

*Assessing "A Moment of Truth"*

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On December 15, 2009, a dozen Christian patriarchs and heads of churches in Jerusalem welcomed the Kairos Palestine 2009 document promulgated four days earlier. They said, "we hear the cry of our children." When the global church joins in hearing that cry, as we should, we need to keep in mind its paradigm, the Kairos Document from Soweto in 1985. Against that background, Kairos Palestine 2009 offers some encouragement, but also illustrates how Christian witness to the task of peace needs to get over its tendency to find villains rather than make progress.

The new document speaks from an "absence of all hope" in the present political leadership, especially in Palestine, Israel, and the Arab world. Yet it asserts both faith and hope in the light of God's love. Spoken from the heart of a spirit-deadening situation, we honor this cry for its defiant assertion of vocation and conviction.

Israel can also take something from this honest expression of humiliation, despondency, and alienation. Whatever necessities Israel may face in dealing with the Palestinian community, both humanitarian values and the pragmatic interest in building a future neighboring state counsel minimizing the degradation and abuse that drives the stranger into such a condition.

Kairos Palestine 2009 sets out a program for the churches in North America and elsewhere in the world: (1) to repent of "fundamentalist theological positions" that support Israeli oppression of the Palestinians; (2) to help recover the Palestinians' freedom; (3) to "come and see"; and, (4) to use boycott and "disinvestment" as tools by which to "take a position of truth with regard to Israel's occupation of Palestinian land."

Each of these familiar themes makes a seductive appeal to the mainline Western churches to support a non-violent version of the Palestinian cause, yet each also embodies the kind of faulty analysis that only prolongs conflict.

In the first case, we agree that Christian support of Israel can turn uncritical and harmful when wedded to an ideological or theological agenda that overrules evidence with programmatic postures. But the document ignores serious, faithful Christian assessments of the Jewish relationship to land that do not distort scripture and do not support an unjust occupation.

Secondly, the centuries-long subjugation of Palestinian Arabs is a painful reality that requires redress. A request to "get our freedom back," however, implies that there was once a Palestinian freedom that Israel alone has abrogated. That misrepresents history. The document's ill-defined assertion of "our land," on behalf of Christian and Muslim Palestinians, panders to a misconception that has repeatedly stalled progress:

the myth that Israel is an illegitimate imperialist interloper that alone stands in the way of Palestinian autonomy and freedom.

Thirdly, the invitation to “come and see” allegedly includes “Palestinians and Israelis alike,” but the authors’ portrait of Israel offers no reassurance that Palestinian Christian guides will help the pilgrim to understand Israeli realities. The document’s call for education and dialogue should start with a serious mission, to involve Jews and Muslims in helping Christians to portray the situation on the ground.

Finally, the call for boycott and divestment by the churches, coupled with “a system of economic sanctions...against Israel” by the international community, evokes the effective anti-apartheid action of the world community in South Africa. This attempted parallel brings us up squarely against shortcomings in the Kairos Palestine 2009 document.

Palestinian society in 2010 is unlike the townships of South Africa, despite superficial resemblances. In South Africa, a white minority arbitrarily imposed a comprehensive range of discriminatory laws against the black majority. But Palestine is not a part of Israel. Nor did the current occupation administration arise as a result of Israel arbitrarily imposing discriminatory laws against Palestinians. Rather, it is one dimension of a generations-long war between the Arab nations and Israel, and of Israel’s struggle to find effective security measures for its own citizens, Arab and Jewish alike.

The Kairos Palestine 2009 document is also unlike its South African predecessor. While it speaks of a peaceful future, it fails to envision necessary steps to achieve it: there is no acknowledgment of Israel as a legitimate state, no address of the infrastructure still required for a Palestinian state, and no imperative for negotiations to begin to arrange those goals. Instead, the document offers only a vague attack against any “religious state,” despite the roots of Palestinian Christianity in European nation-states whose religious foundations are a matter of history. In the case of Kairos Soweto 1985, as in the perspectives of Martin Luther King, Jr, Gandhi, and Jesus, programmatic action was designed to prophesy a world remade, not just to complain about the world as it is.

The Kairos Document of 1985 can guide us toward meeting today’s challenges effectively. We need its commitment to social analysis and political acumen. Without the advantage of majority that helped Black South Africans, it is even more dangerous for Palestinian Christians to speak the truth boldly about the regimes under which they live and suffer, Israeli, Palestinian, and transnational. Honest support from other churches will include the encouragement and political cover necessary for the local church to be fully prophetic. Without a credible understanding of the history and dynamics of the conflict, though, other churches will be ill-equipped to offer those gifts to the Palestinians.

Another crucial element is the courageous and incisive recognition in 1985 that the gospel’s word of hope must also speak hope effectively to opponents, who are themselves “desperately fearful.” Resistance that does not envision a just and safe place for “the enemy” can only ever be met with greater opposition, and love that does not cast out the fear underlying conflict cannot be perfect love. We must be engaged with the most basic fears and hopes of Israelis and Jews, as well as of Palestinians.

Perhaps most of all, we need the humility of 1985 to invite dialogue and revision. The global church cannot only be an audience and a lobbyist for Palestinian perspectives; we are called to be peace-makers. Today the conflict is not within the church, but a tragedy to which the church, and especially the global church through its partnership with Palestinian Christians, can profitably bring a “third voice,” beholden to neither Palestinian nor Jewish nationalism, but committed to all God’s peoples in the region. That voice will emerge from exacting dialogue and interaction among all in the church who commit themselves to the cause of the gospel in this conflict. We must desist from vilification, and become engaged with one another.

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