

# The Role of the Church in Bringing Peace to the Holy Land

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I want to thank the conference organizers and Sabeel for the honor of addressing you today. I am also honored to be in the company of my colleagues and blessed to be part of this powerful and growing community. We are a movement – and more on that later.

Why am I here? I want to begin to answer that question with a story.

In early 2009, soon after the massacre of Gaza, I sat in the Ramallah office of Lana Abuhijleh. Lana is a Palestinian woman, a Muslim from an old Nablus family. She works in Ramallah as the head of a humanitarian assistance NGO, and commutes daily from Beit Haninah, a neighborhood in North Jerusalem that has not yet been swallowed by the inexorable expansion of greater Jewish Jerusalem. On her commute to Ramallah every day with her eight year old daughter, the 25 foot high land grab separation wall is her companion for much of the 6 mile trip. One day her daughter turned to her and asked, “Mommy, why do they make the Jews live behind that wall?”

The wall had been built to keep this child out, but she saw the builders of the wall as the prisoners. Lana was telling me this to make that very point, and I agreed. My experience has been that the Palestinians, trapped in their ever-shrinking bantustans, cut off from their farmlands, markets, and families and forced to undergo humiliating and unpredictable delays at every turn, have not lost their dignity or even their hope. In contrast, the great majority of the Jewish citizens of Israel are the prisoners of their own fear, a fear buttressed by their failure to know their Palestinian neighbors for who they truly are.

I understand this wall. When I stood in front of it for the first time, on a ruined street in East Jerusalem in the summer of 2006, something big and heavy turned over inside me. I knew that wall. It lived in me.

As a Jew born in post-World War II America, I was raised in a potent combination of Rabbinic Judaism and political Zionism. I grew up immersed in the Zionist narrative. I was taught that a miracle – born of heroism and bravery – had blessed my generation. The State of Israel was not a mere historical event – it was redemption from millennia of marginalization, demonization, and murderous violence. The legacy of this history was a sense of separateness – a collective identity of brittle superiority for having survived, despite the effort, “in every age” – so reads the Passover liturgy -- to eradicate us. The ideology and mythology of the birth of the State of Israel partook of this legacy of separateness, vulnerability, and specialness. I embraced it.

Until I saw the occupation.

When I saw the dispossession and oppression being perpetrated in my name, it broke my heart and what is more important it challenged my assumptions and beliefs. I saw the wall and the land grab, I saw the impact on the psyches and souls of my Jewish cousins manning those checkpoints. I realized that the colonial project that I was witnessing, progressing without brakes and with massive funding and diplomatic backing from my own government, was the continuation of the ethnic cleansing that had begun in 1948, planned almost from the beginning of the Zionist project. I learned about another narrative, the Nakba, and understood that the dispossession of three quarters of a million men, women and children to make way for the Jewish State, a crime that continues to this day, was an essential part of my own story as a Jew. I saw how the Nazi Holocaust was being used as political indoctrination and as justification for this project. I realized that the meaning of the Holocaust was not that we had to retreat behind walls of protection but rather to open our hearts to the universality of human suffering and our obligation to relieve it. But most of all, I met the Palestinian people, recognized them as my brothers and sisters.

That summer, I lived in two worlds – the world of West Jerusalem, where my family lived – ordered, clean, manicured, devout, Jewish. And Palestinian East Jerusalem, where I stayed with my delegation – colorful, chaotic, oriental, Muslim and Christian. I realized that, inexplicably, I was feeling more at home on the East side. What was happening to me?

I began to find the answer one morning, soon after my first confrontation with the wall, as we sat in the offices of Sabeel in Jerusalem. We met with Nora Carmi, a wonderful woman who works with Naim in Jerusalem. Nora is herself a dispossessed Jerusalemite. I asked her how she deals with being dispossessed and occupied. I will never forget her answer: We follow Jesus, she said. Who was Jesus? He was a Palestinian Jew living under Roman occupation. Faced with this situation, Jesus did not turn to hatred of his oppressors, nor to fomenting violent rebellion—in contrast, he taught love of humankind, commitment to God’s requirement to pursue social justice, and persistent, stubborn nonviolent resistance to oppression. We follow Jesus, she said. Empires come and empires go. We are here.

Leaving Sabeel that day, I took with me a copy of Naim’s book, *Justice Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*. Naim was eight years old in 1948, the year of my birth, the year that Zionist forces expelled his family from their home, their farm, their church, and their village. He spoke to me from the pages of his book, a book that recounts how his experience of dispossession and occupation led him directly to his belief in the centrality of justice in his faith. It is a book that traces a direct line from the Old Testament prophets of my youth to Jesus of Nazareth. Did I believe in the prophets’ call for justice? Had I not been taught that the core of my identity as a Jew was a commitment to compassion for all people, and the prophetic charge for social justice above all as our duty to God? I realized that to feel the outrage I felt toward the actions of my own people

was the most Jewish thing I had ever felt, and that working for justice in Palestine was the most Jewish thing I could do.

We are witnesses to the founding and growth of a civil society movement to delegitimize Israeli Apartheid. Politics have failed to bring about the required change. The “peace process” has been exposed as the snare and delusion that it is, a method for continuing and completing the effective annexation of Palestine. Indeed, the political process – here and in Israel -- supports the evil. And when politics fail, as Sojourners founder Jim Wallis says, broad grassroots movements arise to change the political wind and bring about the required change.

Because in finding my way to the roots, to the common core of Judaism and Christianity, I found my way to Judaism, and in that way has dissolved, at last, for me, in the words of Paul in Ephesians 2, the walls that divide us.

Together, here, we, a community, a communion if you will, of faith, need to find our way back there – to the Palestine of the first century, when a visionary, prophetic Jew spoke truth to power and changed history. And gave birth to a movement that sought to break down those walls (that’s Christianity I’m talking about, by the way).

We need Jesus so much today, not because Christianity is the best religion or the true religion – just the opposite – there is no best or true one faith, no one group of true believers – and that, by the way is what John 14:6 means-- but because this one particular transformative, kairos time, revolving around this visionary, extraordinary leader, in this particular historical context, has so much to teach us about today.

And, in order to clear the way for the ministry of Jesus to have the urgently required impact, we need to do some theology. For what is theology – it is not about knowing God, it is not about God – it is about our own human attempts to understand what God requires of us – in relation to our fellow human beings and to the earth. And there are other kairos times, in recent history, that many of us lived through – that provide clear examples and powerful guidance for us today – in particular because of the role of the church.

The church has done it before, and it will do it again.

But there is a barrier – and it’s why we need to do the theology.

Here is what I mean.

Sixty five years ago, Christians stood before the ovens of Auschwitz and said: “What have we done?” Since then the Christian world has been engaged in a purposeful, passionate, and often painful process to examine its own theology and to reconcile with the Jewish people. But this effort has gone beyond cleansing the faith of anti-Jewish doctrine. In an effort to find an antidote to the toxic anti-Jewish beliefs known variously as “replacement theology” and “supersessionism,” Christians in the West have embraced

a theology that effectively supports the superior Jewish claim to the land. It represents a regression to an archaic view of God as dwelling in a geographical location and favoring a particular people. It has put the Christian faith, which came to move mankind away from particularism, on a slippery slope to the endorsement of a dangerous, anachronistic ideology of land possession and conquest.

The Christian project of atonement for its sins against the Jewish people has created an industry of Christian-Jewish interfaith scholarship that has profound implications for Christian attitudes toward the Jewish people and the global discourse about the State of Israel. The historical, psychological and spiritual ground zero of this project is the wartime and postwar reaction of the German Protestant church to the Nazi era. In his 1998 collection, *Jews and Christians: Rivals or Partners in the Kingdom of God?* Belgian theologian Didier Pollefeyt traces this movement, reflecting on the “ground that has been covered in Jewish-Christian relations” since the Second World War. The chapter in Pollefeyt’s collection by German Protestant theologian Bertold Klappert describes the situation of the German Confessing Church in the postwar era. Klappert describes how, confronted with the scale of the crime against the Jewish people, the focus of German Protestant theology had shifted from concern about 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. Listen to Klappert’s quote from his teacher and member of the original Confessing Church, Hans Joachim Iwand. In a 1959 letter discussing the Church’s “academic and theological guilt” for Auschwitz, Iwand 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? (1997, 43)

In this cry for purification we can discern the central motivation and future direction for a revised Christian theology, a theology that took root not only in postwar Germany but in the Western world at large. Indeed, the history of Christian anti-Jewish doctrine and actions has become a consuming concern for Christian theologians. “Anti-Jewishness,” wrote contemporary Protestant theologian Robert T. Osborne, “is *the Christian sin.*” (1990, 214, emphasis added) Catholic theologian Gregory Baum, writing about the church’s effort to reconcile with the Jewish people and rid itself of its deeply-rooted anti-Jewish biases, declared that “if the Church wants to clear itself of the anti-Jewish trends built into its teaching, a few marginal correctives won’t do. It must examine the very center of its proclamation and reinterpret the meaning of the gospel for our times” (1997, 6–7). Baum – and in this he is joined by a preponderance of other writers, both Christian and Jewish -- tied the need for this daunting project to the impact of the Nazi Holocaust:

It was not until the holocaust of six million Jewish victims that some Christian theologians have been willing to face this question in a radical way...Auschwitz has a message that must be heard: it reveals an illness operative not on the margin of our civilization but at the heart of it, in the

very best that we have inherited...It summons us to face up to the negative side of our religious and cultural heritage. (1997, 7)

The work of American theologian Paul van Buren was key in setting the stage for this powerful stream of Christian-Jewish reconciliation and a powerful philo-judaic push in American progressive Christianity. According to van Buren, forging a positive relationship with Judaism and the Jewish people is nothing less than the reimagining of what it means to be Christian. "If the church stops thinking of the Jews as the rejected remnant of the people Israel," writes van Buren, "if it starts speaking of the continuing covenantal relationship between this people and God, then it will have to rethink its own identity" (1984, 23). Calling attention to the ways in which Christianity had allowed itself to be built on a foundation of anti-Judaism, van Buren set out to correct this theological error by framing God's covenant with the Jewish people as the basis for the Christian revelation. "Christianity must refer to Judaism in order to make sense of itself," writes van Buren. This is in the service of the "church's reversal of its position on Judaism from that of anti-Judaism to that of an acknowledgement of the eternal covenant between God and Israel" (1998, 85).

The issue of the Promised Land figures prominently in this theology. According to van Buren, Christians may participate in the spiritual Jerusalem with the Jews, but the Jews hold the deed to the actual real estate, and the return of the Jews to possess that very same Promised Land confirms this. Consider the following passage from a 1979 interfaith symposium, "The Jewish People in Christian Preaching." Why, asks van Buren, after eighteen centuries, should Christian leaders "turn Christian teaching on its head" with respect to the Jewish people?

The Holocaust and the emergence of the state of Israel...are what impelled them to speak in a new way about Jews and Judaism. ...the Israeli Defense Force sweeping over the Sinai and retaking East Jerusalem was what could not possibly fit our traditional myth of the passive suffering Jew. The result is that events in modern Jewish history, perhaps as staggering as any in its whole history, have begun to reorient the minds of increasing numbers of responsible Christians. (van Buren 1984)

It is not so much the jarring echo of the mythology of a "new Jew" that shocks and concerns me, nor the one-sided, triumphalist narrative of the 1948 and 1967 wars. What is more disturbing is the theological undertone, the biblical drumbeat, in the appearance of two words in this passage: Sinai and Jerusalem. But there is more going on here than a glorification of Jewish power and the Jewish vision of the Return to Zion: it is that now Christians can join in this triumph, and absorb this historical event into their own vision of what it means to be faithful to God's plan. These events of our time, continues van Buren, reflect "the will of the holy one of Israel, that the greatest of all love affairs of history between God and God's people continue, but that God provides also a way for Gentiles, as Gentiles, to enter along with the chosen people into the task of taking responsibility for moving this unfinished creation nearer to its completion" (ibid).

This is an astonishing reversal in Christian thought. This revised theology perpetuates the triumphalism that helped create the very sin that Christians are attempting to correct. Chosenness has been returned to the Jewish people, and then claimed as well for Christianity as heirs to this privileged status. We have here a kind of Judeo-Christian triumphalism—a significant step backward from the spiritualization of the land and the universalization of the parent faith that characterized the original Christian vision. And this is not a theological quibble -- this shift carries huge consequences. First: it provides theological justification for a massive and an ongoing abuse of human rights. Second: it blocks Christian actions, on both individual and institutional levels, to address this wrong by opposing Israel's actions as a state.

It is this theology that has become firmly established in the mainstream. In a 2009 article in *CrossCurrents*, John Pawlikowski of the Catholic Theological Union, the foremost Catholic theologian on the interfaith issue, asserts that the Vatican's 1993 recognition of the State of Israel was pivotal in correcting Christianity's historic anti-Judaism. With that act, he wrote, "the coffin on displacement/perpetual wandering theology had been finally sealed." Pay attention to what is being done here: recognizing the Jewish state corrects Christian theology! But there is more: Pawlikowski goes on to repudiate Christianity's spiritualization of the land, taking issue with "efforts by Christian theologians to replace a supposedly exclusive Jewish emphasis on "earthly" Israel with a stress on a "heavenly" Jerusalem and an eschatological Zion" (2009 199). He continues: "[T]his tendency has the effect of neutralizing (if not actually undercutting) *continued Jewish claims*. The bottom line of this theological approach was without question that the authentic *claims to the land* had now passed over into the hands of the Christians. Jerusalem, spiritually and territorially, now belonged to the Christians."

I find this an astonishing argument. In the original Christian visioning – and this was a revolutionary and critically important development — Jerusalem itself became a symbol of a new world order in which God's love was available to all of humankind. The Christian vision clarified the meaning of the land promise in the covenantal relationship, removing any ambiguity about possession or ownership. But Pawlikowski was now maintaining that this spiritualization of the land was a betrayal of God's covenant with the Jews – that it had deprived us of our birthright. According to him it was now incumbent upon Christians to honor the claim of the Jewish people to the Holy Land, and indeed to Jerusalem itself. But this is not Christianity! The whole point of spiritualizing the land was to deconstruct, using the full power of the prophetic tradition, the idolatry of Temple and land possession – in Walter Brueggemann's terms, the royal consciousness that seeks only to maintain itself at the expense of community life and social justice.

In the Gospel accounts (Mark 13:2, Matthew 24:2), Jesus stands before the Temple and says: "Not one stone will be left upon another!" Translation: *this old order is over*. And in the Gospel of John (John 2:21), when Jesus says "Destroy this Temple and in three days I will raise it up," the narrator, just to make sure we get the theology right, explains: "He spoke of the temple of his body." Body of Christ: one body – humankind made one, whole, united in one spiritual community. Jesus says to his followers, as God has sent me into the world, so I send you into the world! Is this not the foundational core of

Christianity? Have I missed something here? Have I got this wrong? And yet Christians, in an act of penitence and collective drive for purification, are now actively engaged in a deconstruction of this core element of their faith. We have to be very concerned about this — generations of mainstream pastors and theologians in the West have been educated in versions of this revised theology.

And it's an astonishing reversal in Christian thought. This revised theology perpetuates the triumphalism that helped create the very sin that Christians are attempting to correct. Chosenness has been returned to the Jewish people, and then claimed as well for Christianity as heirs to this privileged status. We have here a kind of Judeo-Christian triumphalism—a significant step backward from the spiritualization of the land and the universalization of the parent faith that characterized the original Christian vision. The Nazi Holocaust was a moment of truth for Christians – but this was, and is, the easy way out. This penitential Christian focus on the sins against the Jews – what I, with apologies to Dietrich Bohnhoeffer, would call *cheap penitence* – becomes problematic in the current historical context. Faced with the prospect of confronting and repudiating Christian exceptionalism, Christians instead elevated this very quality of Judaism and then hitched a ride on it – to use a prominent Protestant theologian's formulation, borrowing from Karl Barth's famous phrase, we Christians are “a guest in the House of Israel.” This is not a theological quibble -- this shift carries huge consequences. First: it provides theological justification for a massive and an ongoing abuse of human rights. Second: it blocks Christian actions, on both individual and institutional levels, to address this wrong by opposing Israel's actions as a state.

This is the theology called into service by the Jewish establishment and elements within the churches themselves to oppose faithful, prophetic efforts within denominations to take faithful stands against companies profiting from the occupation and theft of Palestinian land. These are the arguments used to muzzle and intimidate clergy and secular leaders from speaking out against the State of Israel's human rights violations.

**The Christian impulse for reconciliation has morphed into theological support for an anachronistic, ethnic-nationalist ideology that has hijacked Judaism, continues to fuel global conflict, and has produced one of the most systematic and longstanding violations of human rights in the world today.**

Post WWII produced a broad and deep confessional moment, and it has resulted in the interfaith industry that exists today. Christian-Jewish “interfaith” dialogue was originally undertaken to break down age-old barriers of fear and mistrust between the two communities. Today, however, this dialogue now follows clear rules that serve to insulate Christians from any perception of anti-Jewish feeling and to protect the Jewish community from any possible challenge to unqualified support for the State of Israel or the validity of the Zionist project. These rules are playing out in the academy, in the pews, in interfaith relations on the highest levels, and in everyday encounters. They are rendered more powerful by never being stated or acknowledged.

Fundamentally, there are two rules:

1. "Sensitivity" to "the Jewish perspective" and Jewish self-perception (as defined for all Jews by one group who claim to represent the whole) is paramount. Sensitivity to Jewish experience determines the direction and nature of the discourse. It trumps everything.

2. The superior right of the Jews to the land is not to be challenged. You can nibble at the edges, you may talk about Palestinian human rights, but you may not challenge the central assumptions of political Zionism – the Jews need a national homeland as a refuge, it is the modern nation state now located in historic Palestine, and anything that threatens the security or Jewish character of that state is not acceptable in scholarly discourse.

A recent example is a Christian Century article that appeared in June 2010, just weeks before General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church US. ME Study Group report, *Breaking Down the Walls*.

The intent of the Presbyterian Middle East Study Group Report "Breaking Down the Walls" is clear: "to break down these walls that stand in the way of the realization of God's peaceful and just kingdom." But in their critique of the report published in your June 29 issue, Ted Smith and Amy-Jill Levine of Vanderbilt Seminary strike at the heart of this message. They ask us to believe that the report advocates "a historical narrative that points indirectly to a single state—a new social body—in which a Palestinian majority displaces Jews." In a shocking distortion of the Study Group's evocation of Ephesians 2:14, they claim that "'Breaking down the walls' in order to form 'one new humanity in the place of two' evokes old echoes of theological supersessionism and transposes them into a political key." Meaning, they go on, the one state solution the end of the Jewish state. It's their only prism. That and looking for anti-Semitism around every corner and in every Christian report or statement about Israel.

And the enemies of peace and justice continue to cry supersessionism!

Vatican flap – ME Synod story:

At a news conference, the head of the committee, Greek-Melchite Archbishop Cyrille Butros, said: "The Holy Scriptures cannot be used to justify the return of Jews to Israel and the displacement of the Palestinians, to justify the occupation by Israel of Palestinian lands. "We Christians cannot speak of the promised land as an exclusive right for a privileged Jewish people.

"This promise was nullified by Christ. There is no longer a chosen people -- all men and women of all countries have become the chosen people."

This statement denies the right of the Jewish people to the Jewish State! Screamed the Weisenthal Center. I thought we were friends! declared another Jewish advocacy group - - what about Vatican II? And this response was, sadly, completely predictable.

Bishop Butros might have chosen his words more carefully. But I believe he intended to say precisely what he said, and I applaud his directness, his integrity and his faithfulness to his beliefs. He is right on the issue – taking direct aim at exclusivity, and at the destructive sense and use of the terms promised land and chosen people. Christ indeed lifted a restriction. Unless I misunderstand Christian theology and the message of the Gospel, Christ, by his sacrifice, said he will “draw all men to me.” This means all people, regardless of race, gender, nationality. I like the way the Bishop appears unconcerned about being perceived as making "supercessionist" statements or claims.

The fear among Christians of (even) appearing to endorse a theology that makes a claim for Christianity being improving or building upon Judaism in any way has become a tyranny, has been for too long. Tell it like it is, I say! Christ, and Christianity (until it fell into the same trap) came to take Judaism where it was supposed to go, where it had to be headed -- emancipated from its tribal origin and frame. This is what the South African theologians and clerics – Desmond Tutu, for example, argue for why Apartheid is heresy – it denies the unity of all humankind.

We need to reexamine our theology of land.

A theology of land that is responsive to the current crisis is important not only because of its relevance to the Israel-Palestine conflict. The issue of the land focuses the most urgent theological issue of our time: the particular vs. the universal. As such, it poses two fundamental theological questions: What is God’s love? What is faithfulness to his plan? Today, the theology of land has been hijacked. It has become the captive of the penitential impulse of the Christian world on a religious level, and, on a political level, brought into the service of the preservation of the interests of the few and the powerful. And so we must pose the question: What is the meaning of the land promise? We begin by stating what land in the Bible is not: it is not territory. Rather, it is an evolving construct having to do with the nature of God’s plan and the divine relationship with humankind.

### **An evolving concept**

The concept of the land in the scriptural narrative reflects this evolutionary trajectory. It begins with Genesis and continues through Revelation. The original land promise sets in motion a dramatic story of the transition from the tribal to the universal, from a concept of a territory possessed and conquered to that of the establishment of a global order of social justice.

In the Old Testament narrative, God comes first to mankind by choosing one family for a role in establishing his plan for a just society. The land plays a central role in the unfolding drama of this covenantal relationship. I call this Kingdom of God version 1.0. The people are special (*kadosh*) – set apart from the other peoples, and they are given the land in tenancy as a part of this covenant. The drama continues when the people demand a king. God tells Samuel to warn the people that a king will subvert the primary goal of the covenant of establishing a just world: the king will see the land as a possession, distribute resources unfairly, destroy community and family life, and ultimately bring the

wrath of God down upon the entire people. Of course this is precisely what happens -- ultimately the "kingdom" falls and the people are vomited out of the land, just as specified in the Levitical and Deuteronomic warnings. But even through these ups and downs, the People of Israel retain their special relationship with God, and with that the primary claim to the land – the promise itself, in its exclusivist frame – is never withdrawn. We're at Kingdom of God 1.5. Although Israel is enjoined to treat them justly and even as equals, non-Israelites are "strangers," or "resident aliens," as the work *ger* is sometimes translated. All through the agony of the divided kingdom, the destruction of the northern kingdom, the destruction of Jerusalem, the exile, and the return, this primary tie of people, God, and land is maintained. A theology of landedness –place -- persists. Jerusalem remains the *place* where God dwells. The return recorded in Jeremiah and the time of Ezra and Nehemiah can be seen as a restoration of the people to land and Temple. The Temple is rebuilt – this is never in question.

Fast forward to first century Palestine: The historical frame is the Roman Empire -- the ultimate expression of acquisitive greed. The Temple is still standing. Jerusalem is ruled by a client government installed by that Empire. This is the context of Jesus' ministry, which is a direct response to the evil of that arrangement, and the frame for his revolutionary concept of Kingdom of God. Liberation theologian Walter Wink writes about Jesus' statement, *My Kingdom is not of this world*. Wink points out that in the gospel of John the Greek word for "world" is *kosmos* – which translates as *order* or *system*. This world, Jesus is saying, this system of empire which seeks only to increase its own power and reach at the expense of communities, families, human health and dignity, this world order will give over to the Kingdom of God – something completely different.

In Jesus' Kingdom of God, both the land and the people lose their specificity and exclusivity. Temple -- gone. God dwelling in one place -- over. And, significantly, Jesus' Kingdom takes the next step – it gets rid of the "*Am Kadosh*" or "special people" concept. The special privilege of one family/tribe/nation separated from the rest of humanity is eclipsed. Kingdom 2.0.

The notion of God's elect and the land as an inheritance is an archaic concept. Christians, in resuscitating it and reassigning the role to the Jewish people are committing an act of hubris and folly. Jews, in invoking the land promise as if it were a clause in a real estate contract, are guilty of an act of catastrophic idolatry.

There is no one, special way to God. All scriptures point in a single direction: the building of a community of humankind to confront the urgent issues facing humanity and the planet. We are *all* elected. We are *all* responsible for our fellow man and for honoring and respecting the physical environment.

We can find no more faithful and clear articulation of this theology than the Palestine Kairos document:

We believe that our land has a universal mission. In this universality, the

meaning of the promises, of the land, of the election, of the people of God open up to include all of humanity, starting from all the peoples of this land. In light of the teachings of the Holy Bible, the promise of the land has never been a political programme, but rather the prelude to complete universal salvation. It was the initiation of the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God on earth.

This is my message to Christians, as a Jew who is experiencing, all too vividly, the dangers of particularity: beware of slipping into a newly minted Christian triumphalism under the cover of reconciliation with the Jewish people. The challenge to people of all faiths is to take the lesson from the current experience of the Jewish people with our ethnic-nationalist experiment: God grants specialness to no one people.

### **The Churches and South African Apartheid**

The church has been here before. I want to tell you a story, one not known by enough of us today, and that we have to know.

In 1982 the leaders of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches met in Ottawa Canada. Nine black and colored colleagues from South Africa – ministers and pastors -- refused to sit at the Lord's supper with them because they could not do that at home. The WARC declared the church to be in *status confessionis* – This is a term that comes out of the Protestant Reformation, and it refers to the recognition of a practice that challenges the fundamentals of the faith – that is not indifferent – and that must be corrected until it is clarified and corrected. That means no movement forward, no further church business. We are not OK with God, these church leaders said, until this is remedied! And promptly suspended the SA churches from the worldwide church body until this betrayal of the core of their faith was seen to. No deals, no negotiation, no peace process – nothing moves until this is fixed.

These pastors knew that not only was the church complicit in its silence, but that it had a responsibility for having created the very structures of separation and discrimination upon which the current state structures were built. These theologians and pastors realized that meant that the church was in violation of the fundamental principle of equality under God, the unity of all creation, and that it went beyond doctrine. It created the imperative to act:

Writing in 1982, Charles Villa-Vicencio, a South African Methodist Minister and Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Capetown, wrote the following:

“The emphasis of worldwide Christianity today, while not denying the importance of ‘correct doctrine,’ rejects its isolation from life. Doctrine and faith are inextricably bound up with ethics and behavior. This is the heart of the significance of the WARC decision: which turns what could have been an ‘in house’ ecclesiastical squabble within the Dutch Reformed family of churches into a which challenges churches in and beyond South Africa.”

Look at the parallels. In South Africa the churches were split in how to respond to the call of faith on the one hand and the pressure from the Apartheid government and their own fear of change and rocking the boat on the other. And here is the lesson for us today: it was the support of the global church and the civil society on a global basis that gave church leaders in South Africa what they needed to bring Apartheid to an end.

Here is the background: In the aftermath of the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960, the World Council of Churches called its South Africa member churches into consultation in the Johannesburg suburb of Cottesloe. The result were conclusions that totally rejected the notion that Apartheid could be justified biblically or theologically. The Apartheid government came down hard in response to this. The Prime Minister demanded that the churches recant, claiming that Cottesloe challenged the “high purpose of apartheid.” The Afrikaans Churches backed off completely and continued to support Apartheid as church polity. The English speaking churches also backed off, allowing the separatist and discriminatory practices to continue, but condemned them in word. “Some busied themselves with changing individual attitudes, writes Villa-Vicencio, while leaving the necessary structural changes to others.” (1982, 63)

Look at the parallels. Today, clearly, there is a structure of legalized racism in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, institutionalized and pursued on a state level. People often say to me: it seems that you reject the two-state solution as no longer viable. So are you in favor of one state? I tell them that I am no longer willing to engage in the “one state/two state” conversation. That is over. We have one state. It is a single Apartheid State. The proposed “peace agreements” that are now being bandied about by our own government, supposedly entertained by Israel, and somehow are expected to be acceptable to the Palestinian Authority are more than likely to in effect legitimate the Apartheid reality that exists now. We have a refugee situation that has existed for an unprecedented span of 62 years. This is a structure, a political reality that necessitates a *status confessionis* on the part of the American church, which, in view our own governments complicity, is by any silence and inaction complicit. What does it mean in our context to stay with doctrine and not with deed? It is to talk about Palestinian rights without addressing the structure that takes them away. It is to continue to recite platitudes about a two state solution, about two peoples living side by side in peace and security. It is to continue to buy into the convenient fantasy, the political theater, of two partners negotiating, where in fact one side has all the power and holds all the cards. It is to buy into the snare and delusion of the peace process which is no peace process at all but a design continue and indeed to complete and solidify the apartheid system that exists today. Words alone only support this reality and allow it to continue to move forward.

We need a new confession. We need to be in *status confessionis*.

Let me take you back to Birmingham, AL in 1963. The Reverend ML is sitting in a jail cell, arrested for civil disobedience. He is smuggling a letter out on scraps of paper. Recall the context. The writers of “A Call to Unity” -- eight white pastors -- urged Rev. King to end the demonstrations "directed and led in part by outsiders" that were taking

place in the area at the time, recommending that African Americans engage in local negotiations and use the courts if rights are being denied. Let us work through channels, they said. Let's have a peace process.

To which he responded: we cannot wait. This is the right course of action for our churches, for our society, and for our leaders.

We are witnesses to the founding and growth of this movement.

And it is urgent. The issues are becoming more and more clear for world peace and for the sustainability of life on our planet. In the 80s in South Africa, even as powerful forces moved toward ending the racist system, the move toward the traditional *volksteologie* – the equation of faith and ethnic identity, was a real possibility for some of the churches. Do we not see this in our own society, both within the Christian ranks – Don will talk about that in the next plenary – as well as in the cultural and political realm in the US, as we harden ourselves against the other – immigrants; Muslims; the poor and less privileged? Doesn't the U.S. identification with Israel – politically and culturally – an Israel that is moving more deeply into legal racism -- represent that same impulse in our society, an impulse that must be named and called by its name – racism, heresy, acting against to God's will, God's plan? Doesn't the narrative of a victim Israel, terrorized by implacable Arab hatred fit the dominant post 9/11 American narrative of a white, Judeo-Christian democratic society threatened by the forces that hate our freedom, by dark people with a dark, scary violent religion?

That's why this is so important – for our society, for the world, and certainly for the church. Might the churches split over this? If a split is threatened, if schism is threatened, well, so what. People said the same thing in the Episcopal Church about ordination of gays. And the church is still here and the world didn't end.

And by the way, I think that the Jewish community is looking down this same road. We are at a moment of truth, a kairos moment. Who are we? What are our values? Will we continue to deepen our embrace of redemptive violence, or are we with the prophets, who were working to bring their people out of the primitive tribalism of king and priest and into the just society that God required? And the faster we look this straight in the face and figure it out, the better – our future as a faith community depends on it. Personally, I am not concerned, as the Jewish leadership is, about preserving the people of Israel, by which *they* mean building the walls of separatism and fear of the other higher, through this equation of Judaism and Zionism, while we descend deeper into the hole of ethnic nationalism that we have dug for ourselves. We have to move in precisely the other direction, we have to take down that wall – the one inside us, the one we've built.

We need to revisit the first century when the split occurred over – not the divinity of Jesus but over universalism vs. particularity. I am looking beyond peoplehood. I am looking for something else, something more universal, ecumenical, interfaith if you will.

Or better, interreligious communion – what, I believe, Paul was going after.

*There are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are a variety of services, but the same Lord, and there are a variety of activities, but the same God who activates them in everyone.... For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.*  
Corinthians 12:4

(And this the key to understanding John 14:6, for anyone who needs extra help with that).

And, of course, the passage in Ephesians 2:14: “For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall that is the hostility between us.” This is what Paul was about with respect to his own Jewishness and in the face of what was for him the personally and spiritually devastating Jewish rejection.

The Jewish people are in trouble here. We’re dug in. I don’t know what will happen and how that will play out in the Jewish community. But I know that if the church waits for us to work it out, it will be too late.

Look -- the church is at home here. The call for justice for Palestine is the social justice ministry that permeates the global church – it’s not a hard call! Except for the interfaith issue. That makes it difficult. I know. I know what charges you open yourselves to when you dare to question the actions of the State of Israel. I know that it threatens relationships with Jewish friends, family members and organizations, bridges of understanding built up over years, on personal, professional, and institutional levels. But I say to you: do not let yourselves be held captive to our struggle. Do not confuse the work of reconciling with the Jewish people and atoning for millennia of Jewish suffering with the urgent work that now calls to you. Do what your faith directs you to do, even if many of your Jewish brothers and sisters refuse, for the time being, to accompany you on this ministry. Fighting anti-Semitism is and continues to be important work – as is the opposition to all forms of racism – and Christianity has a lot to answer for in that regard. But the urgent call today is the call to justice for Palestine– justice that will alone bring peace to both the Palestinian and the Israeli peoples.

I know it’s easy for me to say this, there are real costs here for Christians. And this is especially true for clergy – three generations of hard work of building bridges of understanding and reconciliation – hard work – threatens to blow up in your faces over this. And I can offer you no comfort on that score. But this is about love – as expressed by Paul, as articulated in the Kairos document. That’s how I need you to love me.

In conclusion:

***Apartheid is here.*** We are witnessing the birth and growth of a movement to bring about the end of this system and bring peace to all peoples of the land. The church – in particular the American church in view of our government’s complicity, is called. The cause for justice in Palestine is the most urgent and important issue confronting the church today.

The work facing us is two pronged: movement to change the political wind, and support for civil society. It may be a long haul – the South African pastors I met in Bethlehem at the launch of the Kairos statement last year in Bethlehem told me that it took 40 years of political action, non-violent resistance, and church action on a global basis to bring about an end to Apartheid. And we don't know how it will unfold. But however this unfolds, the need for civil society support will be urgent and ongoing.

What then, must we commit ourselves to as we continue to build this movement?

1. We are doing it right here, right now, at the Sabeel conference. Our American conferences have been growing in size, scope and frequency. We are doing vital education, and updating for all of us, the veterans and the potential recruits. These are vital gatherings to keep energy and hope alive. We are a movement.
2. Denominational actions – BDS, study resolutions, accompaniment programs, service
3. Local initiatives, at the grassroots – ecumenical, interfaith: boycotts, vigils, service – dozens of cities, large and small – e.g. Chicago, Dubuque, Austin, Iowa City. This will
4. Congregational – church education, pilgrimages, service
6. And the academy – here, in the seminaries and the universities. There must be an alternative to the careful “interfaith” agenda in the academy, in which the academy has essentially been hijacked, intimidated into either ignoring the issue of Palestine or presenting a sanitized, biased approach designed to protect Christians from the threat of being charged with being anti-Israel.

The church is called. And it is urgent.

I conclude with these words from the Gospel of Martin, from his Birmingham jail letter:

*There was a time when the church was very powerful. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven," called to obey God rather than man. Small in number, they were big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be "astronomically intimidated."*

*...the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century.*

It is the call that rings out clearly in our day.