

A CONFESSING CHURCH FOR THE PRESENT KAIROS
The Ecumenical Movement for the 21st Century

This paper reviews the theological, sociological and political issues related to the global church movement in response to the Palestinian call for liberation from Israeli oppression. Well into the second decade of the twenty first century, the global community faces an urgent threat to humanity and to the earth itself. An increasingly globalized economy controlled by supra-governmental corporations has led to a steady rise in poverty, conflict, dislocation, and to a process of global climate change with catastrophic implications. Fortunately, the previous century has also given us a legacy of prophetic action for human rights, pursued by denominational and ecumenical church bodies in solidarity with national liberation movements. Following the model of the South Africa Kairos document, the paper presents a political and social analysis of the current situation, describes the “church theology” that has supported the Zionist project, and discusses the challenge to the church in confronting Israeli Apartheid as a manifestation of the global neoliberal order. Concrete action steps are proposed.

A CONFESSING CHURCH FOR THE PRESENT KAIROS The Ecumenical Movement for the 21st Century

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This is the moment of grace and opportunity, when God issues a challenge for decisive action.
Kairos South Africa “Challenge to the Church,” 1985

Theology itself is not the fighting part here; it stands wholly at the service of the living, confessing, and struggling church.
Dietrich Bonhoeffer

By leaving out the steps from confession to resistance, one ends up tolerating crimes, turning confession into an alibi, and, in view of the injustice committed, an indictment of the confessors.
Eberhard Bethge

Any declaration of a status confessionis stems from the conviction that the integrity of the gospel is in danger. It is a call from error into truth. It demands of the church a clear, unequivocal decision for the truth of the gospel.
World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 22nd General Council, Seoul, 1989

INTRODUCTION

In 1935 Dietrich Bonhoeffer sat at Finkenwalde, a seminary established in defiance of the Third Reich’s prohibition against the teaching and preaching of the Confessing Church. Driven underground politically and theologically marginalized by the “German Christians” who had thrown in with the Nazi Regime, at Finkenwalde Bonhoeffer produced some of his most important work on the nature and mission of the Confessing Church and the meaning of the ecumenical movement. “Truth bears within itself the power to divide or it is itself surrendered,” he wrote, acknowledging the power of the Confessing Church to challenge and unsettle the prevailing ecclesial order, the theological imperative necessitating its actions, and the sacrifice required of those obedient to its call. In a passionate appeal not only on behalf of the soul of his country, but for the integrity and faithfulness of church he loved, Bonhoeffer made it clear that the “Confessing Church does not confess *in abstracto*,..but *in concretissimo*,” in this case against “the government of the National Church in Berlin.” It was specific and it was urgent -- “a confession in which it is really a matter of life and death.”¹ Although the arena of his original

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The Ecumenical Movement and the Confessing Church,” in Green CJ and DeJonge, MP, *The Bonhoeffer Reader*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 409.

struggle was his native Germany, Bonhoeffer perceived early on that the implications were global, not only politically but ecclesially, and he began to write and speak increasingly about the ecumenical church.

Today civilization confronts a challenge as urgent as that faced by Bonhoeffer. Well into the second decade of the twenty first century, we as a global community face an urgent threat to humanity and to the earth itself. An increasingly globalized economy controlled by supra-governmental corporations has led to a steady rise in income inequality and to a process of global climate change with catastrophic implications. Civil wars, insurgencies and counterinsurgencies have devastated infrastructure and created unprecedented mass migrations, leading to increasing impoverishment, conflicts, and dislocation. Upsurges in nationalism and xenophobia are the highly disturbing accompaniments to these events. Governments pursue campaigns of invasion and colonial conquest, including against their own citizens, in violation of international law and covenants forged in the aftermath of the horrors of the twentieth century. The institutions, contracts and resolutions created by the global community to end war, poverty and hunger appear to count for little as governments and civil society institutions, including the churches, ignore or actively support this march toward global catastrophe.

Lamentably, the institutional church has often partnered with governments in the implementation of oppressive and racist policies, the cases of the Protestant church in Germany during the Third Reich and the great majority of the English and Afrikaans-speaking churches of South Africa being the most well known in recent history. Fortunately, the previous century has also given us a legacy of prophetic action, pursued by denominational and ecumenical church bodies in solidarity with national liberation movements. At critical times in the previous century, the church has roused itself and taken on the true mission of the church of Jesus Christ. Led by Christian theologians, clergy and laypersons at the grassroots, and ultimately by leaders of national, denominational and ecumenical church bodies in response to historical events, church actions have had a direct impact on human affairs on a global level.

This proud record began with the 1934 Barmen Declaration authored by German church leaders speaking out against a church in active collusion with the racism and hyper-nationalism of the Nazi regime. In midcentury, African American pastors and laypersons changed the political and social landscape of America in the struggle to end legal racism. The true church mobilized in 1968 in Uppsala, Sweden, when the World Council of Churches established the Programme to Combat Racism, affirming in word and deed that combatting institutionalized racism was the primary mission of the ecumenical world body. In 1977 in Dar Es Salaam the Lutheran World Federation declared a *Status Confessionis* in regard to apartheid, followed in 1982 in Ottawa with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches' declaration of apartheid as heresy. In 1985, an ecumenical group of South African pastors and theologians took an unequivocal stand against Apartheid, declaring that the apartheid regime was illegitimate and that it was a Christian duty "to refuse to cooperate with tyranny

and to do whatever we can to remove it.”² Arising from and speaking with increasing insistence through these actions was the idea of one church in conciliar unity, transcending denominational and national divisions -- in South African theologian John de Gruchy’s words, “the church as the community within which God manifests in history.”³

THE PALESTINIAN CALL

Even as these momentous developments in the global church were unfolding, the church, in the thrall of theologies that have upheld Jewish privilege over the rights of the indigenous people of Palestine, and at the effect of geopolitical forces supported by neoliberal economic and political theories, slumbered through the relentless taking of Palestinian land and Israel’s violent suppression of two Palestinian uprisings. Then, in 2009, the church was re-awakened by a new Kairos call, authored by an ecumenical group of Palestinian clergy, theologians and civil society activists. The Palestine Kairos document, entitled “A Moment of Truth: A Word of Faith, Hope and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering” has once again called the global church to its universal mission, summoning the power of the church to move governments and societies. Kairos Palestine articulates a theology that calls for non-violent resistance to the evil of occupation: “resistance with love as its logic.” Naming the Israeli occupation a sin, it calls out to the international community, reserving its final appeal for the church itself: “What is the international community doing? What are the political leaders in Palestine, in Israel and in the Arab world doing? *What is the Church doing?*” (emphasis added) ⁴

The church is called to lead now as it was in kairos moments past, embodying the social justice imperative of the first kairos, an indigenous struggle against a tyrannous occupation. Answering this call is not without cost. Today, as in previous struggles, prophetic action creates a conflict within the body of the church, surfacing the tension between its prophetic core of compassion for the oppressed and the vulnerable, and the caution so often exhibited by the institutional church, often in complicity or overt alliance with temporal power.

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ANALYSIS: TOPPLING THE PILLARS OF SUPPORT

In their 2016 *This is an Uprising* activists and organizers Mark and Paul Engler argue that authoritarian and unjust regimes maintain power through the preservation of seemingly immutable beliefs and assumptions as well as through the actual political structures that

² “Challenge to the church: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa,” <https://kairossouthernafrika.wordpress.com/2011/05/08/the-south-africa-kairos-document-1985/>, accessed March 19, 2016

³ John de Gruchy, *A Theological Odyssey: My Life in Writing*, Stellenbosch, Sun Media, 2014, 175.

⁴ “A Moment of Truth: A Word of Faith, Hope and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering,” <http://www.kairopalestine.ps/content/kairos-document>, accessed March 19, 2016.

maintain tyrannous systems. Political scientist Gene Sharp called these “pillars of support.” Governments and systems of power rest on these pillars for the maintenance of the status quo. Racist and authoritarian regimes in particular function in this way: for example, colonial powers on the belief in the inferiority of the colonized and enslaved; tyrannous governments on the divine or natural right to wield supreme power over subject groups. Movements for change succeed by challenging and ultimately removing these supports. “Movements succeed,” write the Englers, “when they win over ever-greater levels of public support for their cause and undermine the pillars of support.”⁵ Following Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King Jr. and other leaders of grassroots liberation movements, the Englers further maintain that the creation of division within and disruption of established institutions and systems is not an unintended consequence but a necessary ingredient for achieving the sought-after social or political goals.

Toppling the ideological, theological and political pillars that supported the apartheid regime was precisely the aim of the authors of the South African kairos document. “The first task of a prophetic theology for our times,” reads the document, “would be an attempt at social analysis or what Jesus would call “reading the signs of the times” (Mt 16:3) or “interpreting this KAIROS” (Lk 12:56). The South African church leaders and activists presented a “social analysis that would enable it to understand the mechanics of injustice and oppression.” They described what they termed the “church theology” that through the false use of words such as justice, nonviolence and reconciliation, served to justify and uphold the political reality that was at the root of the injustice. They held that the system could not be reformed, because as long as these pillars of support remained in place, so too did the fundamental ideological and political structures of tyranny. Kairos South Africa called for an end to rule based on a supremacist political ideology supported by the pillars of ethnic nationalism, belief in the historic right to supreme power, and a theology that granted divine authority to this political program.

Israel’s settler colonial project rests on two pillars.

Pillar 1, political: the Snare and the Delusion

Israeli historian Ilan Pappé has argued that what is commonly known as the “Israel-Palestine conflict” is best understood not as a struggle between two powers, indeed not as a “conflict” at all, but as a settler colonial enterprise: the project to ethnically cleanse the indigenous population of historic Palestine in order to establish a Jewish state. The offenses against the Palestinians have been sanitized, indeed effectively denied -- cast as a narrative of national liberation, with Israel as the victim in need of protection from an implacable enemy. For half a century, this pillar of mythology and deception has supported the political theater of a “peace process,” a supposed negotiation between equal parties for the division of the territory into two independent, autonomous sovereign states. Despite what has been officially put forward by diplomats and politicians, this outcome of two states sharing the territory of historic

⁵ Engler M and Engler P, *This is an Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt is Shaping the Twenty-first Century*, New York: Nation Books, 2016, 193.

Palestine was never intended by Israel or its U.S. backer. Indeed, the endgame has already been reached in the reality of a single apartheid state, in which a Jewish minority rules over a subject population of Palestinians. The protests of the international community have had no effect on the relentless progress of this cynical and deceptive process. Despite the growing recognition that the “two state solution” is dead, that it in fact was an illusion from the beginning, governments and supporters of Israel, from both liberal and conservative camps, continue to call for it. The church has been deeply complicit in this tragic and criminal process. By and large recognition of this reality has been absent in the statements of denominational, national and ecumenical bodies, who, even as they decry the abridgement of the rights of Palestinians by the State of Israel, continue to strengthen this pillar of support for the Zionist colonial settler program by repeating the “two states for two people” mantra.

Pillar 2, theological: A Modern Heresy

Alongside the political pillar of support stands the pillar of a theologically-informed ideology deeply embedded in our Western culture, its origins dating back to English Protestantism. This theology has been expressed in several forms of Zionism, which although conceived as a political ideology, has become completely interpenetrated by theology. Since 1948 and even more powerfully after Israel’s 1967 conquest of the remainder of historic Palestine, Zionism has merged with mainstream Judaism, affirmed across the Jewish theological and cultural spectrum as essential to Jewish identity and belief. Similarly, Zionism has been woven into the warp and woof of Christian theology because of the deeply felt Christian responsibility for Jewish suffering at the hands of the church. Christian self-perception has become strongly associated with Christian penitence and the quest for reconciliation with the Jewish people. Christian Zionism, as it is called, is expressed across the spectrum of Christian thought and belief, from progressive to the most conservative. In mainline Christianity, it effectively grants the Jewish people a right to the land on the basis of their past suffering and confers innocence to the Jewish people for any sins committed in implementing that privilege. Informed by so-called “Post-Holocaust” theology, liberal Christians tend to accept unquestioningly the equation of criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism. Unwritten rules dictate that although Jews and non-Jews alike may pay lip service to the cause for Palestinian rights and to the concept of a Palestinian state, they may not advance any arguments or efforts that challenge fundamental Zionist assumptions. In Christian fundamentalist thought, the Jewish claim to land is grounded in literal interpretations of Biblical promises/prophesies. This eschatology was strengthened by the 1967 conquest, the Jewish possession of all of Jerusalem seen as a signal of the imminent return of Jesus. Absent the End Times component, fundamentalist Christian Zionism is shared by liberal Christians with respect to accepting the Old Testament promise of land as literal and in force. Christian Zionism in both these forms is heretical and unbiblical because it negates the core of

gospel teachings against territoriality and ethnic triumphalism.⁶ Nevertheless, until recently⁷ it has remained unchallenged across the ecumenical spectrum and has powerfully influenced political support for Israeli expansionism at the expense of Palestinians.

Liberal Zionism

Mention must be made of what has become known as “liberal Zionism,” which might be considered a “third pillar.” The aim of liberal Zionism is to salvage the Zionist project through (1) efforts to ameliorate discrimination within “Israel,” (i.e. the state established within the 1949 cease-fire lines that served as a *de facto* border until June 1967) against Arab citizens of Israel and people of color, and (2) collusion with the fiction that Israel and its Western allies are working toward the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. As a moderate, reformist response, liberal Zionism exhibits the key features of “church theology” as described in the 1985 South African “Challenge to the Church:” a theology, in the words of the document, that is in “a limited, guarded and cautious way critical of the oppressive system but that in its superficiality and lack of an adequate analysis of the situation, serves to shore up rather than to challenge the injustice.” Indeed, the “two states” championed by Israel and the Western powers as a political solution bears disturbing similarity to the black homelands proposed by the Apartheid government in the 1980s and the accompanying proposals to “share power” with blacks in the federal legislature. The liberal Zionist response to criticism of Israel represents a major challenge for the church and is an important component of both the political and theological pillars of support. It is championed by institutional Jewish interests and supported by many Christians reluctant or unwilling to create a rift with Jews on personal, professional, and institutional levels.

Standing firmly on their pedestals, these pillars together have served to support Israel’s illegal and immoral actions. Challenge the idea of a Jewish state and you are answered with the objection that Zionism requires it. Challenge Zionism, and you are confronted with the reality of the Jewish state that depends on the acceptance and legitimization of Zionism as both a theological principle and a political program. Like Samson standing between the columns upon which rested the house of his oppressors, both must be toppled in order to bring about the required change in the lives of both Israelis and Palestinians.

⁶ It is also heretical for Jews because Zionism in its modern incarnation justifies domination, exploitation and dispossession on the basis of race. This negates the transformation of Judaism from a territorial, cult-based national religion into its modern form born in the diaspora, a faith expressing the social justice principles of its monotheistic core.

⁷ See Burge, Gary M, *Jesus and the Land: The New Testament Challenge to "Holy Land" Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic) 2010 and Davis, Walter T, Wagner Donald E, *Zionism and the Quest for Justice in the Holy Land* (Eugene: Pickwick) 2014.

FALSE CHURCH, TRUE CHURCH

In his struggle against the heresy of the racist ideology that had taken possession of the German church, Bonhoeffer often spoke of the division between “false” and “true” church. He maintained that the boundaries of the true church emerge in its response to the ideas and practices pursued by a church that has strayed from the core principles of the gospel. Bonhoeffer discovered in his struggles with the ecumenical movement that this is true not for theology that blatantly sides with racism and tyranny, but when church bodies attempt to accommodate to injustice through a blurring of the distinction between right and wrong. The theological and ecclesial pillars that support oppression and tyranny are built of outright lies and deception, but also of fraudulent representations of truth and justice. This is the thrust of Kairos South Africa’s exposure of the “reforms” undertaken by a regime struggling to maintain itself in the face of increasing resistance to injustice. “There have been reforms and, no doubt, there will be further reforms in the near future,” wrote the authors of the South African “Challenge to the Church” in 1985. “They seldom do more than make the oppression more effective and more acceptable. If the oppressor does ever introduce reforms that might lead to real change this will come about because of strong pressure from those who are oppressed.”⁸ Thus is the false church unmasked and false theologies exposed.

It is the role of the true church to serve as the conscience, the mouthpiece, and the organizing body for resistance to oppression and the bringing about of necessary change in human affairs. It does so not as the church of brick and mortar, structures of authority, and institutions set off from one another through doctrinal and national divisions, but in a return to its beginnings as *ekklesia* – as John de Gruchy has written, “an assembly of people ...before and above all else it is a living community of those committed to Christ...an assembly of people embarked on an audacious God-inspired experiment to build what Martin Luther King Jr. referred to as ‘the beloved community.’” Charles Villa Vicencio, writing during the tumultuous final years of Apartheid, describes this “alternative church...seek[ing] its theological center outside of itself...seeking to rediscover a gospel identity, reactivating the dangerous memory of its revolutionary beginnings. It is a church within the church and a church beyond the church which carries within it resources which are capable of transforming the dominant structures not only of the church but of society.”⁹

Bonhoeffer has written that “[i]n times which are out of joint...the gospel will make itself known.”¹⁰ Baldwin Sjollem, the first Director of the World Council of Churches’

⁸ “Challenge to the church: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa,” <https://kairossouthernafrika.wordpress.com/2011/05/08/the-south-africa-kairos-document-1985/>, accessed March 19, 2016

⁹ Charles Villa Vicencio, *Lost in Apartheid*, 193

¹⁰ John de Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa*, 60 (from *Ethics*, cf wjc 320)

Programme to Combat Racism, echoes this principle in his 2015 memoir *Never Bow to Racism*: "...the struggle against racism" he writes, "is not only a struggle against injustice, it is also a struggle for the integrity of the gospel and the church of Jesus Christ. At that moment, racism becomes an ecclesiological issue because the integrity of Christian faith and praxis is at stake."¹¹ This is the "necessary bondage" of the church of which Karl Barth spoke, the challenge posed by the Confessing Church, perhaps particularly to those pastors who chose to remain "neutral" rather than to take the radical stand pursued by Bonhoeffer. De Gruchy has suggested that "liberal indifference" or passive compliance of church leaders represented the "false church" even more than the outright racist and collaborationist *Deutsche Kristen*.¹²

The lessons of the past speak clearly to the challenge of the present kairos. How can the church learn from and remain faithful to that legacy in confronting the conditions of today? How will it meet the challenge of this kairos? Can a new and renewed ecumenical movement, responsive to the ecclesiological and political conditions of our times, provide the setting and the platform for this work?

THE NEW ECUMENICISM: TOWARD A GLOBAL KAIROS

Ecumenism: accommodation or prophetic challenge?

"The question has been posed," wrote Bonhoeffer in the critical year of 1935, asking whether the ecumenical movement would step up to "pronounce judgment on war, racial hatred and social exploitation." "This is not an ideal," wrote the young pastor, summoning his European and American colleagues to fulfil the mission of the nascent international church movement, "but a commandment and a promise."¹³ The implications for us today are as deep, as broad, and as urgent, if not more so, than they were for Bonhoeffer. The question has been posed: words, or action? Obedience, or equivocation? The emergence of the Palestinian struggle as a cause that unites the church recalls Bonhoeffer's struggle to articulate the meaning of the *oikumene*. Early on, Bonhoeffer addressed the conflict between two very different notions of the nature and purpose of the ecumenical movement. In the first, the ecumenical movement serves as a deliberative body, committed to bringing disparate churches together for mutual understanding and "non-binding" dialogue. The second, in line with Bonhoeffer's own uncompromising vision, was of the ecumenical movement as "a community of faith placing itself under the word of God and therewith coming to an authoritative *decision* on where its obedience to Christ lies."¹⁴ Indeed, Bonhoeffer arrived at the conclusion that the ecumenical

¹¹ Sjollema, B., *Never Bow to Racism: A Personal Account of the Ecumenical Struggle*, WCC Publications, Geneva, 2015, 184.

¹² De Gruchy, op cit, 23.

¹³ In Clements, op cit, 172

¹⁴ Clements, K, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Ecumenical Quest*, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2015, 169.

movement did not exist to serve the churches, but was in fact a form of the church, indeed *the form* of the true church. “The Confessing Church, he wrote, “stakes its identity and existence on its *confession*. “There is only a Yes or a No to this confession,” wrote Bonhoeffer, speaking of the proclamations that had emerged from Barmen and Dahlem in response to the heresies of the German church under the Third Reich. “Is it a place for coming to an authoritative decision on where its obedience to Christ lies? Or is there to be endless discussion of possibilities, forever evading a division of the spirits?”¹⁵ In Bonhoeffer’s case the confession was in reference to the heresy of the Reich Church, but it is ever so through changing contexts. What became known in the Germany of Bonhoeffer’s time as the *church struggle* has manifested as such at other critical times: the black liberation movement in the U.S., the South African church struggle against Apartheid, and now Palestine. In every instance, the cry of those calling for resistance to injustice is answered by forces within the church that seek wish to muffle those voices, not through outright suppression but through appeals to reason, arguments for caution, and proposals of compromise.

The question of the identity and mission of the church is one that has followed, one might say productively vexed, the ecumenical movement throughout its history. It was the subject of World Council of Churches General Secretary Willem Visser ‘T Hooft’s address to the Fourth Assembly of the WCC in Uppsala, Sweden in 1968. As one who interacted with Bonhoeffer during the years of Bonhoeffer’s struggle with the ecumenical movement, it is more than likely that Visser ‘T Hooft had the young German’s struggle very much in mind as he spoke these words to the assembled a generation later, as the world body prepared to focus its attention on the anti-racism and anti-colonial movements that were gaining momentum in the decade of the 60s.¹⁶ “So many conceive of unity in terms of uniformity and centralization,” Visser ‘T Hooft pointed out -- but for the church “the great tension [is] between the vertical interpretation of the Gospel as essentially concerned with God’s saving action in the life of individuals, and the horizontal interpretation of it as mainly concerned with human relationships in the world.” Visser ‘T Hooft, however, rejected this division as a false dichotomy -- a failure to understand the true nature of God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ. Rather than being separate from or in conflict with it, the vertical dimension of “God’s saving grace in the life of individuals” was inseparable from the horizontal imperative for action in the world. “True unity” for the church, he maintained, is found rather in “faithfulness to God’s proclamation of the unity of humankind and His incarnation in the life, ministry and sacrifice of Jesus Christ and through the church as a fellowship of faith acting directly in human affairs.”¹⁷ In the words of Keith Clements, chronicler of Bonhoeffer’s ecumenical quest, the ecumenical movement finds its true mission not as a

¹⁵ Bonhoeffer, in Duchrow, *op.cit.*, 320

¹⁶ Martin Luther King Jr. had been the scheduled key speaker. Following his assassination in April, he was replaced by James Baldwin.

¹⁷ Visser ‘T Hooft, W, “The Mandate of the Ecumenical Movement,” Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Uppsala, 1968, in Kinnamon, M and Cope, BE, *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, (Geneva, Grand Rapids: WCC Publications, Eerdmans), 38-43

functional organization to serve the churches, but rather, as “a community of faith placing itself under the word of God and therewith coming to an authoritative *decision* on where its obedience to Christ lies.”¹⁸ When the pillars of tyranny are toppled, what remains is not rubble or destruction, but justice and compassion, carried out by a community committed to the Lordship of Christ, the word of God incarnate in the affairs of humankind.

A new ecumenism: returning to the church struggle

Clearly, the need for the ecumenical power of the church is as great or greater now than it was in the previous century. But what will serve as the heir to the ecumenical movement in its proudest moments? Sjollema, writing in 2015, acknowledged the World Council of Church’s diminished ability to achieve the consensus necessary to mount prophetic actions such as the Programme to Combat Racism, initiated in 1970 following the Uppsala assembly. It has, in fact, retreated into the comfortable “functional” role of supporting the stability and coexistence of church institutions across denominational and national divisions, the very role against which both Bonhoeffer and Visser ‘T Hooft had argued. “After 65 years of existence,” laments Sjollema, “the WCC has lost its pioneering role;” its original mandate has changed. It has become a bureaucracy. It no longer takes initiatives on its own; it now depends on its member churches for that.”¹⁹ Although the World Council of Churches has taken the Palestine issue on directly over the past two decades, its ability to mobilize action with respect to Palestinian suffering and Israeli crimes is constrained because it has declared its function to be representing the heads of churches, who as such are primarily concerned with preserving long-term relationships and staying faithful to the Post-Holocaust penitential agenda. There is verbal commitment to social justice, there is concern about misuse of the Bible and the perversion of Christian principles and of liberal concepts of democracy and equality, but the formal agenda of the world body today appears to be about serving the interests of the national churches and global denominations, and on finding ways to bring them together in consensus -- to “acting together or not at all” as expressed at a recent WCC symposium on Palestine. *The institutional ecumenical “body” does not have a body in an incarnational sense.* It is very far from manifesting costly discipleship. This is why we must revisit Uppsala, Ottawa, Cottesloe, and the letter from Birmingham Jail. Bonhoeffer writes that it is in the *Gemeinde*, the community in which the true spirit of the church resides, that the church can fulfill its mission to be obedient to the word of God, to indeed *be the church* in the area of human affairs. It is as true today as it was for Bonhoeffer in his time, that this is achieved through struggle -- in Bonhoeffer’s formulation, achieving unity through disunity:

Neither unanimity, uniformity, nor congeniality makes it possible, nor is it to be confused with unity of mood. Rather, it is a reality precisely where the seemingly sharpest outward antitheses prevail... there unity is established through God’s will... the

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 169

¹⁹ Sjollema, *Never Bow to Racism*, 199

more powerfully the dissimilarity manifests itself in the struggle, the stronger the objective unity.²⁰

These same issues confront us today in embracing an ecumenical vision for the church. Never have the issues that divide and the “antitheses” been more acute and more deserving of direct, unswerving gaze. Writing in the 1980s, German theologian Ulrich Duchrow observed that the emergence of the ecumenical movement in the 20th century required a “new language” for the church, which had been dominated by the “political and legal principle of territorialism...[its] unity conceived of in terms of imperial law, on the Centre-peripheral principle.”²¹ For a church freed of the constraints of historically validated models of social and political organization and modes of thinking, conflict with the institutional church is inevitable. A church that focuses on the urgent realities of the present context will confront the “historical” church that will act to maintain the status quo, seeking to avoid “its own death, which every organized structure, like every individual, fears....”²² This emerged dramatically in the reluctance of churches in the industrialized West to act on the Lutheran World Federation’s call for a *status confessionis* with respect to Apartheid in 1977, because it threatened financial interests in South Africa.²³ In his letters from prison Bonhoeffer focused in particular on the urgent need for the church to be liberated from its investment in the institutional church itself, on how the fear of division paralyzes its ability for prophetic action. Bonhoeffer related this specifically to the question of the ecumenical. Clements writes of Bonhoeffer’s expressed aversion in his final words from prison “to any notion of privilege in religion and nothing speaks more loudly...of privilege than do confessional differences and the self-justifying pride and the largely fictional identities they generate to sustain and reproduce themselves, a dynamic which constantly vitiates ecumenical commitment.”²⁴

Holy restlessness

This fear-based conservatism on the part of church bodies supports the very conditions that threaten human and environmental survival. Duchrow describes a church limited to viewing “the present and the future as a linear extension of the past” and as such instrumental in bringing “the whole human family...[to] the edge of destroying itself and its natural basis by the aimless growth of fragmenting systems of science and technology.”²⁵ We have again arrived at a pass in which we must ask, as did Charles Villa Vicencio in 1988, “Can religion truly break the

²⁰ in Clements, *op cit*, 62

²¹ Ulrich Duchrow, *Conflict Over the Ecumenical Movement*, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1980, 298-299 (also in de Gruchy, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Witness to Jesus Christ*, 143)

²² Duchrow, *op cit*, 305

²³ Ulrich Duchrow, *Global Economy: A Confessional Issue for the Churches?* Translated, David Lewis, (Geneva: WCC Publications), 1987, 102

²⁴ Clements, *op cit*, 265

²⁵ Duchrow, *op cit*, 305

iron cage of history? Can religion produce a qualitatively different kind of society? Is the Kingdom of God a real possibility?"²⁶

Villa Vicencio's question has theological as well as ecclesial implications. Bonhoeffer, the consummate and passionate theologian, understood this as the crisis grew in his own life and within that of the German church. He came to understand that in the crucible of history, it ultimately comes down not only to how theology is understood, but how it is practiced within the community charged to bring the Kingdom of God. "Theology itself is not the fighting part here;" wrote Bonhoeffer in the 1935 "The Confessing Church and the Ecumenical Movement," "it stands wholly at the service of the living, confessing, and struggling church." "The Confessing Church," he continued, "stakes its identity and existence on its *confession*. There is only a yes or no to this confession. Is it a place for coming to an authoritative decision on where its obedience to Christ lies? Or is there to be endless discussion of possibilities, forever, evading a division of the spirits?" And finally, the question that is posed even more strongly today: "Who can say that the ecumenical movement will not emerge more strongly from the struggle, prompted more strongly and more authoritatively precisely by this disruptive challenge?"²⁷

Clements describes Bonhoeffer as "a disturber of the ecumenical peace," his passionate, at times agonized appeal to the ecumenical movement of his time lying at the heart of his ecclesiology: "Bonhoeffer's call, resounding through the years 1932-34, for the ecumenical movement really to believe in itself and to anticipate as much as possible what it means to be the one church of Christ in and for the whole world, is a call to risk taking, which is what confessing always involves...There is for Bonhoeffer a holy restlessness which can never be satisfied with a minimizing ecumenism basically content with cooperation, dialogue, and lazy theories of 'reconciled diversity.'" ²⁸

May we be possessed by this holy restlessness as we rise to meet the challenge before us.

CHALLENGING EMPIRE

The Kairos Palestine Document has engendered a global response to the Palestinian cause. It has spawned documents from kairos organizations worldwide, responding to the Palestinian call while standing squarely in the contexts of their own local cultural and political struggles. ²⁹ In a 2012 paper, "Bonhoeffer's Legacy and Kairos Palestine," John de Gruchy draws a straight line from Germany, to South Africa, to Palestine. "Bonhoeffer's influence," he states, "is clearly evident in the Kairos Palestine Document just as it was in the original South African Kairos Document in 1986. His personal example of resistance to oppression, his insistence that there

²⁶ Charles Villa-Vicencio, *Trapped in Apartheid* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 201.

²⁷ Bonhoeffer, in Duchrow, *ibid*, 320

²⁸ Clements, *op cit*, 290

²⁹ Braverman, M., "The Moment of Grace and Opportunity: The Global Kairos Movement for Justice in the Holy Land," *Theologies and Cultures* Vol. XI, No. 1, June 2014, 42-83.

can never be security without justice, and his ecumenical commitment to peace, immediately suggest that what he had to say on such issues during the 1930's is of critical importance today." ³⁰ Steve de Gruchy has observed that the abiding influence of South Africa comes increasingly into focus as we become more aware of the global scope of the current struggle. Reflecting on the South African experience, in which the interchurch struggle figured prominently even as the church strove to find a common voice, de Gruchy notes that "[t]he global focus on apartheid facilitated much of [the] international networking" that led to the downfall of the regime.³¹ Raising the issue of globalization, de Gruchy argued that ecumenism is key to the emerging role of the church as a force for social justice, citing again the struggle against apartheid, in which "historic confessional differences were shelved in favor of united witness."³² The importance of Palestine beyond its own context is also evidenced in the increasing recognition of the intersectionality of the Palestinian cause with other liberation and human rights struggles, and the inseparability of each local struggle with the environmental, social justice, economic and political issues that bear directly on the fate of the Earth. This has most recently emerged in the recognition of the powerful connections between Palestinian liberation the Black Lives Matter movement in the U.S., and popular struggles for rights and equality in South America, Asia, and Europe, where the Palestinian story has taken on powerful symbolic value with respect to colonialism, economic oppression, and state-sanctioned racism.

The 2015 "Dangerous Memory" conference held in Johannesburg on the 30th anniversary of the South African "Challenge to the Church" provided direct and concrete expression of these principles. Naming the "Empire Theology" undergirding the realities of the present kairos, a direct line was drawn from South Africa, to Palestine, to the global struggle:³³

In our time, we find that various sites of pain and struggle are joined in a Global Kairos, a shared quest for justice. In our discussions, we named our shared struggle against the scourge of this global empire of our times. Empire is an all-encompassing global reality seeking to consolidate all forms of power while exploiting both Creation and Humanity. The empire we face is not restricted by geography, tribe, language or economy. Empire is an ideology of domination and subjugation, fueled by violence, fed by fear and deception. It manifests itself especially in racial, economic, cultural, patriarchal, sexual, and ecological oppression. Empire deceptively informs dominant, white supremacist, capitalist paradigms controlling global systems and structures. Global empire is sustained by weapons and military bases along with ideologies and theologies.³⁴

³⁰ John De Gruchy, "Bonhoeffer's Legacy and Kairos Palestine," 2012 [CITATION INCOMPLETE – DID THIS APPEAR IN PRINT?]

³¹ John de Gruchy, with Steve de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, Fortress, Minneapolis, 2004, 194.

³² Steve de Gruchy, *Church Struggle in South Africa*, 257.

³³ Kairos 30th Anniversary Statement: Dangerous Memory and Hope for the Future.

<https://kairossouthernafrika.wordpress.com/2015/08/20/kairos-sa-30th-anniversary-conference-statement/>.

Accessed March 16, 2016

³⁴ Compare with Duchrow's summary of Gross' description of the "new fascist order...an exploitative combination of imperial expansion, domestic repression, militarism and racism.." which Gross claims to be the *status quo* of the world order in the post WWII global reality. (Duchrow, 1987, 115)

The dangerous memory of the South African Kairos document provided a prophetic critique of State Theology, theologies that validate and confirm forms of state terror. It identified as heresy theologies that justify Apartheid. In our time, we are called to expand this critique and rejection of state theology to address Imperial Theology, the 'software' that justifies imperial exploitation and oppression. We were encouraged to find that, although Empire seeks to divide communities from one another, peoples' resistance can unite us across religious, ethnic and culture divides.

In its global scope, its call for a community of resistance across national, religious and ethnic lines, and its focus on theology, "Dangerous Memory" has set the stage for the work of building an ecumenical movement for our time.³⁵

KEY ISSUES FOR AN ECUMENICAL RESPONSE TO THIS *KAIROS*

Several key issues emerge from the preceding analysis, and serve as a guide in formulating an action plan:

Church struggle. Change originates from the grassroots. Inevitably, actions that challenge the domination system's oppression of the disadvantaged and vulnerable will put communities of the faithful in conflict with the efforts of the institutional church when its effort to preserve the status quo, involves support of oppressive regimes or practices -- a church, as Bonhoeffer wrote from prison, that will "fight for its own preservation, as if this were an end in itself."³⁶ But it is this very struggle that Bonhoeffer saw as key to the vitality, usefulness and essential nature of the church. This, he wrote, is also a key aspect of the ecumenical movement, which must embrace this struggle, even as it "shudders before the gravity of a cleavage in the church,"³⁷ "Separation is at hand," Bonhoeffer wrote to a friend in September 1933 after Nazi regime barred pastors of Jewish descent from serving their churches, expressing, in retrospect, more wish than reality. Writing in the early years of the Confessing Church, as he began to articulate the concept of the ecumenical movement, Bonhoeffer declared that in this clarity and willingness to differentiate itself from the institutional church, the church ecumenical becomes the "living, confessing, and struggling church."³⁸

³⁵ cf. the Harare Assembly of the WCC in 1998, quoted by Steve de Gruchy in *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, p 252: "The vision behind globalization includes a competing vision to the Christian commitment to the *oikumene*, the unity of humankind and the whole inhabited earth..."

³⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Thoughts on the Day of Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge, in Green CJ and DeJonge, MP, *The Bonhoeffer Reader*, 787.

³⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Confessing Church and the Ecumenical Movement, in de Gruchy, JW, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Witness to Jesus Christ*, 144.

³⁸ Ulrich Duchrow, *Conflict Over the Ecumenical Movement*, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1980, 321 (also wjc 143)

Duchrow observes that in situations where the question of a *status confessionis* has emerged, the appearance of what he has termed “discipleship groups” are necessary for reminding the church of the justice imperatives that have been betrayed by false theology. Perhaps at no time since the global fight against nuclear armament has the church been mobilized in discipleship groups the way it has for Palestine. This is occurring at multiple levels of the church, and organizations appearing at congregational and community levels, within denominations, and in networks of local groups such as Kairos, the German Palestine solidarity network, and Sabeel. Costly discipleship is emerging at national and global levels in the mobilization of campaigns against companies involved in specific human rights scandals (Caterpillar, G4S, Motorola Systems), and in the growing response to the 2005 Palestinian call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions.³⁹ It is particularly important to see the growth of education and action at congregational and local levels. This is a strong example of how, in Duchrow’s words, “The local church is the scene of mission and of training in Christian faith and practice...the congregations are really the starting point for the training of the church institutions in discipleship.”⁴⁰

The neoliberal challenge. Today, the church struggle is characterized increasingly by the confrontation between the actions of church groups at the grassroots, in alliance with non-faith based liberation struggles, and the forces of neoliberalism. The latter are often disguised as efforts designed to promote the welfare of the masses. In reality, they are intended to preserve and advance the status quo of the enrichment of the few at the expense of the many. Today, the institutional church is joined by Jewish religious and advocacy groups on national and international levels, as well as governments, in support of Israel’s colonialist project. This is perhaps the greatest challenge that the church movement for Palestinian liberation will face in the current struggle, encountering an even steeper gradient than that faced by previous global movements. Few outside the Third Reich or among those directly subject to its tyranny questioned the evil embodied in the authoritarian and racist nature of its program. Decades before the fall of the South African apartheid regime, the world at large had soundly condemned the racist and brutal realities of Apartheid South Africa. Even those secular and church leaders in South Africa who refrained from active resistance acknowledged the political and theological unacceptability of Apartheid and were not misled or confounded by the “reforms” proffered by the regime. In the case of Israel, however, the world, on popular as well as official levels, has by and large accepted the fiction of Israel as a society committed to human rights and equality for all its citizens.

The trappings of a liberal democracy and a recent escalation of public relations efforts by Israel have helped to perpetuate this myth. Supporters of the status quo of Jewish hegemony in historic Palestine employ classic “reform” strategies, including support for minor, incremental improvements in the human rights situation inside Israel, lip service to

³⁹ <https://bdsmovement.net>

⁴⁰ Ulrich Duchrow, *Global Economy: A Confessional Issue for the Churches?* Translated, David Lewis, (Geneva: WCC Publications), 1987, 65

the idea of a sovereign Palestinian state, and an attempt to co-opt the Palestinian call for Boycott Divestment and Sanctions through a parsing and gutting of its three demands -- for example limiting boycott to products produced in West Bank Settlements.⁴¹ “Liberal Zionism,” discussed above, has thus emerged as one form of the neoliberal response to efforts to put an end to Israel’s colonial project.

Challenging the interfaith deal: From post-Holocaust to post-Nakba

For almost two millennia, the church defined itself through negation of the Other -- the barbarians, unbelievers, and rejecters of the true faith vilified in a “binary logic of Us vs. Them.”⁴² Brigitte Kahl has described how “nominal Christianity” has authorized “imperial globalization” through the “aggressive justification of the Western Self and the mentality of conquest.”⁴³ This worldview found particularly toxic expression in the Reformation, with Luther’s demonization of the Jew, the “Turk,” and the “Papists,” with far-reaching and disastrous effects on church doctrine and action through the centuries. Then, in the mid-twentieth century, a remarkable turnabout occurred. In a paroxysm of horror, shame and guilt following the Nazi genocide, the church, beginning in Germany and spreading West, undertook a project of penitence through a stunning reversal of its stand on the Jewish people. Instead of being despised for rejecting the foretold Messiah, the Jews were restored as the most beloved of God, the original, exclusivist covenant now reinstated and with it the conditional but irrevocable promise of the land.⁴⁴ This “Post-Holocaust” formulation stood replacement theology on its head. Instead of seeing itself as the triumphant replacement of the Jewish people and inheritor of the covenant, Christianity in its mainline Protestant form has now defined *itself* negatively in its confession of *the* Christian sin of anti-Judaism.⁴⁵ But Christians are not left out in the cold in this new order -- as “guests in the house of Israel” they take their place as fellow inheritors of the divine

⁴¹ The three demands are: (1) Ending its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands occupied in June 1967 and dismantling the Wall; (2) Recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; (3) Respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194. <https://bdsmovement.net/bdsintro>, accessed July 22 2016.

⁴² Brigitte Kahl, *Galations Re-imagined: Reading with the eyes of the vanquished*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 10

⁴³ *ibid*, 6

⁴⁴ Bertold Klappert describes how, confronted with the scale of the crime against the Jewish people, the focus of German Protestant theology in the postwar era shifted from the faithfulness of the church to its theological core as opposed to the demands of the state, to a penitential focus on Christianity’s culpability for the Nazi genocide. Klappert quotes his teacher and member of the original Confessing Church, Hans Joachim Iwand, who, in a 1959 letter discussing the Church’s “academic and theological guilt” for Auschwitz, asks: “Who is going to take this guilt away from us and our theological fathers – because there it started? ... How can the German people that has initiated the fruitless rebellion against Israel and his God become pure?” (Didier Pollefeyt, 1997. *Jews and Christians: Rivals or Partners for the Kingdom of God?* Louvain: Peeters Press. 43)

⁴⁵ Mark Braverman, *Fatal Embrace: Christians, Jews, and the Search for Peace in the Holy Land* (New York: Beaufort Books, 2010)

covenant.⁴⁶ Thus, the opportunity to confront the Christian sin of triumphalism was squandered. In its focus on restoring the divine blessing to the Jewish people, Christian postwar penitence has not led to obedience to the Lordship of Jesus, who asked – and answered – “who is my neighbor?” Instead, in their preoccupation with correcting historic church anti-Judaism, Christians have compounded the sin by enabling the Jews in their present project of conquest and domination. Historic Christian triumphalism has thus been replaced by a *Judeo-Christian triumphalism*, and its language is Zionism.

Recognition of this requires a shift from the focus on Christian responsibility for Jewish suffering to the church’s responsibility to respond to the call of *today’s* victims. Theologically, we have left the “post-Holocaust” era and entered the “post-Nakba” era.”⁴⁷ The issue facing Christians today is not how to atone for their sins against the Jews, but how to confront today’s urgent human rights issues, of which the crime against the Palestinian people is the exemplar of a global system of economic and political oppression. This requires a profound and wrenching paradigm shift for Christians. It threatens treasured relationships and in many cases the loss of support – financial and otherwise – on institutional levels. On institutional as well as personal levels, Christians are accused by Jewish colleagues of betraying the project of postwar reconciliation and trust building when questions are raised about Israel’s human rights behavior. “We will continue to work with you to repair the damage of the past,” is the message, “as long as you leave the issue of Israel out of the conversation.” This is the so-called “ecumenical deal,” more accurately the “interfaith deal.” It has been used to hold Christians back from faithful witness and action since the surfacing of the Palestinian narrative challenging the popular image of Israel as heroic and untarnished.⁴⁸ The consequences of breaking this implicit agreement can be severe. *This is without doubt a cross to pick up*, but this is to be expected with any prophetic endeavor. It places this effort firmly in the tradition of the struggles referenced above.

It will be difficult to achieve this shift in focus within the current framework of Jewish-Christian relations on ecclesial and institution levels, because under the unwritten rules, these activities must conform to the guidelines of the interfaith deal. The still powerful forces that are brought to bear to suppress Christian witness with respect to Israel in order to preserve peace between Christians and Jews necessitates that the church be willing to act on this issue as the church and *only as the church*. Meanwhile, the Jewish community is experiencing its own internal struggle, between the established institutions of denominational, advocacy and philanthropic organizations that oppose meaningful criticism of Israel and voices within the Jewish

⁴⁶ The Roman Catholic church officially repudiated its anti-Jewish doctrine in the mid- 20th century. Although partially – and grudgingly – backing off from the charge of killing Jesus, the Catholic church did not go as far as relinquishing its exceptionalist and exclusivist claims.

⁴⁷ *Nakba*, Arabic for “catastrophe” is the term adopted by Palestinians for the dispossession and ethnic cleansing of 1947-1949.

⁴⁸ The term “ecumenical deal” was first used to describe this phenomenon by Rosemary Ruether and by Marc Ellis [provide cites]. See also Braverman, *op cit*.

community that support nonviolent action to stop the oppression of Palestinians. Indeed, there is a growing movement within the Jewish community in which theologians, clergy, journalists and activists argue for a “post-Zionist” future for both the Jewish people and the State of Israel. These Jewish voices have joined with those of Christian and Muslim counterparts in the common search for a shared theology that will provide, in Kahl’s words, a “source of spiritual, social and ecological restoration... border-transgressive peace building and justice seeking.”⁴⁹ Likewise, there are examples to be found of active collaboration between church groups and Jewish and Muslim organizations, scholars, and leaders committed to a just peace in Israel/Palestine.⁵⁰ These are very hopeful signs. But within the mainstream context, they are still the exception, not the rule, and are customarily dismissed as being the activities of “fringe” groups. This caution regarding “interfaith” conversations, therefore, is not meant to be prescriptive or normative, but it is a necessary caution given the still considerable power of the interfaith deal to vitiate or even neutralize the power of the church as a force for political change with respect to Israel. This is a cross that remains to be picked up -- it embodies the willingness of Christians to pursue a faithful course with respect to Palestinian liberation, even when this means proceeding without the accompaniment, and in some cases in the face of the active opposition, of Jewish colleagues and friends.

COSTLY WITNESS: OUTLINE FOR ACTION

“Whenever a community of peace endangers or suffocates truth and justice, the community of peace must be broken and the battle must be declared” Bonhoeffer said to an ecumenical conference in 1932, addressing directly the elevation of “peace” as an absolute good in and of itself. “Should the situation arise,” he continued, “*the struggle* can protect the openness for the revelation of Christ better than the *external peace* in that it breaks the hardened, self-enclosed order.”⁵¹ (emphasis added) These issues are as acute today as they were for Bonhoeffer. In his concluding chapter, Clements writes about the “journey the ecumenical community still has to make in earnest, that is, the discovery and teaching of spirituality which undergird and sustain effective social and political engagement as distinct from cheap statements and easy posturing.”⁵²

Where is the global church today regarding prophetic action?

We have witnessed persistent, growing activity at multiple levels of the church in support of equal rights for Palestinians and in opposition to Israel’s policies. This has been true on a global level. A vibrant grassroots church movement has arisen in Germany, where the Kairos Palestine Solidarity Network has called on the Evangelical Church in Germany (the Lutheran and

⁴⁹ Kahl, *op cit*, 6

⁵⁰ Examples include Jewish Voice for Peace and American Muslims for Palestine in the U.S., Judische Stimme in Germany, Jews for a Just Peace in the UK and in South Africa, and the work of South African Muslim scholar and activist Farid Esack.

⁵¹ in Clements, *op cit*, 77

⁵² in Clements, *op cit*, 293

Reformed Churches) to account for its cautious and temporizing response to the 2009 Kairos Palestine document, in effect adhering to the "Staatsräson" of the German government that places the "security" and stated interests of the State of Israel before universal principles of human rights. This position violates not only principles of democracy and human rights, but fundamental Christian values. The grassroots in Germany has raised its voice in protest. In the U.S., organizations at the church grassroots organize pilgrimages of solidarity with nonviolent resistance in Palestine, sponsor resolutions for the study of the Palestine Kairos document, and call for a reassessment of U.S. policy. At the denominational level, examples include the divestment of U.S. Protestant denominations from companies profiting from and aiding the dispossession and oppression of Palestinians, and educational programs on regional and congregational levels. Globally, through nationally-based Friends of Sabeel organizations, Kairos networks, student organizations, and Jewish activist groups, nationally and globally-based boycott campaigns have received significant support. Also worthy of mention is the high level of direct support for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza through civil society projects initiated by non-governmental organizations, including Christian, Muslim and secular institutions and through witness pilgrimages on the part of denominational missions and congregational initiatives. These serve a crucial purpose in keeping Palestinian civil society alive under terrible and worsening conditions. It also supports the courageous work of Jewish Israeli organizations, in the face of increasing suppression and even persecution, to call their own government to account. On a global ecumenical level, the World Council of Churches has maintained a focus on the issue, notably in the Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel, the 2007 International Peace Conference "Churches together for Peace and Justice in the Middle East" that produced the "Amman Call,"⁵³ and the 2008 "Promised Land" conference in Bern sponsored by the WCC's Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum (PIEF).⁵⁴ In the work of PIEF and the output from these international meetings, we see the beginnings of a challenge to the theological climate that has supported the abrogation of Palestinian rights and has failed to honor the distinctive, contextual theology that has emerged from the churches of the Holy Land.

But the global church has not yet acted. The "step from confession to resistance," as Bethge warned, has not been taken.

"There is still no theology of the ecumenical movement," Bonhoeffer stated in 1932. By this he did not mean that there was no theology, but that the ecumenical movement was at risk of being at the effect of false theology, a theology that limited the actions of the movement to "cheap statements and easy posturing." "They abolish Christ by preaching him," Luther said of those who failed to follow their faith with acts of obedience."⁵⁵ With respect to a theology that compels to action, Bonhoeffer's statement still holds true for the ecumenical movement of

⁵³ <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/public-witness-addressing-power-affirming-peace/middle-east-peace/the-amman-call>

⁵⁴ <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/public-witness-addressing-power-affirming-peace/middle-east-peace/bern-perspective?searchterm=PIEF>

⁵⁵ Duchrow, *op cit*, 131

today. In his embrace of the necessity for church struggle Bonhoeffer set the stage for the work of theology and accompanying ecclesiology that will compel to effective action that is to be done in our time. Despite the recognition of the urgent human rights issues and the advances in the theological discourse with respect to Palestine, the focus of the institutional church on denominational, national, and ecumenical levels on the question of Palestine has remained on bringing the churches together and on not disturbing the waters. "Dialogue," "interfaith reconciliation," and a celebration of "diversity" continue to trump prophetic action. In a press statement addressed to the Bishop's Conference of the Protestant Church of Germany, the German Kairos Palestine Solidarity Network took the Bishops to task for the statement they issued following a pilgrimage to the Holy Land that passed over the true impact of Israel's occupation on the Palestinians, hiding behind a screen of "balanced" condemnation of violence on both sides. The statement reads in part:

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said: "The truth is concrete." We deplore this resort to comforting generalizations designed to be acceptable to a wide audience but which do nothing to advance peace. Rather, these statements serve to obscure the truth and obstruct an understanding of the real situation. They reduce the capacity for empathy with the real suffering and sacrifices occurring today. Such proclamations might lead to an ecumenism in which formerly separate churches are 'reunited,' but in this way become irrelevant to the suffering world.

Sadly, recent meetings and pronouncements of the World Council of Churches with respect to Palestine, which call for unanimity of church voices in actionless protest against Israel's crimes are also deserving of the Kairos Network's critique. The 2010 response to Kairos Palestine of the Evangelical (Reformed and Lutheran) Church of Germany, which lamentably meets the criteria for church theology set out by the 1985 South Africa Kairos document, similarly demonstrates the need for a prophetic movement that risks paying the cost in division and struggle within the church. Similar statements and attempts at accommodation to institutional stability and safety characterize the official positions of major Protestant denominations in the U.S., UK, the Netherlands and other Western nations in the face of the increasingly desperate Palestinian situation. The statement issued by German Kairos Network echoes precisely the issue that Bonhoeffer was addressing in his 1935 essay, "The Confessing Church and the Ecumenical Movement," in which he describes how the Confessing Church and the Ecumenical Movement "had made an encounter and must question one another." That encounter, that very questioning, Bonhoeffer was saying, is at the heart of the church struggle and represents the hope for the church finding its power and claiming its truth. The still vivid South African experience continues to provide guidance. In his essay "Taking Sides," written in the last years of Apartheid, South African theologian and Kairos document author Fr. Albert Nolan emphasizes this very point: "The peace that the world offers us is a superficial peace and unity that compromises the truth, that covers over the injustices and that is usually settled on for thoroughly selfish purposes." For Nolan, Jesus' instruction to love our enemies continues to serve as a motivating and idolatry-shattering principle for practitioners of nonviolent resistance, providing the surest path to God's peace: "The ruling class as a whole cannot step down: we

will have to pull them down from their thrones. Not in order to sit on those thrones themselves, or to put others on them, but in order to destroy the thrones."⁵⁶

The social analysis and the critique of church theology have been accomplished. The description of the current state of ecumenism is part of that analysis. Together with Jesus' equally paradigm-shattering declaration that he had come "to bring not peace but division," (Lk 12:51) Jesus' enemy-loving commandment shows the way forward for resistance movements throughout modern times. There is only a yes or a no to this confession. There are no grey areas when it comes to declaring that an ideology or theology supporting racism and inequality constitutes heresy. As South African theologian Allan Boesak has written, "more than the liberation of the oppressed is at stake here...the integrity of the Gospel, and the credibility of the witness of the church are at stake here."⁵⁷

RE-VISIONING THE REFORMATION

The emergence of the Palestinian liberation struggle has opened up a much-needed theological discourse on Zionism, one that has broad implications for the role of the church in the current world crisis. As discussed above, the Palestinian cause must be viewed in the framework of globalization and the growing dominance of the neoliberal order. A recent project has as its objective a reassessment of and challenge to the post WWII liberal theology that effectively abandoned the radical critique of capitalism to be found in the Reformed tradition.

"Radicalizing Reformation" is a critical research and action project, to be officially inaugurated in 2017 on the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Based on an understanding of the church reform movement begun by Martin Luther as a scripturally-based critique of individualism and early capitalism, "Radicalizing Reformation" describes the effects of the modern property and money-based economy in the cultural, structural, and direct violence inherent in the current global economic order. Advancing an interpretation of Paul away from the focus on personal salvation and toward a gospel message of social justice, "Radicalizing Reformation" seeks to reconnect Christianity to its Old Testament roots of Torah and the prophetic writings as a blueprint for just action in human society:

Paul speaks about the beginning of an all-encompassing change of rule. He directs his hope towards God's final intervention, which for him has already begun with Jesus' resurrection. Although Paul has no direct political goals, his faith in Christ's rule and the hope for a final change of rule has deep political implications. Faith leads the faithful to live as liberated people, both in their faith community and in their common life with others. This is the beginning of a new life. This claim for liberation from totalitarian reality, such as under the Roman Empire, is more trenchant and empowering for all who

⁵⁶ Nolan, A, "Taking Sides," Catholic Institute for International Relations, 1990.

⁵⁷ Allan Boesak, 'Kairos Consciousness.' *Kairos Southern Africa* (25 March, 2011).

<http://kairossouthernafrica.wordpress.com/kairos-consciousness/>

live today under the domination of financial and violent markets than are traditional generalizations about sin.⁵⁸

In its redirection of Reformed theology away from individual salvation and toward action in the world, “Radical Reformation” brings us firmly back, in the words of his friend and biographer, Eberhard Bethge, to Bonhoeffer’s “welding of the theological and the sociological.” Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology was wholly grounded in his Christology. The task of the church, he wrote, is “to express the being of Christ in the centre of life, not on its margins.”⁵⁹ “The church,” wrote Bonhoeffer, “is the church only when it exists for others.”

In its call for the sharing of projects embodying this “fellowship of faith acting directly in human affairs,” “Radicalizing Reformation” exemplifies the globally linked movement of which the Palestinian liberation struggle is a key component. The identification of Zionism as heresy and the call for the end of unjust rule in historic Palestine is both the lynchpin and the *sine qua non* for the current justice imperative facing the church. Zionism as an ideology that results in unjust, racist rule cannot be reformed, no more than apartheid as the foundation of rule in South Africa could have been reformed. The clear, uncompromising stand of the South African churches and ultimately the global church against apartheid was an act of love for all South Africans -- white and black, oppressor and oppressed. Following Bonhoeffer’s example of confronting the cautious, ineffective ecumenism of his time, what calls to us today is the bold, prophetic act that will force the church to choose, that will create the division that manifests the word of God in the present *kairos*. The theology that will define and guide the ecumenical movement of our day will be costly -- *it will divide*. But in that division will be found the unity that Bonhoeffer sought and that must guide our actions today. Therein will lie the key to the renewal of the church in our time, a reclaiming of the radical spirit of the Reformation and the legacy of the ecumenical movement in its finest moments – the pursuit of peace not as the world gives but as embodied in the gospel. “There is,” Bonhoeffer wrote, “no peace along the way of safety. For peace must be dared.”⁶⁰

A STATUS CONFSSIONIS?

Duchrow notes that the term *status confessionis* originated in Luther’s time in connection to situations where the church might come in conflict with the state, but never in matters “vital to faith,” or to political questions of any kind.⁶¹ In 1933, in response to the Third Reich’s actions against the Jews, specifically expelling all Jews (or Christians of Jewish ancestry) from civil service, Bonhoeffer radically repurposed the term and the concept. He elaborated that a *status confessionis*, under which the church would be compelled to act to protect its integrity and its

⁵⁸ <http://www.radicalizing-reformation.com/index.php/en/>, accessed October 29, 2016

⁵⁹ Eberhard Bethge, *Bonhoeffer: Exile and Martyr* (New York: Seabury), 1975, 153

⁶⁰ in de Gruchy, JW, “Bonhoeffer’s legacy and Kairos-Palestine”, *JTSA*, Vol 143, 2012, 67-80.

⁶¹ Ulrich Duchrow, *Global Economy: A Confessional Issue for the Churches?* Translated, David Lewis, (Geneva: WCC Publications), 1987, p 88

faithfulness to the gospel, could be invoked under the following conditions: (1) the state interfering with the life of the church (“too much state”), or (2) the state failing in its duty to carry out lawful order (“too little state”) -- in that particular case failing to protect the rights of its Jewish citizens. Bonhoeffer emphasized that the declaration of *status confessionis* should not become a matter of rigid theory, predicting the church’s actions for future circumstances, but that it be applied to a concrete situation, calling forth the church’s action at a specific time and place: “...not what is good once and for all, but the way in which Christ takes form among us here and now.”⁶² Bringing the concept into our contemporary context, Duchrow maintains that a *status confessionis* exists when it is necessary to challenge a church institution failing to fulfill its duty of obedience, i.e. to act in response to systematic violations of human rights at the state or global levels. It is when these urgent conditions apply that what Duchrow has described as the neo-Lutheran error of the so-called “Two Kingdoms” doctrine of the autonomy of the political and economic spheres must be confronted. The church cannot claim indifference or non-involvement in the presence of suffering and injustice. This is the *confession* of the *status confessionis*. This exactly what was later implemented by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in “a committed process of recognition, education and confession (*processus confessionis*) regarding economic injustice and ecological destruction” from 1997 to 2004, leading to the 2004 Accra Confession.⁶³

We are in Bonhoeffer’s debt for having revived the powerful notion of the *status confessionis* in his courageous stance with regard to the German state. At the same time, we are able to step away from his formulation of “too little state” or “too much state” (he was still operating from a frame of the church’s duty to support in its divine mandate duty to preserve lawful order). We now say, very simply, that when the state is acting wrongly, the church confesses its active or passive complicity and takes action. This was true in 1977 for the Lutheran World Federation in Dar Es Salaam and in 1982 for the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Ottawa. It held true in 1970 with the World Council of Churches’ establishment of the Programme to Combat Racism, although the term *status confessionis* was not invoked, and similarly in 1985 when the South Africa Kairos “Challenge to the Church” called for the fall of Apartheid. Duchrow made the case in 1983 at the World Council of Churches Assembly in Vancouver that a *status confessionis* was called for in response to the disastrous impact of the world economic order on the wellbeing of millions. The response was to launch the “Conciliar Process of Mutual Commitment towards Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation.” We must ask the same question today with respect to Palestine that Duchrow asked then in Vancouver – “whether Apartheid is not just the tip of the iceberg...” with the industrialized nations “exploiting the majority of the world’s population just as systematically as the white South Africans exploit the majority of the people in South Africa.”⁶⁴

WHY PALESTINE?

⁶²Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, in de Gruchy, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Witness to Jesus Christ*, 231.

⁶³ <http://wcrch.ch/accra/the-accra-confession>, accessed December 2, 2016

⁶⁴ *ibid*, 92

The Palestinian struggle has enormous power to summon the church to its mission. It surfaces the systems and ideologies that support white supremacy and colonialism on a global scale, as expressed in the 2015 “Dangerous Memory” statement: “Palestine is...a microcosm of global empire, a critical site of reflection that can bring experiences in other locales into sharper focus. Palestine does not eclipse other situations around the globe but instead intensifies the need for greater interconnection and mutual engagement.”⁶⁵ As discussed above, the Palestinian call has awakened church movements at the grassroots around the world, each nationally-based movement responding from the context of its own human rights struggle, such as in the Philippines and Brazil, and in some cases, notably the U.S. and the U.K., from its own confession of sin.⁶⁶

Palestine in the post-Oslo Accords era resembles South Africa in the 1980s: political systems, global in their origin and reach, outposts of the white supremacist order, devoted to strengthening the economic and cultural oppression of the subaltern population, supported by church institutions granting theological and historical legitimacy to these actions.⁶⁷ In the case of South Africa, the world came to recognize the political system and the ideology upon which the country was based for what they were. Given the powerful biblical/theological and historical narratives operating in the Israel-Palestine situation, the gradient is steeper -- in the South African case the theological support was limited to the English-speaking, Dutch Reformed and other Afrikaans-speaking churches of South Africa and to the cultural and historical narrative particular to the South African settler population – only the Afrikaners believed themselves to be the chosen people! But the moral, political and theological challenge confronting the world community is the same today. The battle is joined today between the neoliberal agenda, in which Zionism is brought into the service of the “contemporary globalized capitalism of modernity...manifest in exploitation, colonization, and genocide in Africa, Asia, and the Americas,”⁶⁸ and the quest for equality, human dignity, and the survival of the natural environment.

⁶⁵ Kairos 30th Anniversary Statement: Dangerous Memory and Hope for the Future.

<https://kairossouthernafrica.wordpress.com/2015/08/20/kairos-sa-30th-anniversary-conference-statement/>. Accessed March 16, 2016

⁶⁶ See “Call to Action: A U.S. Response to the Kairos Palestine Document, a word of confession and faith from Christians in the United States, <http://kairosusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Kairos-USA-Call-to-Action.pdf>, accessed October 10, 2016, and “Time for Action, a British Christian response to A Moment of Truth, the Kairos Palestine document, <http://www.kairosbritain.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Time-for-Action.pdf>, accessed October 10 2016.

⁶⁷ The 1993 Oslo Accords, which established the Palestinian Authority, was the cause of great optimism, especially on the part of Palestinians. But by 2000 it was clear that Israel was using the military and civil control ceded in the agreement to increase its outright annexation of Palestinian lands and to build the infrastructure of political and economic control over the remaining territory west of the Jordan River. The occupation was not ending; it was deepening, with the cooperation of the Palestinian Authority, operating effectively as a client government of Israel.

⁶⁸ “Radicalizing Reformation – Provoked by the Bible and Today’s Crises: 94 Theses” <http://www.radicalizing-reformation.com/index.php/en/>, accessed July 24, 2016.

Palestine is important because it fulfills Bonhoeffer's requirement that the confession be concrete, a response in a particular time and place. The historic and ongoing ethnic cleansing and colonization of Palestine represents the most longstanding systematic violation of human rights today. This outrage is made more pointed given the support of the Western powers to the continuing colonization of Palestinian land and abrogation of human rights, with the backing of liberal Protestant theology. In the words of Rev. Edwin Arrison, General Secretary of Kairos Southern Africa: "There is much injustice in the world today, but there is only one that is justified by a misuse of the Bible" (*Sunday Tribune*, Nov 15 2016). We must ask: how does accommodation with, indeed loyalty to, Zionism serve to keep the church comfortably secure in its privilege, neutralizing it as a force for the liberation of humankind from the economic and environmental catastrophe now confronting us? When we take on the crime of the dispossession and the political and economic colonization of Palestine we split wide open the entire global system of triumphalism and tribalism, the theological regression to territorialism, and for Christians the negation of Pentecost in the service of building a house to God on a mountain -- in short everything that is represented by the church's theological and ecclesial embrace of the racist, ethnic nationalist ideology of political Zionism.

A PLAN OF ACTION

In conclusion let us review what we have outlined as the challenge and opportunity of the present kairos:

- A continuing and intensifying condition of systematic human rights violations in Palestine, diplomatically and politically enabled and financially resourced by governments and theologically and culturally justified by church bodies, a condition now acknowledged by an increasingly broad sector of the secular and religious world community;
- A model of prophetic theology set out in the "Dangerous Memory" statement, placing Palestine as the exemplar of a global system of economic oppression and racism;
- The legacy of the ecumenical movement and church struggles in the 20th century, furnishing models of prophetic ecclesiology;
- An emerging global network of grassroots church organizations on every continent in response to the Palestinian call.

A plan of action

Goals:

- Mobilize the ecumenical church to call for the end of apartheid in historic Palestine through prophetic witness and direct action at local, national and global levels;
- Gain active supporters and engender public sympathy for the cause for Palestinian human rights;

- Establish lawful government in the territory of historic Palestine.⁶⁹

Method:

- Challenge the prevailing political paradigm of Israel and Palestine as a conflict between two national movements, to that of a settler colonial project;
- Challenge the political model of negotiations for a “two state solution,” describing it rather as a paradigm intended to preserve, advance and complete the colonization of Palestine and the legitimization of Zionism as a political ideology and political program;
- Do the theology with respect to Zionism. Largely, this work has been done, primarily by theologians in Palestine, Europe, South Africa, Latin America and the U.S. This work should be reviewed, its implications analyzed, and a plan developed to bring it to various audiences -- lay, clergy, and academic. This should be carried out within the broader issue of false theology, a theme that carries over from the Confessing Church in Germany to the ongoing work of kairos theology on a global basis today.
- Consider the initiation of a *processus confessionis*, similar in direction to that outlined by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Debrecen/Hungary 1997.⁷⁰
- Explore avenues for alliance with and support for campaigns and resistance organizations, e.g.
 - BDS National Committee;
 - Church organizations and networks, e.g. Friends of Sabeel and Kairos organizations at national levels, national networks such as the German Palestine Solidarity Network, Kairos Britain, Kairos Southern Africa, and Kairos USA, and denominational mission networks;
 - Organizations of resistance and activism in Israel and Palestine;
 - Trade and other economic actions at governmental (including the European Union and other transnational bodies) levels, including trade agreements, sanctions, and actions directed at banks;
- Call on church bodies at local, denominational, national, and global ecumenical levels for specific actions, e.g.:

⁶⁹ The phrase comes from Karl Barth, in Villa-Vicencio, *Between Christ and Caesar*, p 95: “...violent solutions of conflicts in the political community – from police measures to law court decisions, from the armed rising against a regime that is no longer worthy of or equal to its task (in the sense of a revolt undertaken *not to undermine but to restore the lawful authority of the state*) ...must be approved, supported and in some cases even suggested by the Christian community.” (emphasis added) Also see John de Gruchy’s discussion of “From Confession to Resistance” in the chapter entitled “In Dialogue with Dietrich Bonhoeffer” in *My Life in Writing*, 64ff in which he discusses church opposition to unjust government. De Gruchy cites Bonhoeffer’s “putting a spoke into the wheel” of the state in “The Church and the Jewish Question.” Also relevant is Bonhoeffer’s discussion of immanent righteousness in “After Ten Years.”

⁷⁰ From the 1997 WARC call: “...the question of *status confessionis* was raised at the WARC consultation in Kitwe in 1995. By committing themselves to a process of confessing, our churches are challenged to come to a common confession. In this regard, the WARC 22nd General Council, Seoul 1989, stated: ‘Any declaration of a *status confessionis* stems from the conviction that the integrity of the gospel is in danger. It is a call from error into truth. It demands of the church a clear, unequivocal decision for the truth of the gospel...’”

- Authorize tourism to Israel and Palestinian Occupied Territories only to programs fulfilling certain criteria, e.g. working through Palestinian agencies (see South African and Nigerian examples of these actions on the part of churches and church groups.)
- Pursue divestment of church bodies from companies involved with and profiting from the destruction of Palestinian society and the colonization of Palestinian lands;
- Demand specific actions from governments (U.S. of course, but also Germany, UK, Norway, Sweden, South Korea, SA, Brazil, France, Philippines etc.) regarding military financial aid, trade policies, participation in international sanctions, legal judgments and other actions.
- Put in place methods for awareness building and education as a critical organizing strategy.

CONCLUSION

God leads us to responsibility and obedience through the call of the oppressed and the suffering. The concrete manifestations of this call in our world are as physical as Christ's wounds revealed to the apostles in the final chapter of Luke's Gospel: "Look at my hands and feet!" cries Jesus to his disciples -- "and have you anything here to eat?" My wounds are visible and my hunger is urgent, Jesus tells us today, with the same immediacy as on that day in Jerusalem. Our responsibility is made visible in the desecration of the landscape of the West Bank by illegal colonies and separation walls, in the misery of the checkpoints and the rubble and starvation of Gaza, in the pain and despair in the eyes of the oppressed and the desperation and fear in those of the oppressors. The confessional process allows the church to avoid the stumbling blocks of compromise, reform, and the resort to endless "dialogue." It calls the question, forcing the church to declare itself as the true church of Jesus Christ, requiring of Christians a decision for obedience -- to ask, as did Bonhoeffer, "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?"