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"The message to the people of South Africa" in contemporary context: The question of Palestine and the challenge to the church

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Abstract

In September 2018 John de Gruchy presented a paper at the Volmoed Colloquium entitled "Revisiting the *Message to the people of South Africa,*" in which he asks, "what is the significance of the document for our time?" In this expanded version of the author's response to de Gruchy, two further questions are pursued: First: how can the churches today meet the challenge of today's global system of economically and politically-driven inequality driven by a constellation of individuals, corporations, and governments? Second: in his review of church history, de Gruchy focused on the issue of church theology described in the 1985 Kairos South Africa document, in which churches use words that purport to support justice but actually serve to shore up the status quo of discrimination, inequality and racism. How does church theology manifest in the contemporary global context, and what is the remedy? The author proposes that ecumenism can serve as a mobilizing and organizing model for church action, and that active engagement in the issue of Palestine is an entry point for church renewal and for a necessary and fruitful exploration of critical issues in theology and ecclesiology.

Keywords

Palestine; Apartheid; Barmen Declaration; Liberation Theology; ecumenical movement

In September 2018, on the 50th anniversary of its publication, John de Gruchy presented a paper at the Volmoed Colloquium entitled "Revisiting the *Message to the people of South Africa*."[1] Identifying the *Message* as "the

1 John W. de Gruchy, "Revisiting the *Message to the people of South Africa:* 1968–2018," *The Ecumenical Review* 70, no. 2 (July 2018): 272–282.

first major South African ecumenical statement that rejected apartheid as unbiblical and unchristian, a 'false gospel,'" de Gruchy asked, what is the significance of the document for our time? After reviewing the theological and ecclesial history leading up to the Message, going back to the Barmen Declaration, de Gruchy charted the history of prophetic church action in South Africa from Sharpeville and Cottesloe in 1960, to the founding of the Christian Institute in 1962 and its transformation into the SACC in 1966, to the *Message* in 1968.[2] This paper is a revised and expanded version of my response to de Gruchy on that day, in many ways an homage to his lifelong work on the church as a prophetic body – in his words, "the community in which God manifests in history."[3]

In my response I proposed two further questions to follow de Gruchy's primary question of what the meaning of the Message for our time is. First: in 1968 the *Message* was addressed to a particular community and a specific situation. Whereas in the 1960s racism was perceived in terms of local struggles, today's context is a global system of economically and politically-driven inequality driven by a constellation of individuals, corporations, and governments pursuing their self interest in the guise of "development," "progress" and "growth" that has put all of humanity and the planet itself at imminent risk. How can the churches today meet this global challenge? Second: in his review of church history, de Gruchy focused on the issue of church theology first described in the 1985 Kairos South Africa document, in which churches serve the interests of tyranny and inequality by using words that purport to support justice but that actually serve to shore up the status quo of discrimination and racism. How does church theology manifest in the contemporary global context, and how can we provide a remedy so that the churches can confront the urgent issues facing our world? To address these questions, in this paper I propose

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2 Throughout this paper I use the words "the church" and "the churches" to refer to church institutions at multiple social levels, from the local to the global and across the ecumenical spectrum. According to the context, this may connote a specific church or number of church institutions, taking a specific action or actions in response to injustice. "Church" may also refer to the construct of the "church" itself, as used by Bonhoeffer or by de Gruchy to describe the identity and role of the followers of Christ in the world. (Matthew 16:18: "… on this rock I will build my church.")

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

that the call of Palestinian civil society, including the churches of Palestine is an entry point for a new ecumenical movement, harking back, to use de Gruchy's term, to the "Confessing Church movements" exemplified by the *Message to the people of South Africa* and the prophetic church actions that preceded and followed it. I will propose that ecumenism can serve as a mobilizing and organizing model for church action, and a deepening and contextually-driven concept of confession as a model for theological and ecclesial action.

1. Turning points in church history

De Gruchy has been addressing this topic for over five decades. In 1984 Eerdmans published a compilation of de Gruchy's papers and lectures dating from the mid-1970s entitled *Bonhoeffer and South Africa*.[4] The unifying theme for this collection was historical turning points – events and conditions in human affairs that challenged the churches to respond in word and action. The life and work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer provided the focus and starting point for these papers. I will refer to two of these, titled "Providence and the shapers of history," and "Enduring significance of Barmen." In the first, addressing the Bonhoeffer Society in 1976 against the backdrop of tumultuous events in South Africa, de Gruchy asked, "How is the gospel to be understood and proclaimed concretely at such a time of uncertainty, fear, and expectation…when it seems that history is getting out of control?"[5] Bonhoeffer was asking a similar question in the early years of the Third Reich, when he called on his fellow clergy and theologians to resist the German church's alliance with the tyrannical and racist regime. The founding of the Confessing Church was the German pastor's answer to his church's betrayal of the most fundamental principles of the gospel. Despite the heroic if short-lived gathering of the Confessing Church as an alternative community and its issuing of the Barmen Declaration, Bonhoeffer's assessment in his final years appears to be that this effort to redeem the church had failed. Writing from prison, he lamented, "Our church, which has been fighting in these years only for its self-preservation, as though that were an end in itself, is incapable of taking the word of

4 John W. de Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa: Theology in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 128

5 Ibid, 50.

reconciliation and redemption to mankind."[6] Throughout, however, Bonhoeffer never lost sight of the heart of the church as the embodiment of Jesus Christ, enjoined in every historical era to ask the question, "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?"

For de Gruchy, as for Bonhoeffer, the ethical question becomes ecclesial: How can the church find its footing, its very *self*, at a time when the world is tottering on the edge and the churches themselves appear to be asking, who are we? In "Providence and the shapers of history" de Gruchy described the year 1976 as a "turning point" for South Africa, with the independence of Mozambique and Angola unfolding on its borders and the townships erupting in protest against apartheid. What might these events portend for South Africa, de Gruchy wondered, the country still in the grip of a reactionary, increasingly militarized and repressive regime? For de Gruchy, the question held particular relevance for the church in South Africa at that time. Picking up the discussion in the 2018 paper, de Gruchy framed the question in the context of South African church history, making special mention of the period leading up to the publication of the *Message,* the Cottesloe Declaration of 1960 and its aftermath in the secession of the Dutch Reformed Churches in response to this clearest stand to date against apartheid, the establishment of the Christian Institute in 1963 under the leadership of Beyers Naudé, and the inauguration of the Study Project on Christianity in an Apartheid Society (SPRO-CAS). According to de Gruchy, these developments signalled the establishment of a vibrant "confessing church movement." But by the mid-70s, these heady and creative times had yielded to a condition of retrenchment and siege as government repression came down on resistance movements throughout South African society, including on those in the churches who had dared to speak out. For de Gruchy, the connection to Bonhoeffer was clear, leading to the question of what, to use Bonhoeffer's language, is "responsible action" in times such as these? And what is the role of the churches as the community in which human beings discern and act in response to human affairs?

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6 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Thoughts on the Day of Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdger Bethge, May 1944," in John de Gruchy, ed., *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Witness to Jesus Christ* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 297.

This question has been central to de Gruchy throughout his life. Reflecting on the history of church struggle in his homeland at a time of mounting tension and increasing government domination, de Gruchy poses this question: "When it had seemed to us that the work and witness of prophetic leaders like Beyers Naudé could in fact usher in a new era of justice, but that now it seems that events are beyond such influence, how then, if at all, do we discern God at work in our situation?"[7] It is the question that Bonhoeffer was asking, and which in his *Ethics* he answers: "It is in times which are out of joint, where wickedness and lawlessness triumph, it is in these times that the gospel makes itself known."[8] He returns to it in "After Ten Years," where he famously asks, "Are we still of any use?"[9] De Gruchy has observed that it is when issues of human rights and dignity become inescapably apparent that the church is summoned to act. It is of therefore of "fundamental importance," de Gruchy submits, "to develop an ecumenical prophetic ecclesiology and consciousness that enables the church to recognise the *kairos* when it occurs."[10]

2. A theology of church struggle

The concept of "church theology" is central de Gruchy's discussion of the *Message* to the People of South Africa. "The core of the *Message,"* he writes, "namely that of reconciliation in Christ, was in danger of becoming cheapened by a 'church theology' that failed to resist apartheid with action and not just words."[11] The concept of church theology as a false gospel was introduced by the authors of the 1985 Kairos South Africa "Challenge to the Church." It applies as much, if not more, today than it did when it was conceived and called into service in the closing years of the anti-apartheid struggle. As the title indicates, the focus of the 1985 South Africa Kairos document was not the government in Pretoria, but rather the church in

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7 De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa,* 50

8 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics,* in de Gruchy, *Witness to Jesus Christ,* 32.

9 Bonhoeffer, "After Ten Years," in de Gruchy, *Witness to Jesus Christ,* 257.

10 John de Gruchy, "Kairos moments and prophetic witness: Towards a prophetic ecclesiology,"

Theological Studies 72, no. 4 (August 2016): 1–7.

11 De Gruchy, "Revisiting the *Message to the people of South Africa*."

South Africa, for its complicity in the creation of and of apartheid. The theology employed by the South African churches the document asserted, "tends to make use of absolute principles such as reconciliation and nonviolence and applies them indiscriminately and uncritically to all situations. Very little attempt is made to analyse what is actually happening in our society and why it is happening." Church theology is as powerful as it is pernicious because it flies under the false flag of defending human rights and opposing oppression. "In a limited, guarded and cautious way this theology is critical of apartheid," explained the authors. "Its criticism, however, is superficial and counter-productive because instead of engaging in an in-depth analysis of the signs of our times, it relies upon a few stock ideas derived from Christian tradition and then uncritically and repeatedly applies them to our situation."[12]

De Gruchy identified the tension for the church between its original mission to pursue justice and, in the words of the *Message*, "the forces that threaten to isolate and destroy us."[13] Today, as in the years of the anti-apartheid struggle and in Bonhoeffer's time, these forces are to be found as much within the church itself as coming from the greater society. Ultimately the source of Bonhoeffer's greatest agony was not the German church's abject unfaithfulness to Christ in its embrace of National Socialism, but the silence of so many church leaders, as well as the gradual defection of members of the Confessing Church as a result of pressure exerted by the Third Reich. Bonhoeffer wrote: "the very neutrality of many Christians was the gravest danger that would lead to the disintegration and dissolution of the church." In times such as these, he maintained, what was required was a "clear decision for or against Christ."[14] According to Bonhoeffer, the church that does not struggle is not a church at all, because, rather than boldly confronting the signs of its times, it hides its head in the sand or focuses on preserving itself, and probably both. The critique of church

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12 "Challenge to the church: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa." [Online]. https://kairossouthernafrica.wordpress.com/2011/05/08/the-south-africa-kairos-document-1985/ [Accessed: May 23, 2019].

13 "A Message to the people of South Africa," September 1968. [Online]. https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/a-message-to-the-people-of-south-africa-authorised-summary%2C-1968. [Accessed: June 9, 2019].

14 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics,* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 343.

theology takes direct aim against this tendency of the church to betray its primary mandate to stand for "the least of these," by aiding, and in many cases actually joining, the oppressive system.

As a voice of protest originating from within the church, the *Message* stands in the tradition of prophetic speech. In speaking out against the moral and political corruption of the Israelite theocracy, the Hebrew prophets were confronting the church of their time. Jesus continued that prophetic tradition in his defiance of the Temple cult and Israelite kings serving the imperial system of Rome. The *Message* charged the church to confess its complicity with apartheid in its support of the false gospel of separation. It declared that the policy of racial separation had put the church in peril: "Where the Church abandons its obedience to Jesus Christ, it ceases to be the Church." To whom, asks the *Message*, "or to what, are you giving your first loyalty? Is it to a subsection of mankind, an ethnic group, a human tradition, a political idea, or to Christ?"[15] And so, we must ask, how does church theology manifest in our day? And what is the remedy so that the churches can confront the urgent issues facing our world? To answer these questions, we will consider three interlocking topics: the lineage of church action in facing the global order, the importance of the Palestinian call, and ecumenism as a mobilizing and organizing model for church action.

3. Facing the global order – a lineage of church action

The 1968 *Message to the people of South Africa* was addressed to a particular community in a specific historical context. As de Gruchy notes, the subject was racism – "separation" in the language of the document. The focus and thrust was in line with the spirit of the late 1960s. The civil rights movement in the U.S.A. was producing momentous societal and political changes in that country. National liberation movements were sweeping across Africa, spelling the collapse of the global imperial-colonial order. Nineteen sixty-eight was the year of the World Council of Churches conference in Uppsala, Sweden, where, identifying racism as the most urgent issue confronting the churches, the world body established the Programme to Combat Racism, lending financial and other forms of direct support to these struggles.

15 Ibid.

Whereas in the 1960s racism was perceived in terms of local struggles and addressed as such, we now understand racism as an integral component of a world order of supremacy driving politics and economics. It is this global context to which the church must now address itself. The churches of the world were awakened by the call of the South African churches to a *status confessionis.* Although the situation was local, it resonated with a far-reaching commitment to social and economic justice at a global level that had been made by ecumenical bodies in previous decades and that continues to this day.[16] This follows the model of the gospel narrative and message. The movement led by Jesus confronted a particular empire, at a particular time – the Temple hierarchy and client monarchy colluding with Empire to sell out its people. But it articulated a vision that applied universally – the charge on Pentecost to bring the message of compassion and equality to the wide world. The call of the contemporary Palestinians and the concomitant requirement to confront Zionism as theology and a political program is the *kairos* of our time. To confront it is to address the wider global context of the Domination System, to use Walter Wink's term.[17] We can no longer see one particular liberation struggle as isolated from the broader struggle against Empire. An inquiry into the Palestinian liberation struggle and into Zionism itself surfaces the systems and ideologies that support supremacy and colonialism on a global scale. When we unpack Zionism, we address both the political and theological tip of the iceberg of the neoliberal order – a political and economic ideology and view of human relations that threatens human civilization and the earth itself.

The 30th anniversary of the South Africa Kairos statement presented an opportunity to foreground this perspective on church history. In August 2015 Kairos Southern Africa hosted an international conference in Johannesburg titled "Dangerous Memory and Hope for the Future." The Palestinian struggle was a major focus of the gathering. "In our time," reads the conference statement, "we find that various sites of pain and

16 Ulrich Duchrow, *Conflict Over the Ecumenical Movement: Confessing Christ Today*, trans. David Lewis (Geneva: World Council of Churches: 1981; Braverman, Mark, January 2017. "A Confessing Church for the Present Kairos: An Ecumenical Movement for the 21st Century," Proceedings of Third International Conference of Radicalizing Reformation, Wittenberg, Germany. [Online]. Available: http://www.radicalizing-reformation.com/files/RR-vol-7-Eng-rev1218.pdf

17 Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press: 1992), 225.

struggle are joined in a Global Kairos, a shared quest for justice. Empire is an all-encompassing global reality seeking to consolidate all forms of power while exploiting both Creation and Humanity." The statement continued: "We found that the context of suffering and pain created by Israel's oppression of Palestine contains all aspects of Empire. Palestine is therefore a microcosm of global Empire, a critical site of reflection that can bring experiences in other locales into sharper focus."[18] This statement has deep historical resonances. How the response to a local situation can mobilize a global movement was demonstrated in 1982 at the meeting of World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) in Ottawa Canada, when a group of black South African pastors refused to take communion with their white colleagues. They pointed out that they would be unable to do so in South Africa because of the official policy of separation of the races, condoned and enforced by the churches. The WARC declared a *status confessionis* and suspended the South African member churches that were practicing racial separation. With the WARC action, the churches of the world fell in behind the protesting South African churches, in alliance with students, labor unions, and even the armed resistance. This led to the Belhar Confession of 1982, a document which continues to exert influence within the Reformed tradition beyond the specific context of its origination, and to the 1985 Kairos South Africa Kairos "Challenge to the church," which laid the groundwork for the Palestine Kairos document of 2009 and the global movement it has spawned. "The church has often provided theologies of domination in the service of Empire," declared the "Dangerous Memory" statement. "In our discussions, we found that the South African Kairos indictment of Church Theology is as relevant in our time as it was in 1985."[19] Today, the need for the voice of prophecy from within the church is as great or greater than ever. The call of the Palestinian churches has awakened the churches of the world to that need.

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18 "Dangerous Memory and Hope for the Future," statement on the 30th Anniversary of the Kairos South Africa statement, Johannesburg, 2015. [Online]. Available: https://kairosusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Kairos-30th-Anniversary-Statement.pdf [Accessed: May 19, 2019].

19 Ibid.

4. Resistance with love as its logic: the Palestinian call to the church

The 2009 Kairos Palestine "Moment of Truth: a word of faith, hope and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering" raised a prophetic voice of protest against the evil of Israeli dispossession and oppression, and against the misuse of the Bible to support that evil. The authors, a diverse and ecumenical group of Palestinian Christians, issued a challenge to the world to stand in solidarity with the Palestinians in their struggle for justice, equality and dignity, a struggle described in the document as "resistance with love as its logic." Zionism must be confronted both ideologically and theologically: "We declare that any use of the Bible to legitimize or support political options and positions that are based upon injustice, imposed by one person on another, or by one people on another, transform religion into human ideology and strip the Word of God of its holiness, its universality and truth."[20]

The question of Palestine has particular and urgent relevance for the churches today for three reasons:

Politics has failed

Not only have political efforts failed to restore Palestinian human rights, they have actively and materially supported the ongoing injustice. Israel's project of settler colonialism has been advanced by the world powers, diplomatically and, in the case of the United States, through huge financial support, in violation of international law and universally agreed upon principals of human rights. It is for a time such as this that the churches are called to act, as they have acted in the past, to move systems to change on both societal and political levels. The civil rights movement in the USA and the global anti-apartheid movement provide compelling examples of the power of the churches to bring about political change.

20 "Moment of Truth: A word of love, faith and hope from the heart of Palestinian suffering." [Online]. Available: http://www.kairospalestine.ps/index.php/about-us/kairos-palestine-document [Accessed: April 10, 2019].

A resurgence of exceptionalism

Today, a claim for the legitimacy of a colonial settler project in historic Palestine is being made on the basis of a revived Judeo-Christian exceptionalism. In their zeal to atone for church sins against the Jews by endorsing the project to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine, Christians – from the pulpits, in their organizational and community relations, and in the seminaries – have betrayed fundamental principles of the gospels, namely the rejection of territoriality, particularity, and exceptionalism. The post-World War II Christian preoccupation with historic church anti-Judaism has served up a theological embrace of political Zionism that presents a barrier to church action for Palestinian rights. This runs tragically counter to the passionate opposition to the merging of hyper-nationalism and religion that was informed by Bonhoeffer's radical, humanistic Christocentrism.

The churches cry out for renewal

Fifty years ago, the *Message to the people of South Africa* opposed not only the evil of apartheid itself but the fact that the claim for separation was "being made to us in the name of Christianity." An inquiry into Zionism leads us back to the theological roots of the Eurocentric supremacist world view and to colonialism itself, originating in the Reformation with the notions of covenant people and return to Zion. In every historical era, the church has struggled with the tension between its institutional and theological affinity with the structures of power and its core commitment to equality and compassion – between Christian exceptionalism and the question, asked and answered by Jesus, "Who is my neighbour?" The current work on the Palestinian question and on Zionism as a theologically-informed ideology has served to mobilize and renew the churches as a force for social justice. From the 1990s until his death in 2004, Catholic theologian Michael Prior called church leaders and Bible scholars alike to *interrogate,* to use his word, the biblical texts that have provided the theological underpinning for the colonization of Palestine and the dispossession of the indigenous Palestinians.[21] Prior identified not only those biblical texts concerned

21 Michael Prior, *Zionism and the State of Israel, a Moral Inquiry* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

with the conquest of Canaan, which explicitly describe divinely mandated ethnic cleansing and genocide, but also the texts that by enshrining the concepts of "chosenness", specialness, and divine right to territory provide legitimacy for these practices today. The matter of Palestine, therefore, inextricably linked to core issues of theology and hermeneutics, is a powerful entry point for church renewal in our time and cries out to the churches for attention. Here, as in the past, theology and ecclesiology meet in the arena of human affairs. And in this arena, to paraphrase Bonhoeffer, the ecumenical movement and the church encounter one another.

5. Holy restlessness: ecumenism and the prophetic church

The question of the identity and mission of the church is one that has followed, and 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. "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 dichotomy as false – as a failure to understand the true nature of God's incarnation in Jesus Christ. Rather than being separate from or in conflict with one another, he said, the vertical dimension of "God's saving grace in the life of individuals" and the imperative for action in the world were inseparable. "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."[22] In the words of Bonhoeffer scholar Keith Clements, the ecumenical movement finds its true mission not as a functional organization to serve the churches, but rather, as "a community of faith placing itself under the word of God

22 Willem Visser 't Hooft, "The Mandate of the Ecumenical Movement," Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Uppsala, 1968, in Michael Kinnamon, and Brian E. Cope, eds., *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, (Geneva, Grand Rapids: WCC Publications, and Eerdmans, 1997), 38–43.

and therewith coming to an authoritative *decision* on where its obedience to Christ lies."[23]

Ecumenism is a natural and necessary expression of the prophetic church. Emerging in the aftermath of World War I as a movement energized by pacifism, it resurfaced after World War II as a platform for church action for human rights. Today, ecumenism offers a framework for confronting the urgent theological and ecclesial issues facing the churches, and for providing concrete guidance for action. In his 1984 paper "Bonhoeffer and the Relevance of Barmen for Today," de Gruchy takes us back to the birth pangs of the ecumenical movement in the struggles of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth, who asked the question, what is the true church? De Gruchy maintains that the Christology of Barmen, even given the denominational frame in which it was situated, contained the seeds for transcending that very denominationalism. Bonhoeffer pointed the way in his 1935 paper "The Confessing Church and the Ecumenical Movement," where he asks, "what is the ecumenical church?" For Bonhoeffer this question was not academic, but an issue of critical urgency. "The ecumenical movement and the Confessing Church have encountered one another."[24] It is categorical – "There is only a yes or a no to this confession as articulated *in a binding fashion* in the Barmen and Dahlem synodical resolutions."[25] The ecumenical movement, Bonhoeffer argued, is a *form* of the church *itself*, not an *organization of churches*.

Ecumenism was thus a defining concept for Bonhoeffer in his struggle to establish the Confessing Church as the true representative of the German church in the early days of Nazism. Ecumenism is not, he asserted, about churches smoothing out their confessional differences, ignoring or glossing over violations of human rights in the service of inclusion and harmony. It is, rather, *a natural and necessary* expression of the prophetic church. This was an issue confronted painfully by Bonhoeffer in the early 1930s when he appealed to the nascent ecumenical movement to recognize the Confessing

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23 Keith Clements, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Ecumenical Quest*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2015), 169.

24 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Ecumenical Church and the Ecumenical Movement," in Clifford J. Green and Michael P. DeJonge, *The Bonhoeffer Reader* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 401.

25 Ibid, 402.

Church as the one and true representative of the German church and to reject the German Church that had fallen in with the racism and hyper-nationalism of National Socialism. To Bonhoeffer's sorrow, the ecumenical movement chose to remain within the norm of the Protestant mainstream in Europe in which church and nation were effectively merged, refusing to cast off the German church as it had constituted itself under the Nazi regime, despite its betrayal of the fundamentals of the gospels. A similar dynamic was at work in the church struggle in South Africa from the 1960s through the 1980s. It is very much in play today in the churches' confrontation with globalism, in particular in the tension between the global North and South and in the still powerful pull of the church's legacy of white supremacy and Christian triumphalism.

Today, as in Bonhoeffer's time, Christians must decide where their loyalties lie – and it cannot be as Germans, English, or Dutch, or as Baptists, Lutherans, or Catholics. The imperative of this confession transcends obligations to nations, churches or denominations – and here is the echo of Barmen – when they have effectively become servants of the state.[26] Barmen's "call to obey Jesus Christ as Lord 'in the midst of a sinful world,'" writes de Gruchy, "*remains fundamental to the life and task of the Christian and the church*" (emphasis added).[27] This confession, this necessary, and, as are all prophetic acts, difficult realization has the effect of sweeping away the false gospels that draw people away from obedience to the Word of God.[28] At this moment of decision – this *kairos* – the church is called to be not an institution that seeks to preserve itself or its relationships with nations, national identities or particular creeds, but rather, in de Gruchy's words, strongly echoing Bonhoeffer, "the community in which God manifests in

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26 See Ulrich Duchrow, *Conflict over the Ecumenical Movement: Confessing Christ today in the Universal Church* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1981). Duchrow identifies ecumenicism as the vehicle for finding a "new language and new direction for consensus and action" for the churches. Advocating for a broad role for the ecumenical movement with respect to global issues of economic inequality, Duchrow notes the persistence of the "compliance of the European churches, the Protestant churches especially, with the political and legal principle of territorialism." (298).

27 John de Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa,* 128.

28 De Gruchy adds a clarification and a caution – that Barmen "can be misinterpreted and misused unless it is understood not in triumphalist terms but from the perspective of a critical and liberating 'theology of the cross' such as we find in Bonhoeffer."

history."[29] In his description of Bonhoeffer as "a disturber of the ecumenical peace," Clements sets out what the church must do to remain true to its mission in every historical era: "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.'" [30] Surely, this charge to church institutions and individual Christians applies to the churches' current relationship to the potent amalgam of ethnic nationalism and hermeneutic of exceptionalism that is Zionism.

Can the churches of today embrace this enlivening and renewing quality? The Christology of Barmen leads to the inevitable and necessary expression of the truly ecumenical on the part of church at all levels, from congregational, to denominational, to global. And that is what may be meant by a confessing movement, where "confession" is liberated from its denominational framework, its false and ultimately unchristian yoking to a particular creed or church institution. And then – and this is how the theology of Barmen continues to provide a guiding vision – this leads to action: specific, contextual, and prophetic. On the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of the *Message to the people of South Africa*, we turn our gaze from the focus on the heresy of separation to contemplate the broad landscape of intensifying economic inequality, proliferating conflict, environmental degradation, and mass displacement brought about by the global neoliberal order.[31]

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29 John de Gruchy, *A Theological Odyssey: My Life in Writing*, 175.

30 Clements, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Ecumenical Quest,* 290.

31 Other ecclesial terms that have been used in the context of an imperative for action include "radical discipleship," "eucharistic conciliarity," "liturgy after the liturgy," "covenant," and "prophetic action." (U Duchrow, personal communication, December 13, 2019). "Confession" is proposed as best expressing the clear decision for action, in the tradition of *status confessionis* beginning with the Barmen Declaration as discussed here. The word has also appeared as *processus confessionis*, for example During the 23rd General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Debrecen, Hungary, August 1997, when delegates unanimously called for "a *processus confessionis, a committed process of progressive recognition, education, and confession*, within all WARC member churches at all levels regarding world economic justice and ecological

6. A false gospel

For most Christians in the mainstream, it is easy to dismiss as heretical and unbiblical the variety of Christian Zionism that associates modern-day Israel with an End Times theology that envisions the return of Jesus to an earthly Jerusalem. But Christian Zionism takes many forms along the theological and ecumenical spectrum. A powerful form of Christian Zionism is hiding in plain sight in the midst of the Christian mainstream. So-called Liberal Zionism, embraced by the great majority mainline Protestants, partakes of church theology as laid out by the South Africans in 1985. Terms such as "interfaith dialogue," "reconciliation with the Jewish people," "balanced discourse" and "dual narratives" serve up a false power equivalency between oppressed and oppressor, elevating the comfort of preserving harmony with Jewish institutional leadership over the discomfort of standing with those who are the victims of the policies directly or indirectly supported by that same Jewish leadership. They are accompanied by diplomatic tropes such as "two states living side by side in peace and security" and "land for peace," which have been employed for close to half a century to mask and indeed advance the political reality of colonization and ethnic cleansing. On personal and institutional levels, Christians observe unwritten rules effectively forbidding criticism of Israel and questioning of Zionism. Like church theology in the apartheid years, liberal Zionism serves to preserve the existing structure of oppression. Theologically, Zionism is a false gospel – in the words of Kairos Palestine: "We declare that any use of the Bible to legitimize or support political options and positions that are based upon injustice, imposed by one person on another, or by one people on another, transforms religion into human ideology and strip the Word of God of its holiness, its universality and truth."[32] Ecclesiologically, liberal Zionism constitutes a false church, seeking by "keeping the peace" to avoid the necessary division brought about by standing up to tyranny and injustice. This was a fundamental concept for

destruction." (emphasis added). This description expresses the process leading up to the confession and the required action following from it. See D. J. Smit, "What Does *Status Confessionis Mean?*" in G. D. Cloete and D.J. Smit, eds., *A Moment of Truth: The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church 1982* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 7–32.

32 "Moment of Truth: A word of love, faith and hope from the heart of Palestinian suffering."

Bonhoeffer, articulated early in his career in *Sanctorum Communio,* where he considers the question of what constitutes the true church community. "It was an understanding of community," writes Keith Clements, "that not only embraced but *required* difference, in encounter with the other" (emphasis in original).[33] In *Sanctorum Communio* Bonhoeffer introduced his principle of the unity of the church:

> 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 more powerfully the dissimilarity manifests itself in the struggle, the stronger the objective unity.[34]

Thus, we return to de Gruchy's implicit warning, 50 years after the *Message to the people of South Africa,* that we must be ever wary of efforts to create a false peace in the name of church unity. Bonhoeffer appealed in vain to the ecumenical movement to challenge the heresy of the German churches. The world had to wait until after World War II for the movement to find itself. Writing about the ethical imperative driving ecumenical activism, Scottish theologian and foremost proponent of public theology Duncan Forrester references the historic 1993 Rønde Consultation "Costly Unity: Koinonia and Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation." Convened by the World Council of Churches, the purpose of the consultation, in the words of report editors Thomas Best and Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, was to "move beyond the historic ecumenical division between the search for the visible unity of the church and the churches' common calling to prophetic witness and service."[35] "Cheap unity," states the consultation report, "avoids morally contested issues because they would disturb the unity of the church."[36]

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33 Keith Clements, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Ecumenical Quest,* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2015), 61.

34 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in Keith Clements, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Ecumenical Quest*, 61–62.

35 Thomas Best and Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, eds. "Costly Unity: Koinonia and Justice, Peace and Creation," (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1993), v.

36 Duncan Forrester, *Truthful Action: Explorations in Practical Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 187.

7. The necessary bondage of the church

Zionism is inextricably linked to colonialism. *It is a form of colonialism*. To engage with Zionism is to step onto a theological, hermeneutical and ecclesiological battleground, beginning with revisiting the church's relationship with the Jewish people. It calls for an honest re-evaluation of how Christians, individually and institutionally, have attempted to resolve their guilt about the persecution of the Jews at the hands of the church. A key component of this effort, involving the aforementioned rules that have come to govern Christian-Jewish relations in the post-Holocaust period, has been an effort to purge Christianity of supercessionism. This has included avoiding even the appearance of describing the Old Testament as "tribal" in contrast to the universalism of the New Testament. However, much it breaks the rules to say so, however, it must be acknowledged that the Old Testament narrative incorporates a colonialist ethic. As such it has informed and justified colonialism and its attendant racism, oppression and tyranny on the part of the Christian West throughout history. The current recrudescence of colonialism in the form of political Zionism presents an opportunity for the church to revisit how it chooses to confront this shameful legacy. Confronted now with the grim reality of what Zionism has wrought, and with the frighteningly broad implications of what support for Zionism means for humanity at large, Christians must bring a fresh moral, hermeneutical and theological perspective to the age-old issue of its relationship to its Jewish roots and to the Jewish people.

For Jews, what has come to be known as Holocaust theology established the Nazi genocide and the creation of the State of Israel as dual pivot points of contemporary Jewish identity. These two events have also defined the relationship between Christians and Jews after World War II. Christians are enjoined (once more, invoking the rules) to accept that Jewish identity and security depend on Jewish hegemony in Palestine, and that Jewish suffering over the millennia renders the Jewish state innocent of the offences committed in the name of the Zionist project. Now, confronted with Israel's historic and continuing crimes, Christians, reminded of their duty to do for the least of these, must move on from the guilt that has led to support for Zionism and to a betrayal of core principles of their faith. Standing before the embodiment of the greed and tyranny of Roman occupation, Jesus declared, "Destroy this Temple and I will build it up

again in three days." To ensure that the message would be clear to the early readers of the gospel, the narrator explains: "He spoke of the Temple of his body" (Jn 2:19–21). The Temple and all that it represented was to be supplanted by a society based on equality, compassion, and radical inclusion. Today, confronted with the racism and exceptionalism of the Zionist project, Christians are called to be unapologetically Christian in rejecting this particular embodiment of Empire, opposing it, as they must all other Temples that have been built on the suffering of the oppressed and the dispossessed. Like Jesus was in his time, those today who speak up for the occupied and the oppressed pay a price, in this case the accusation of failing in their duty to atone for sins against the Jews, and, increasingly, of anti-Semitism itself. It remains for each Christian, in particular clergy and church leaders, to choose whether or not to pick up this cross.

The stakes could not be higher for the churches themselves and for a world in desperate need of moral compass. "The struggle against racism" wrote Baldwin Sjollema, the first Director of the World Council of Churches' Programme to Combat Racism, "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" (emphasis added).[37] In "Enduring significance of Barmen" de Gruchy furnishes this astonishing quote from Karl Barth: "The fight," wrote the principal author of Barmen, "is not about the freedom, but about the necessary bondage, of the conscience … of the Church, i.e. about the preservation, rediscovery and authentication of the true Christian faith."[38] The "fight" came to a head with the establishment of the Confessing Church, perhaps most acutely in the example of the German pastors who attempted to remain "neutral" rather than to take the radical stand demanded by Bonhoeffer. De Gruchy has suggested that the "liberal indifference" or passive compliance of church leaders of that time represented the "false church" even more than the outright collaborationism of the *Deutsche Kristen*.[39]

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37 Baldwin Sjollema, *Never Bow to Racism: A Personal Account of the Ecumenical Struggle,* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2015).

38 De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa,* 124.

39 De Gruchy de Gruchy, *A Theological Odyssey: My Life in Writing,* 23.

Writing about the church struggle in the Apartheid years, de Gruchy concludes his 2018 paper with these reflections:

> The publication of the *Message* drew a new line in the sand. Christians and churches were no longer to be understood as divided by denomination, tradition, or ethnicity, but by their response to the "false-gospel" of apartheid and their witness to the reconciling gospel of Jesus Christ. What divided the true from the false Church was support for or opposition to apartheid. Those familiar with the witness of Bonhoeffer during the German Church Struggle will immediately recall that this was precisely the challenge he presented to the ecumenical movement. Thus, with the publication of the *Message* the SACC [South African Council of Churches] was no longer a consultative council for inter-church relations or joint statements on social issues. It had joined hands with the CI [Christian Institute] in becoming part of a confessing movement.[40]

The parallels with our times are compelling.

"*What divided the true from the false church then was support for or opposition to apartheid.*"

The debate about Palestine has intensified in proportion to growing awareness of Israel's human rights violations and flouting of international law. As the controversy deepens, the divisions within the Christian world along theological and ideological lines have sharpened. Like other issues that have divided Christians, such as those concerning gender and sexuality, this causes pain. But the discord and the discomfort is indicative of a healthy church. We are reminded of Jesus' proclamation about having come to bring division, in contrast to the false "peace" of the absence of conflict. Clearly with Jesus in mind, Martin Luther King Jr. in his letter to his "fellow clergyman," wrote about the importance of allowing society's underlying tensions to surface, in order that society might move from "a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice." [41] The true church, Bonhoeffer reminds us, is

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40 De Gruchy, "*Revisiting the Message to the people of South Africa*."

41 Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," [Online]. Available: https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html [Accessed: June 9,

the "actively confessing and struggling church."[42] We can expect the controversy and the division to increase, in society at large as well as within the churches, as Israel continues to advance its political and economic control of historic Palestine, resistance at the grassroots in Palestine and among its supporters worldwide gains momentum, and grassroots pressure for effective action works its way upward in governmental and ecclesial bodies.

With the publication of the "Message" the SACC was no longer a consultative council for inter-church relations or joint statements on social issues. It had joined hands with the CI in becoming part of a confessing movement.

The 2009 Kairos call of the Palestinian Christians has generated a response from churches on every continent, setting the stage for a revived ecumenical movement. In conferences and from the pulpits, in congregational study groups and mission committees, through dissemination of study materials, denominational policy statements, political advocacy, direct action (e.g. divestment of church pension funds from companies profiting from the colonization of Palestine), and pilgrimages to the region to witness and support the Palestinian struggle, each church has responded from the context of its own confession and struggle. Nowhere has this been truer than in Southern Africa. In 201 the Southern African churches invited the Palestinian Christians to Johannesburg and Cape Town to officially embrace Kairos Palestine. This signalled the rebirth of Kairos in Southern Africa, having gone to slumber, according to some who participated in that church struggle, following the fall of Apartheid in 1994. Leaders of the re-energized Southern African Kairos movement have likened the global response of churches to the Palestinian call to the vigorous response of the churches of the world to the appeal of the South African churches in the 1980s, a response which is credited with helping to move world governments to support the economic sanctions that brought the Pretoria government to the table. The Palestinians, indeed the world at large, await the action of the churches, united ecumenically, to do for Israel and the

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42 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Confessing Church and the Ecumenical Movement," in Clifford J. Green and Michael P. DeJonge, *The Bonhoeffer Reader* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013) 409.

Palestinians what the church did for South Africa, liberating both white and black from the evil of apartheid.[43]

8. Good news in our time

Baldwin Sjollema, documenting the bold actions of the World Council of Churches in combatting racism in the mid- to late-20th century, writes, "It was clear that the churches could perform a role that no other group could undertake – a role that could be made more credible by international participation."[44] Duncan Forrester cites Desmond Tutu's often repeated view that "apartheid was too strong for divided churches; and in the course of the struggles against it there was often a new experience of unity, *new ecumenical ground was sometimes broken*" (emphasis added).[45] Forrester quotes from Hoedemaker's introduction to the Rønde report, in which the Dutch theologian makes a striking connection between ecumenism and liberation theologian Leonardo Boff's notion of ecclesiogenesis: "The human moral struggle, with all its pressures, sorrows and hopes, is a *basic ecclesiogenetic power*" (emphasis added). The churches are tested and renewed in every age, continues Hoedemaker: "A confessional ecclesial tradition consists of a series of just such occasions of ecclesiogenesis." Indeed, church unity is formed *only* by "being challenged and tested in

43 Here the word "united" must be understood as the "costly unity" envisioned by Bonhoeffer and then at Rønde six decades later. The Palestinian Christians express this well in the 2009 Kairos document: "The mission of the Church is prophetic, to speak the Word of God courageously, honestly and lovingly in the local context and in the midst of daily events."

44 Baldwin Sjollema, *Never Bow to Racism,* 29. Noting that at its 1998 meeting in Harare, the WCC "linked globalization to colonialism and included a critique of neo-liberalism as a competing vision to the *oikumene,"* Sjollema issues a challenge: *"*Issues of power and capitalism will have to remain on the agenda of the ecumenical movement if we are serious in overcoming racism." (Sjollema, *Never Bow to Racism*, 196) Sjollema, who led what was arguably the WCC's most courageous program in the form of the Programme to Combat Racism, in the implementation of which it successfully defied the strident opposition of some member churches, in his 2015 memoir laments the WCC's present diminished ability to achieve the consensus necessary to launch a program such as the PCR. Sjollema suggests that "other forms and expressions of ecumenism do exist and may take its place." (Sjollema, *Never Bow to Racism,* 47)

45 Duncan Forrester, *The Church and Morality*, 20.

people's actual moral struggles … on the ultimate questions relating to injustice, violence and ecological disaster."[46]

The response of churches worldwide to the Palestinian call has established the basis for an ecumenical movement for our time. The network for this movement exists. It is the churches, at local, national and international levels, through established ecclesial structures as well as in spontaneously generated grassroots organizations, often allied with student, labour, and human rights groups that have mobilized in support of the Palestinian struggle. A global network of organizations has officially affiliated with and stand in solidarity with Palestinian Christian organizations such as the Jerusalem-based Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre and the Bethlehem-based Kairos Palestine and its global arm, Global Kairos for Justice. Other local, national, and denominationally-based groups have established connections with human rights, healthcare, academic and fair-trade organizations in Palestine. The active support provided by this network includes financial assistance, education and awareness-building about the Palestinian struggle, promotion of Kairos theology, and support for direct action for Palestinian rights. The Palestinian call for Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) has been endorsed and actively supported by many of the organizations comprising this network. This call for nonviolent action from Palestinian civil society is steadily gaining momentum. The over 4.5 million strong Southern African provincial synod of the Anglican Church (ACSA) has adopted the BDS boycott of Israel. ACSA represents Anglican Christian communities in southern African countries including South Africa, Namibia, Mozambique and Angola. After years of heated internal controversy, Protestant denominations in the United States and elsewhere in the Western hemisphere have officially endorsed BDS, with more to follow. At this writing the Methodist Church in the United Kingdom prepares to consider a resolution to divest from companies profiting from Israel's colonization of Palestine.

The matter of Palestine presents challenges not faced by earlier struggles in which the churches took an active role. Consensus about the evil of racism in the cases of the black liberation movement in the U.S.A, the

46 Best and Granberg-Michaelson, *Costly Unity, 6.*

anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, and the anti-colonial struggles of the mid-20th century ultimately overcame any lingering claims for white supremacy. Similarly, efforts to legitimize structures of racism on the basis of the Bible or divine right did not prevail against the overwhelming drive for equality and human rights of the second half of the 20th century. But the gradient is much steeper when it comes to Israel's oppression of the Palestinians. In the case of South Africa, for example, only the Afrikaners believed themselves to be God's chosen people, claiming a biblical mandate for the dispossession and virtual enslavement of the indigenous black Africans. In the case of Palestine, however, whether on biblical or historical grounds or both, there is virtually universal acceptance of the superior right of the Jews to the land. The Old Testament is accepted as a historical document with respect to the divine promise of land and as an accurate account of past conquest and settlement that justifies a "return" to reclaim the homeland. In this view the current political situation is understood as a "conflict" between competing claims for territory, rather than as a colonial settler project carried out against an indigenous population. In order to free the churches to act for Palestine, therefore, there is a need to clear away the myths and misinformation about the actual nature of the situation, to answer the charge of anti-Semitism brought increasingly to thwart Christians' action for Palestine, and to take on the theological and hermeneutic issues directly through study and discernment.[47]

The ability of the church to act directly in human affairs has always been hard won, a struggle as old as the ecumenical movement itself. It comes as the result of the tension, well known to Barth and Bonhoeffer in their time and to subsequent generations of prophets, between the desire to achieve

47 The author recalls a 2015 workshop held in Johannesburg on Israel and Palestine organized by the South African Council of Churches, attended by clergy and church official from across the denominational spectrum most with little knowledge of the situation. I listened to a bishop of an apostolic church, having just heard the testimony of Palestinian theologians on the issue of the land in the New Testament, and the witness of South Africans who had served in the WCC's Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine, declare "we need to go back and re-read our Bibles!" More heartening still, he and many others in the room were asking the question, "How can we bring this back to our people in our churches and communities?" Even more important was the follow-up question asked by this same bishop: "But how then do we meet their objections that by questioning the actions of the State of Israel and the divine right of the Jewish people to possess the land, *we are going against the Word of God*?"

interdenominational consensus on issues of doctrine and practice and to maintain harmony with the powers and principalities on the one hand, and, in the words of the Rønde Consultation, the "calling to witness and service to the world." The power of ecumenism lies in its willingness to grapple with this tension in every historical period, whenever the church is confronted with the abuses and tyranny of power. More than the opposition of governments and rulers, however, it is the church's tendency to ally with or be assimilated into the structures of power, as well as its desire to maintain peace within its ranks, that must be confronted and not allowed to distract from the true mission of the church of Jesus Christ. The church was born to – was born *in* – this tension. "It is in times which are out of joint, where wickedness and lawlessness triumph, it is in these times that the gospel makes itself known." If there is one lesson to be learned from the *Message to the people of South Africa* and the towering documents of prophetic theology that followed, it is that the church has done it before, and the church can do it again. This is good news indeed.

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