

Money, morals and Israel: An exchange: The Presbyterian case for divesting from Israel

by [Vernon S. Broyles III](#) in the [February 8, 2005](#) issue

This statement is the first part of a four-part exchange on the divestment policy of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The other three parts are:

[Barbara Wheeler's response](#) to Broyles

[Ira Youdovin's response](#) to Broyles

[Broyles's reply](#) to Wheeler and Youdovin

Churches have been practicing corporate divestment for a long time—long before the recent decision by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to consider divestment from certain companies doing business in Israel. The practice began with churches' refusal to invest in companies whose profits derive from products like tobacco and alcohol or from activities like gambling.

In attempting to manage its assets in a way consistent with its theology, the PCUSA has questioned investments in companies whose activities are harmful to workers, environmentally destructive or linked to the violation of human rights. On those grounds, the church has challenged corporate activity in such places as Nigeria, Equatorial Guinea, China, Indonesia and Sudan.

The PCUSA's longstanding commitment to peacemaking has also led the church's General Assembly to limit or eliminate church investments in companies that are heavily involved in producing military weapons.

In 1985, at the height of the apartheid crisis in South Africa, the church adopted a process for challenging particular U.S. corporations that did business in that country. The aim was to change their behavior so that their presence would no longer undergird the apartheid economy but would be a force for political change in both South Africa and the U.S.

That process involved some deliberate steps, including: establishing criteria for determining corporate involvement; identifying the most important companies to engage; arranging meetings with management; exercising shareholder resolutions to give visibility to the church's concerns; and finally, if none of these prior steps bore fruit, recommending that a particular corporation be placed on the General Assembly's divestment/proscription list.

The church's goal in enacting this policy was not divestment in itself; nor was it to maintain some kind of purity. The aim was to alter corporate behavior.

In 2004 the General Assembly, responding to a proposal from the Presbytery of St. Augustine in Florida, voted to begin the process of phased selective divestment from corporations active in Israel, following the style of engagement approved by the General Assembly in 1985. In adopting the same approach applied to South Africa, the General Assembly made no comparison of the situation in apartheid South Africa with the situation in Israel/Palestine.

The divestment decision was adopted as the last of seven recommendations, most of which reiterated previous General Assembly policies. The assembly:

- affirmed the right of Israel to live within its own safe and secure borders
- affirmed the right of the Palestinians to their own state in which they could also live within safe and secure borders
- expressed abhorrence of acts of terror by any party that maim or kill innocent people
- reiterated the call to Arab states to cease any funding that might be supporting terrorism
- urged Israeli and Palestinian leaders to be serious, active and diligent about seeking peace for their peoples; or, if they are unwilling or unable, to step down and make room for other leaders who will and can
- called for an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory and a return to the Green Line established in 1948 and in place until 1967
- demanded termination and removal of illegal settlements

- demanded removal of the “Separation Barrier” (the Wall)
- demanded an end to collective punishment of Palestinians, administrative detentions, mass house imprisonment (“curfews”) and other forms of humiliation of Palestinians
- urged acceptance of the League of Arab Nations’ unanimous offer of peace in return for land occupied by Israel since 1967

The recommendation on divestment also cited these realities “on the ground”:

- almost every day innocent Palestinians are killed by the Israeli Defense Force or armed settlers
- as many as 20 percent of those killed are children and several have been American citizens
- illegal settlements continue to be built or expanded (the rate has increased dramatically since the collapse of the Oslo talks) in defiance of international law and of United Nations resolutions
- Christian Peacemakers, who are accompanying Palestinian children to their schools so they will not be harassed by settlers they have to pass on the way to school, have been brutally beaten by thugs from the settlements
- Palestinian homes are regularly destroyed (often bulldozed-rebuilt-bulldozed-rebuilt-bulldozed), sometimes in acts of collective punishment of whole families or neighborhoods where there may be a “suspected terrorist”
- Palestinian olive groves, vineyards and other agricultural sites are being bulldozed or otherwise destroyed in acts of intimidation and terror
- the Separation Barrier, whose route has been challenged under both international law and Israeli law, often divides Palestinians from Palestinians, not Palestinians from Israelis, preventing some from reaching their schools, jobs or medical facilities
- Palestinian farmers are often refused permits to pass through Israeli checkpoints to harvest their crops, and must leave them to rot on the trees or in the field

The church recognizes that suicide bombers have taken numerous innocent Israeli lives—acts that the General Assembly has deplored as unconscionable. There are

periodic acts of violence on the part of some Palestinians against innocent victims. Palestinians have often been poorly served by leaders who have been guilty of serious corruption and of violence against some of their own population.

The divestment recommendation in no way ignores the responsibility of Palestinians to work toward a peaceful future. It does express the conviction that until the Israeli occupation and other aspects of Israeli encroachment and domination are ended, that peaceful future will remain in jeopardy.

Following the action of the General Assembly approving a process for engaging corporations doing business in Israel, the Mission Responsibility Through Investment Committee (MRTI) developed criteria for identifying corporations whose activities need scrutiny. The focus is on:

- multinational corporations that provide products or services for use by the Israeli police and military to support and maintain the occupation
- multinational corporations that provide products, services or technology of particular strategic importance to the support and maintenance of the occupation
- multinational corporations that have established facilities or operations on occupied land
- multinational corporations that provide products or services, including financial services, for the establishment, expansion or maintenance of Israeli settlements
- multinational corporations that provide products and services, including financial services, to Israeli or Palestinian organizations/groups that support or facilitate violent acts against innocent civilians
- multinational corporations that provide products or services, including financial services, that support or facilitate the construction of the Separation Barrier

These criteria will be used to develop the initial list of companies to consider, out of which a relatively small number will be identified for further engagement. Decisions about which companies should be on the “focus list” will require judgments by the MRTI Committee as to the relative magnitude and strategic importance of individual companies.

Some critics immediately complained that the General Assembly was not taking a “balanced” approach to the conflict. But there is no “balance” in the current situation in Israel/Palestine, nor can there be “balance” under current conditions. This is not a contest of power between two more or less evenly matched opponents. The call for balance is ludicrous when one party has overwhelming military, political and economic power and is buttressed by the preferential policies of the most powerful nation in the world. The call for balance brings to mind the comment by Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, in responding to calls for balance in consideration of the white Christians in South Africa: “When the elephant is standing on the mouse’s tail, the mouse will not be impressed with your ‘neutrality.’”

Some critics asked why the church would single out Israel for such scrutiny. The simplest answer is that Israel is the place of greatest concern to the Presbytery of St. Augustine, it brought that concern before the General Assembly, and the assembly acted upon it.

Another obvious reason is the unique awe and respect in which the Holy Land is held by adherents of the three great Abrahamic faiths. The turmoil, violence and injustice there leave unique scars on Jews, Christians and Muslims. For that violence to occur especially in Jerusalem, the City of Peace, makes work for peace all the more pressing.

Finally, there is no place on earth where U.S. citizens are more complicit. It is our tax dollars that enable the occupation, the expansion of the settlements and the construction of the Separation Barrier. It is our regular affirmation of shared democratic values that is put to the lie by the injustices visited daily on Palestinians, including those who are Israeli citizens. It is the silence of U.S. Christians and Jews, often leaders in other struggles for civil and human rights, that allows the longstanding bias in U.S. policies to be ignored. It is the conspiracy of silence in the U.S. media that keeps millions of Americans ignorant of the realities of daily life in Palestine/Israel.

The divestment decision by the 2004 General Assembly is not about the Jewish people. It is not about the right of the state of Israel to a secure existence. It is not about ignoring unconscionable acts of violence against innocent Israelis. It is not about getting rid of our holdings in “bad” corporations. It is not intended to exclude appropriate investment in the region. It is not offered as a stand-alone strategy for achieving a peaceful resolution of conflict.

Divestment is a specific strategy to address specific, persistent behaviors of an occupying power against a weaker population. It is about getting the attention of enough people in the U.S. and in Israel on the issues so that these behaviors will change. These are behaviors that violate international human rights law, Israeli law and moral law, not to mention basic tenets of the Torah. They are behaviors that in and of themselves are barriers to peace.

We know that many of our Jewish friends are upset by this action. God forbid that the price of friendship and dialogue should be silence in the face of gross injustice by the government of Israel. God forbid that our Jewish friends, who are people of conscience, should be silenced by the demand that their Jewishness should prevent them from criticizing egregious policies and actions of the state of Israel. And God forbid that Christians in the U.S. should remain passive in the face of bias in the policies of our own government.

It is time for us to join forces—Christian, Jewish, Muslim—to demand of our leaders a secure and lasting peace in the region. The people of Israel/Palestine must have it; peace in the region and the world requires it; and our God commands it. If we could manage that, the discussion of divestment would be irrelevant. Thank God for those who already have shown the courage to begin.