

Part 4

APARTHEID: What does the Lord require of the Global Church?

“Justice is turned back,
and righteousness stands at a distance;
for truth stumbles in the public square,
and uprightness cannot enter.
Truth is lacking...

The LORD saw it, and it displeased him
that there was no justice.
He saw that there was no one,
and was appalled that there was no one
to intervene...”

Isaiah 59:14-16

The realities of Israel’s apartheid have been described from every perspective: legal, social, political, biblical and theological. The cries of Palestinians have exposed their long and brutal experience of apartheid. As the Prophet Isaiah might proclaim, “The Lord sees it, too”—the injustice, truth stumbling in the public square.

Faced with the undeniable truth of Israel’s apartheid, we know what the Lord requires of the Global Church: “To do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8).”

The church has named and resisted the sin and injustice of apartheid in the past. **The church is called to rise up once again.**

Apartheid: Some churches’ responses

Among the churches that admit to the reality of Israeli oppression, there have been a variety of responses that fall short in addressing the root cause of the Palestinians’ suffering. They say that use of the word *apartheid*:

“Is not helpful”

But words matter. Churches are called to use the word *apartheid*, whether they find it helpful or not. The word *apartheid* points—in both its definition in international law and its description of realities on the ground—to a truth. Truth matters, and it matters most when it is named. As churches recognize but hesitate to use the word, we fail to name a fundamental motivation for our taking up the ministry of Jesus “to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to captives, to let the oppressed go free (Luke 4:16ff).” Further, to denounce apartheid affirms Palestinian experience and motivates the international community to explore, embrace and strengthen the framework of international law in a time when it is being eroded through systems of racism, authoritarianism, and other oppressions based on economic, patriarchal, political, and military power—including antisemitism. To call out and denounce Israeli apartheid is extremely helpful.

“Burns bridges and stops dialogue with partners”

It’s true. By taking a clearly expressed stand against systemic injustice, bridges will be burned. Treasured ecumenical and interfaith relations may be broken, especially with those who benefit from the *status quo*. But to seek to be more “diplomatic,” to seek conciliatory approaches in a situation grounded in asymmetrical power imposed economically and militarily, is to avoid the harsh reality of Palestinians. We can expect that taking a prophetic stance will be disruptive to the dynamic of traditional dialogues. Yet, it is faithful: “Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue... (Deuteronomy 16:20).” Churches are called to trust, in times like this, that new dialogue partners will emerge, that former partners may be fruitfully challenged, and that conversations—rooted in truth, compassion, humility and integrity—will realize the promise in Psalm 85:10 “Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.”

“Should be left to the courts to decide”

Some claim that it is not for the church to determine if the crime of apartheid is being perpetrated, that the church should not pre-judge. But there is a Biblical imperative to raise a prophetic voice when an injustice arises. It is precisely the role of the church to hold the nations accountable. At our best, churches and religious communities have called for the highest standards and insisted on the application of international law and human rights when they are grounded on Gospel values.

“Is bad strategy”

Some churches have argued that it is not a helpful strategy for the church to press for the application of international laws and human rights conventions when describing Israel’s policies and practices as apartheid. But drawing attention to laws and conventions agreed upon by the international community is more than a strategic calculation or a political strategy. It is the church’s faithful embrace of every resource that addresses the root cause of a systemic oppression. It is the church’s faithful witness to civil society, world leaders and global institutions that the church is not removed from, but rather a part of, the human community.

“Can you help us?”

The witness of Palestinian Christians insists that the Global Church speak up, take action, and join the world’s growing recognition of Israeli apartheid. Because of their witness, no church can say, “We did not know”—or knowing say, “Our nation’s history impedes us from taking a stand.” In their extraordinary plea, A Moment of Truth, our Palestinian siblings offered this “word to the Churches of the world” [KP 6]: *We ask our sister Churches not to offer a theological cover-up for the injustice we suffer, for the sin imposed upon us. Our question to our brothers and sisters in the Churches today is: Are you able to help us get our freedom back?*

How will your church, council, conference, region or synod respond? The biblical answer is clear. The theological answer is clear. Neutrality is not a faithful response. Denying or ignoring the reality of Israel as an Apartheid State according to the definitions of international law and ethical discernment is not a faithful response. Complicity with a situation of systemic oppression in the name of interfaith solidarity is not a faithful response. Theological and or biblical justification of oppression and injustice is both sin and heresy.

May these words of contrition be an example to all of us in the Global Church, as our Palestinian friends confessed in A Moment of Truth:

Perhaps as individuals or as heads of Churches, we were silent when we should have raised our voices to condemn the injustice and share in the suffering. This is a time of repentance for our silence, indifference, lack of communion, either because we did not persevere in our mission in this land and abandoned it, or because we did not think and do enough to reach a new and integrated vision and remained divided, contradicting our witness and weakening our word. Repentance for our concern with our institutions, sometimes at the expense of our mission, thus silencing the prophetic voice given by the Spirit of the Churches [KP 5.2].

May our faith compel us to intervene to right injustice, lest our God be appalled (ref. Is.59).