore it.

Nurit Peled Elhanan’s 13 year old daughter was killed by a suicide bomber in Jerusalem. When she and her husband, both Israeli Jews, experienced this terrible tragedy, this evil, they looked very hard at themselves and at the society that had brought this down upon them. They opened their house of mourning to other bereaved parents, including Palestinians.

A reporter asked her how she was willing to accept condolences from the other side. She replied that she had refused to meet with the other side. She said, “When representatives of the Israeli government came to offer their condolences I would not sit with them. For me, the other side, the enemy, is not the Palestinian people. For me the struggle is not between Palestinians and Israelis, nor between Jews and Arabs. The fight is between those who seek peace and those who seek war. My people are those who seek peace.”

I hope and pray that she will be able to look at the members of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and say without hesitation that we are her people.

NOTES
1. “Presbyterian Church USA Ready to Declare War Against Israel: Take Action Now,” on the Simon Wiesenthal Center website.