

## Part 3

### **APARTHEID: A Biblical/Theological Reflection**

“We affirm that the continued oppression of the Palestinian people remains... a matter of theological urgency and represents a sin in violation of the message of the biblical prophets and the Gospel, and that all efforts to defend or legitimate the oppression of the Palestinian people, whether passive or active, through silence, word or deed by the Christian community, represent a fundamental denial of the Gospel.”

*Declaration for a Just Peace Between Palestine and Israel*, Adopted by the 33<sup>rd</sup> General Synod of the United Church of Christ, July 2021

In 2009, Palestinian Christian leaders representing a wide range of denominations issued the historic document, “[A Moment of Truth](#): A Word of Faith, Hope and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering.” The profoundly theological document—grounded in Biblical texts—is a bold, prophetic call naming Palestinian realities as they are and declaring the leaders’ commitment to life in accord with God’s purpose for all to live in love and free from oppression.

In 2020, [Kairos Palestine](#) and [Global Kairos for Justice](#), a worldwide coalition born in response to A Moment of Truth, released “[Cry for Hope](#): A Call to Decisive Action.” Cry for Hope is an urgent plea to Christians, churches and ecumenical bodies “for decisive action on a matter that we believe relates to the integrity of our Christian faith.” Cry for Hope calls the global church to seven specific actions, insisting, “It is time for the international community... to recognize Israel as an apartheid state in terms of international law.”

#### **Apartheid: a contradiction of Biblical faith**

Apartheid is not only a crime described in international law. It contradicts core principles of Biblical faith. The Church is called to revisit our holy texts, where we read that in the beginning God created *Adam*—humankind—in God’s own image (Genesis 1:26-28). To refuse to recognize the humanity—the uniqueness, the beauty and the reflection of God’s image—in any one group is a sin.

The Hebrew Bible reflects in large part Israel’s response to life lived under the occupation of one empire after another. Texts affirm the peoples’ faith in the God who liberates the oppressed. God’s self-revealing declaration—*I AM WHO I AM*—appears in Israel’s origin story, when God proclaims, “I have observed the misery

of my people... I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters... I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them (Exodus 3:7-8).” To ignore a people’s cry for justice is a sin.

Later, when leaders began to misuse their power and impose laws that divided the people by favoring some over others, God inspired the prophets to cry out, “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream” (Amos 5:24; see also, Micah 6:8; Isaiah 58:6-8). Perhaps the Book of Daniel records the clearest of the Bible’s calls to resist the empires of this world, insisting that God’s sovereignty reigns over all the “kingdoms of mortals (5:21).”

We remember that Jesus was born under the yoke of the Roman Empire. His ministry—the words he spoke, the deeds he accomplished, the relationships he nurtured, both the blessings and the woes he declared—are best understood in the context of a people suffering harsh oppression. The sermon Jesus preached in the synagogue in Nazareth—to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and setting free those who are oppressed—was his social manifesto (Luke 4:18-19). It shaped his ministry and led, eventually, to his crucifixion.

Set free through his forgiveness, grace and promise, Jesus’ followers took up the charge, carrying the Gospel of God’s love and liberating presence “to the ends of the earth”—regarding no one from a human point of view but rather embodying, like Christ, the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:16,18) and breaking down walls that divide (Ephesians 2:14).

For the Church to abide any system of injustice, including apartheid, is anathema to God and a rejection of the Gospel.

### **Apartheid: church theology in the service of state theology**

After the Christian faith was imperialized during the time of Emperor Constantine, the Church often served the goals of the state. When Western powers began their global dominance through unchecked capitalism, colonialism and the racism of white supremacy, the Church joined in imposing three evils upon the conquered populations: exploitation of their resources, apartheid, and extinction. History is replete with examples of the Church’s willing embrace of this harsh reality, using its political influence and its mission in the service of the state and committing egregious misuses of the Bible in the process. Only now is the Church in North America more fully coming to terms with theologies that supported—and political positions that furthered—the genocide of indigenous peoples.

The world is still suffering the consequences of two more recent examples of the Church using theology in the service of the state: “German Christians” in Nazi Germany, and the white Lutheran and Reformed Churches in South Africa. Each articulated and promoted a racist theology, one supporting the supremacist political system of National Socialism, the other supporting the apartheid laws of the white supremacist regime of South Africa.

Today, Christian Zionism likewise twists the biblical notions of justice, peace and reconciliation to advance a political theology that rejects Palestinian human rights and endorses Israel’s illegal colonization through military aid and diplomatic support. Other church bodies, whose theologies encourage a “balanced” perspective and promote a “dual narrative” approach, neglect the grossly asymmetric power between the occupier and the occupied and thus support the worsening situation on the ground in Palestine and Israel. Still others, valuing their relationships with Jewish friends and colleagues and in acknowledgement of the Church’s responsibility for antisemitism, culminating in the horrors of the Holocaust—refrain from criticizing the state of Israel’s apartheid regime.

### **Apartheid: a *status confessionis***

In 1933, German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer declared that the Nazi regime’s denial of the rights of Jews and the interference of the state into matters of religion placed the church in *status confessionis*. The term is Latin, meaning “confessional status.” To describe an issue as *status confessionis* means that taking a clear stand on a particular issue is essential to the nature of the Church—that the Church’s position either affirms or denies the heart and the meaning of the Gospel. The Barmen Declaration, adopted the next year, affirmed Bonhoeffer’s position, insisting on the church’s obligation to stand up to injustice and to resist ideologies of tyranny.

When at their 2021 General Synod, the United Church of Christ (UCC) [declared](#) that Israel’s oppression of the Palestinian people is “a matter of theological urgency and represents a sin in violation of the message of the biblical prophets and the Gospel, and that all efforts to defend or legitimate the oppression of the Palestinian people... represent a fundamental denial of the Gospel,” the church effectively declared a *status confessionis*. The UCC Declaration links the obligation to reject the oppression of the Palestinian people with fundamentals of the Christian faith, saying, “Therefore, we reject any theology or ideology including Christian Zionism, supercessionism, antisemitism or anti-Islam bias that would privilege or exclude any one nation, race, culture or religions within God’s universal economy of grace.”

The UCC wasn't the first to make such a declaration. In 1964, the first General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, Willem Visser 't Hooft, stated that racism, like apartheid, constitutes a *status confessionis* for the churches. In 1977, the Lutheran World Federation declared that "apartheid created a *status confessionis* for the church" and in 1984 suspended the white Lutheran Churches in Southern Africa who practiced apartheid. In 1982, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches declared apartheid incompatible with Christian belief and suspended the member churches practicing racial separation. The World Communion of Reformed Churches in 2017 affirmed "that with respect to the situation of injustice and suffering that exists in Palestine, and the cry of the Palestinian Christian community, that the integrity of Christian faith and praxis is at stake."

The situation in Palestine/Israel is rapidly worsening. Now is the time for the global Church—and each of its constituent bodies—to recognize Israel as an apartheid state and to actively and nonviolently resist its apartheid laws, policies and practices. Why? Because they are violations of international law and, more essentially, because they contradict the Gospel and the blessed community for which we work and pray, "on earth as it is in heaven."

*"Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream"*  
(Amos 5:24).