

# Title: The Moment of Grace and Opportunity: The Global Kairos Movement for Peace in the Holy Land<sup>1</sup>

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## A Moment of Truth for South Africa

*“This is the KAIROS, the moment of grace and opportunity, the favorable time in which God issues a challenge to decisive action.”*

—“The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church,” South Africa, 1985

By the mid-1980s the South African government was contemplating its own fall. The outlawed and exiled African National Congress was escalating the armed struggle. The townships seethed in the face of massive repression as the government desperately tried to hold on to power. World governments were joining the global movement to sanction the country economically and isolate it politically. And then, finally, definitively, the church acted. In 1985 a group of South African pastors and theologians brought out a prophetic document that not only took an unequivocal stand against the Apartheid regime but also spoke out against the neutrality of the English-speaking churches. Titled “Challenge to the Church, A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa,” this prophetic document is commonly known as the South Africa Kairos document. Whereas previous theological documents critical of Apartheid had already condemned it as a “false gospel” and “sinful” (“The Message to the People of South Africa,” issued by the South African Council of Churches in 1968) and as a “heresy” (The “Belhar Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church,” 1982), the Kairos Document went a step further and declared the apartheid regime illegitimate from a moral and theological point of view. Thus, it declared, it is a Christian duty “to refuse to cooperate with tyranny and to do whatever we can to remove it.”

Describing Kairos as “the moment of grace and opportunity, the favorable time in which God issues a challenge to decisive action,” the document clearly articulated a *moral* imperative to recognize the evil and to take direct and clear action to address it. But true to its title, the main thrust of this historic document was to present a *theological* imperative -- challenging the faithful, in the words of one of its authors, theologian Charles Villa-Vicencio, to “wrench the church from its slumbers.” “A church, wrote Villa-Vicencio several years after the publication of the Kairos document, “trapped in the dominant structures of oppression, controlled by entrenched bureaucracy, [and] conditioned by a history of compromise” at its peril ignores the voices of the oppressed (Villa-Vicencio 1988, 201). The document addressed itself directly to the South African church’s history of complicity with Apartheid, describing and analyzing the “church

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theology” that had rendered the church ineffective against the racist policies of the government. It announced that a profound crisis for the church had arrived -- a “moment of truth,” in the words of the document, “that shows us up for what we really are. There will be no place to hide and no way of pretending to be what we are not in fact. At this moment in South Africa the Church is about to be shown up for what it really is and no cover-up will be possible” (Brown, 1990).

This willingness of the church to take a clear, bold stance on an urgent issue of social justice was presaged in 1982 when the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) meeting in Ottawa Canada declared the world body in *status confessionis* because of its failure to directly confront the Apartheid practices of its South African member churches. The WARC duly suspended the South African member churches and was soon joined by churches on a global level in support of those South Africans, church-related as well as secular, committed to fundamental political change. The case can be made that the support of the global church for the resistance to Apartheid accelerated the political and economic sanctions against the state that brought about the change in government in 1994.

### **Kairos: Reading the Signs of the Times**

What is most important about the South African document is that it commits most of its analysis to the way the injustice had been supported by the institution of religion. In their critique of what it terms “church theology,” the authors take aim at the appropriation of words and concepts, such as *reconciliation*, that amount to a betrayal of core theological precepts. “In our situation in South Africa today,” they wrote, “it would be totally unChristian to plead for reconciliation and peace before the present injustices have been removed. Any such plea plays into the hands of the oppressor by trying to persuade those of us who are oppressed to accept our oppression and to become reconciled to the intolerable crimes that are committed against us. That is not Christian reconciliation, it is sin. No reconciliation is possible in South Africa *without justice*” (Brown, 1990 italics in original).

The South African document was followed by “Kairos Central America: A Challenge to the Churches of the World” (1988); and “The Road to Damascus: Kairos and Conversion” (1989). Developed by theologians, church workers and lay people, these documents reject the kind of “dialogue” or “reform” that functions to preserve rather than remove the structural injustice embedded in the political system, actions taken by governments in an attempt to remain in power, and most importantly, to maintain the injustice. These documents proclaimed the equality of all humankind and the principle of compassion as articulated in Matthew Chapter 25 as core principles of Christianity. They all emphasize the notion that in the face of the injustice and the forces arrayed to maintain the existing system, the church faces a fundamental crisis: in the words of *Road to Damascus*, “the time for a decisive turnabout on the part of those groups and individuals who have consciously or unconsciously compromised their Christian faith for political, economic and selfish reasons” (Brown, 1990). Invoking Jesus’ admonition in Luke 12:56, Kairos involved *reading the signs of the times*, and in doing so, being struck by

something that is inescapably compelling, an experience that is sometimes likened to that first, famous conversion, hence the naming of the 1989 “Road to Damascus.” It marks the time when the reality is so strong that it knocks you down, first blinding you and then leading you to clear sight. It is the fortunate time, it is God’s time.

In taking this stance against the complicity of the church, these courageous church leaders – through all the years of struggle a minority among their peers – were pitted against the very institutions of which they were a part. Not only did these clergy, academics and heads of church organizations position themselves against the evil of Apartheid; they often had to stand up to those members of the faith community who insisted that “the church and politics do not mix.” A key point, therefore, in understanding kairos theology and kairos movements in every historical era is that they represent a *church struggle*. In his aptly named *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, Kairos author and South African theologian John De Gruchy writes:

The church is called to bear witness to the Kingdom of God in the world... This being so, a faithful church will always find itself in tension with society. For this reason, the church desperately needs the presence of prophetic movements... for these movements provide the critique that forces the church to a new assessment of itself. Such movements are part of God’s way of renewing the church in every generation and situation (De Gruchy and De Gruchy, 2005).

The unwillingness to compromise on core issues coupled with the willingness to step outside the strictures of the institutional church characterizes the Kairos documents that followed the South African document of 1985. Kairos is a practical theology that emerges at those very times when it is most needed – in times of urgent need. In this, it hearkens back to the original kairos, the confrontation of a visionary, prophetic figure with the evil of empire – the man from Galilee standing up to the greatest power in the world. The first Kairos embodied 3 key elements: (1) an urgent sociopolitical situation – the tyranny of Rome -- that threatened the economic and social fabric of a village-based agrarian society; (2) an ancient, God-given ethical and spiritual tradition, rooted in a civilization under mortal threat by that same tyrannical system; and (3) the appearance of a prophetic witness, teacher and leader who called his people and their leadership to nonviolent resistance to that tyranny, a resistance based on faithfulness to the essence of their tradition. Jesus knew that the challenge of the historical circumstances required a return to the essential truths of the Jewish tradition, truths that had been betrayed by the monarchical/priestly system in power in Jerusalem, working for the Roman occupier. And that is the source of the opposition and the persecution, of course -- not only from the tyranny itself but from the conservative forces within the society that seek only to preserve their power and privilege.

### **Kairos Palestine: Resistance with Love as its Logic**

Following the end of Apartheid in 1994, the role of the church in that struggle was largely forgotten, as was the role of the World Alliance of Reform Churches in helping to

mobilize the global movement that brought an end to legalized racism in South Africa. In recent years, however, the concept of *kairos* and the church activism it represents has experienced a revival with the rapid growth of awareness about the plight of the Palestinians. Indeed, the South African document set the standard for the historic Palestine Kairos document of 2009, entitled “A moment of truth: A Word of Faith, Hope and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering” (Kairos Palestine, 2009). Also known as “Kairos Palestine,” the document, created by Palestinian clergy, theologians and societal leaders from across the ecumenical spectrum, sets out the situation of a brutal and worsening occupation and articulates a theology that requires nonviolent resistance to the evil of occupation -- resistance “with love as its logic.” Naming the Israeli occupation a sin, it calls out to the international community, reserving its final call for the church itself: “What is the international community doing? What are the political leaders in Palestine, in Israel and in the Arab world doing? What is the Church doing?”

Like its South African predecessor, the Palestinian call has created a moment of truth for the church. The concept of *status confessionis* speaks to this: in Robert McAfee Brown’s phrasing, “when the issues become so clear, and the stakes so high, that the privilege of amiable disagreement must be superseded by clear cut decisions, and the choice must move from both/and to either/or” (Brown, *Kairos*, 7). Kairos Palestine has been commended for study by congregations and denominations worldwide and has spawned Kairos movements and documents in Asia, Europe, and the U.S.A. “Call to Action: U.S. Response to the Kairos Palestine document,” published in June 2012, is the most recent addition to this global response (Kairos USA, 2102). Because of the central role of the U.S. government in its support for Israel and the size and power of the U.S. church, the appearance of the Kairos USA document is a significant development. Like the South African document, that challenged the “church theology” that had supported the unjust system, “Call to Action” directly addresses key theological and ecclesial issues that bear on U.S. Christian action for justice. These include the combined effects of Christian Zionism in its various forms, the post-WWII Christian renunciation of displacement theology, and the impact of Jewish institutional opposition to any perceived threat to U.S. support of Israel.

The U.S. document is a response to the Palestinian call but it bears most resemblance to its South African predecessor. In both cases, the object of the call to action is not the tyrannous system itself, but “moderating” forces that seek to disable the resistance and to preserve the unjust system, often through the appropriation of language and outright co-opting of religious and political leaders. Certainly this was true in the 1980s, with the Pretoria government’s attempted “reforms” in the form of Bantustan vassal states ruled by Black political leaders co-opted by the Apartheid regime. The current U.S. commitment to a “two-state solution” to the Israel-Palestine conflict bears disturbing resemblance to this earlier example, with the resulting Palestinian “state” consisting of enclaves located within a territory controlled militarily and economically by Israel.

Like South African church statements that predated the 1985 Kairos document, pre-2012 U.S. church statements, while expressing support for Palestinian human rights, have supported a two-state formula without questioning what reality this might actually

represent with respect to equality and sovereignty for Palestinians. In an effort to preserve hard-won relations with the institutional Jewish community, these statements on the part of U.S. church institutions have uncritically articulated a “balanced” approach to statements related to the conflict. It is allowable to write or speak about the abrogation of Palestinian rights and about Palestinian suffering, but only if this is accompanied by an acknowledgment of historic Jewish suffering, support of Jewish claims to the land, and an emphasis on the importance of to security for the Jewish state – threatened, presumably, by the hatred of the Arabs and the threat of annihilation. This position, taken by even the most progressive elements of the U.S. church pre-Kairos, ignores the overwhelming power imbalance between the occupying power and the occupied population. It also violates the fundamental Christian principle of standing up to regimes and systems that abrogate the human rights of minorities, indigenous populations and other vulnerable groups.

### **False prophecy**

How do we avoid the trap of false prophecy, the seduction of reform, of balance, of dialogue, of “can’t we just talk about this?” Kairos cuts through these examples of false prophecy, arguments designed to counteract the power of a prophetic challenge to injustice. “Do you suppose,” Jesus teaches in Luke 12:51, “that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division.” The meaning of the Greek *diemerismos* is to make a clear demarcation: to know the difference. It is to know the difference between a theology that supports the policies and institutional structures of oppression and a theology that, in response to history and human affairs, stands boldly with the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the dispossessed. It is to know the difference between actions and words that seek at all costs to preserve cherished beliefs, attitudes and relationships, and those that faithfully challenge them in order to bring about a world of love and compassion.

The current ferment of discourse within the U.S. church illustrates this dynamic in a particularly striking and poignant way. “Call to Action” is only the most recent appearance of statements as well as actions such as divestment of church pension funds from companies profiting from the illegal occupation of Palestine, that have increased in frequency and intensity over the past several decades. Currently the controversy has been occurring along two issues: First, an appeal to preserving post-war Christian-Jewish reconciliation based on Christian penitence for historic anti-Semitism, and second, a theological challenge to kairos theology itself.

### ***Capturing the theological discourse: the rules for Christian-Jewish dialogue***

Christian-Jewish “interfaith” dialogue was originally undertaken to break down age-old barriers of fear and mistrust between the two communities. However, in the current context of mounting awareness of Palestinian grievances, it has also put institutional Christianity on a slippery slope to a theological endorsement of political Zionism. The post WWII period produced confessional statements by German Protestant churches as they struggled to come to terms with the consequences of Christian anti-Jewish doctrine.

This impulse of penitence and self-scrutiny resulted in a movement that quickly spread throughout Western Europe and to the United States, resulting in a fundamental revision of reformed theology with respect to the understanding of the place of Judaism in Christian thought and practice. For the Roman Catholic Church, Vatican II in 1965 was a watershed event, as the Church undertook a long overdue examination of its attitudes toward the Jewish people. Today, interfaith dialogue and academic work devoted to interfaith themes observe unwritten 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 all Jews) is paramount. Jewish experience and Jewish needs, again, as defined by some, determines the direction and nature of the discourse.
2. The superior right of the Jews to the land is not to be challenged.

Ruth Langer is a Reform Rabbi and Associate Professor of Theology at Boston College. In 2008 she published a paper entitled “Theologies of the Land and the State of Israel: The Role of the Secular in Jewish and Christian Understandings.” In the paper Langer invokes the first rule, that Christians accept “Jewish self-understanding” regarding Jewish identity and the land of Israel as definitional and unassailable. For Langer Jewish self-experience is characterized by two elements: (1) The Jewish attachment to the Land of Israel as a Jewish homeland is an essential element of being Jewish – it cannot be questioned. (2) Related to this is the Jewish experience – which Langer presumes to describe for all Jews -- of being a people apart. Langer argues that the failure of the Enlightenment to bring Jews fully into Western society is evidence that this quality of Jewishness is essential and inalienable. Langer ignores the diversity of Jewish experience on both these axes. For her, any Jew who disagrees with her description of Jewish experience is in flight from his or her Jewish identity, like those Jews who sought to assimilate in order to curry favor and advantage with the dominant Christian society in which they lived, or worse, those who actually converted to Christianity. And, points out Langer, it was a vain attempt: although many Jews had attempted to shed their particularism -- and with it the identification with the idea of a return to Zion or any sense of seeing themselves as a separate nation -- economic and social marginalization and sporadic violence forced them back into a separatist, and ultimately nationalist, stance. The Nazis, of course, provided final support for those who advance this analysis.

The argument from history is central in defending the Zionist project against those who would question its validity, sustainability, morality, or logic. “Christians,” writes Langer, “must strive to learn by what essential traits Jews define ... Christian-Jewish dialogue. In terms of...the development of adequate theologies of the land and state of Israel within

the context of the contemporary dialogue, this is a crucial first step” (Langer, 2008, 16-17).

The use of the historical argument to control the so-called “dialogue” between Christians and Jews takes second place only to the imperative of repudiating replacement theology. The June 2009 edition of *Cross Currents*, a quarterly on religion with a progressive and interfaith bent, is titled “The Scandal of Particularity.” The title, which features articles by Jewish, Catholic and Protestant authors, suggests a critical analysis of the claim of any religion to a superior or exclusive path to God. In fact, however only Christian particularity is targeted in the publication. The entire issue follows closely the rules of interfaith “dialogue” described above, providing a theological and spiritual basis for the Jewish claim to the land. In one article, William Plevan, a Rabbi and student of theology at Princeton, draws heavily on the anti-supercessionist work of Orthodox Jewish theologian Michael Wyschogrod. “Wyschogrod argued” writes Plevan, “that the central theological concept of Judaism is God’s election of Israel to God’s beloved people. While God demands that Israel observe the commandments and while certain beliefs about God’s nature may be implicit in the Biblical record, the essence of divine election is not the commandments or any beliefs about God, but rather God’s preferential and parental love of the carnal family of Israel, the flesh and blood descendants of Jacob” (Plevan, 2009, 217). According to Plevan, this exclusivist core is essential to interpreting the message of the Gospel. “The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ,” he claims, “actually has roots in Jewish ideas, such as God’s presence in the people Israel.” The Temple, although physically gone, is preserved as symbol of landedness and Jewish exclusivity. A piece by Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin entitled “The Place of ‘Place’ in Jewish tradition” claims that although the land has a spiritual and psychological meaning, this “nod to the universal does not cancel out the particular.” Jewish life, asserts Cardin, is “all bound up in that particular bit of land on the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea” (2009 214). The land of Israel is the gift of God to the Jewish people, its inheritance.

A centerpiece of the *CrossCurrents* issue is the article by John T. Pawlikowski, a prominent Catholic theologian and Director of the Director of the Catholic-Jewish Studies Program at the Catholic Theological Union.” In his piece, entitled “Land as an Issue in Christian-Jewish Dialogue,” Pawlikowski 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” (Pawlikowski, 2009, 199) 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” (Pawlikowski, 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” (Pawlikowski, 2009 199, emphases added).

This is an astonishing argument. In the original Christian visioning—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 in effect deprived them of their birthright. According to this formulation, 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. 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. This is the theology called into service by the Jewish establishment and elements within the churches themselves to oppose efforts within denominations to take faithful stands against companies profiting from the illegal occupation and the theft of Palestinian land. 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.

### ***Attempt to discredit Kairos theology and neutralize Palestinians Christians***

Until recently, these theological arguments have effectively muffled both clergy and lay leaders from speaking out against the State of Israel’s human rights violations. The appearance in 2009 of the Kairos Palestine document, however, has challenged this theology, a theology that requires maintaining the narrative of a victimized, innocent Israel beset by the implacable hatred of the Palestinians. The issue has now arisen of how to square this narrative with the alternative narrative presented in the Kairos document, in which Palestinians describe their persecution and proclaim their commitment to Christian love in reaching out to their persecutors? Discrediting the Kairos Palestine document thus became one of the aims of the Israeli-sponsored public relations campaign against the threatened “delegitimization” of Israel in the United States.

The Israel Action Network (IAN) is a project of the Jewish Federations of North America in partnership with the Jewish Council of Public Affairs and is the leading edge of this campaign. Its aim is to drive a theological wedge between Palestinian Christians and



Christians globally and especially those North Americans who challenge the narrative of Israeli victimhood and innocence. Most recently it has focused on the denominations that are proposing to divest their pension funds from companies involved in the Israeli occupation of Palestinians lands. The Kairos Palestine document has lent impetus to the energy and stridency of this campaign. Information provided by IAN through telecasts, guest speakers and material on its website now instructs Jews on how to deal with those Christians who are being misled into activities that, according to the claims of the IAN, are anti-Semitic and that threaten the State of Israel and the survival of the Jewish people. Kairos Palestine, it maintains, is not only anti-Semitic but is in error religiously.

Classified by the IAN as “liberal Protestants,” these are the Christians who, according to the Network, are mistakenly attracted to this poisonously “Palestinian” anti-Jewish theology and must be led back to the righteous path by Jewish scholars, clergy, and established community leaders, who will define what Christians should believe, not only about Zionism, but about their own faith. In a recent telecast intended to instruct Jewish leaders on how to understand and combat the document, one speaker for the IAN characterized Kairos Palestine as “elevating” Palestinian Christians into a “pure form” of Christianity, and as such granting special status and authority to the anti-Jewish statements and anti-Jewish theology contained in the Kairos document. This is troubling, they maintain, because American Christians have “worked so hard to remove anti-Judaism from their theology.” Misguided “liberal Christians,” therefore, are now threatening their hard-won friendship with the Jewish people and abandoning their vigilance against anti-Semitism. They are doing this because they have unfortunately come under the influence of the Palestinian Christians, who are pursuing their own, clearly anti-Israel and thus anti-Semitic agenda. As evidence of the anti-Jewish nature of the Palestinian call, one of the Jewish scholars featured on the telecast quoted the statement in Kairos Palestine that reads: “God is on the side of the oppressed, and the oppressed here are the Palestinians.” There can be no clearer indication of the crisis that the church faces when a statement as eminently true as this is offered as an indictment of this call to world Christians to stand in faithfulness to their core beliefs.

How do we avoid the trap of false prophecy, the seduction of reform, of balance, of dialogue, of “can’t we just talk about this?” Kairos provides the answer by making it clear that prophecy follows from confession -- the realization of how we have failed, how we have been complicit. This is, after all, what the prophets demand, and they do their work in the marketplace, at the gate of the city, and even, perhaps especially, in the Temple courtyard. Because what is at stake goes beyond the struggle for the human rights of one particular group in one particular political context. What is at stake is the church itself, Jesus’ message of the Kingdom of God. It is the message of the Gospels, the call, first articulated by the Hebrew prophets and then made the basis for Jesus’ ministry in his own time and place, the call to the church stated clearly in the Kairos Palestine 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.”

### **The new ecumenicism: Creating the Beloved Community**

The act of creating a Kairos document brings people together. It creates a home for those who have been toiling for justice within their own congregations and denominations but in isolation from one another. This is not an “ecumenical” movement in the sense that the word is often employed – a kind of United Nations of churches, each coming to the table wearing his or her denominational or theological hat. Rather, it is ecumenical in the sense that we are reaching for in this conference -- the sense of a single body united in a faithful ministry. Discussing Kairos, Robert MacAfee Brown puts it in the broader context of a fundamental shift in the church – he calls it a “second reformation” – moving away from salvation by faith alone toward the mission of good news to the poor. It is, in the words of *Road to Damascus*, “a call to conversion to those who have strayed from the truth of Christian faith and commitment.” Charles Villa-Vicencio has posed the question: can a creative, prophetic drive penetrate the institutional church, a church that is trapped in the dominant structures of oppression, a church conditioned by a history of compromise with, indeed by having joined the structure of oppression? He asks: “Can religion truly break the iron cage of history? Can religion produce a qualitatively different kind of society? Is the Kingdom of God a real possibility?”

And the answer is *yes* -- if we discover, or rediscover, or uncover, the true meaning of the Christian faith, as so many of the kairos documents cry for – the moment of truth – the time, in the words of the South African Kairos, for the church to make a decision.

We are talking about something very powerful. In 1963 the Reverend Martin Luther King Junior, sitting in a cell in Birmingham Alabama received a letter from a group of ten white clergymen, asking him to back off from his campaign of direct action. We support your movement, Dr. King, they wrote, but this campaign of civil disobedience is hurting the cause. Let us work through channels. *Let us have a peace process.* His response, smuggled out on scraps of paper and now regarded as one of the key statements of contextual theology of the twentieth century, is well known: this is not the Christian way, wrote King. This is not what we are called by Jesus to do in the face of the evil of racism in this country. When the early Christians entered a town, he wrote, they were persecuted as “outside agitators – but they persisted, knowing that they were a colony of heaven, called to obey God rather than man.” King continues:

“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.”

Contexts change but that which is essential endures. The lesson of Kairos is that we must pay close attention to the way in which the bringing of the Kingdom of God is being enacted in our own time. MacAfee Brown, writing up until his death in 2001, never addressed in writing the story of Palestine – but I believe that if he were alive today his eyes would be opened. He would see the course clearly because he understood so well the legacy of the U.S. pursuit of global economic hegemony and how that has driven our illegal and immoral policies throughout the world. He would have had to contemplate our government’s financing and diplomatic support of Israeli Apartheid. *We* have built the

wall that cuts Palestinians off from their own land and that imprisons Israelis within their own fortress of fear. That wall is *our* wall -- *our* hegemonic, racist frontier. Look at Palestine, unpack the story of Palestine today, and what emerges is the larger, global picture of Western economic imperialism.

We do very well to keep this in mind – the power of the Palestinian cause is its ability to reveal the broader global context of Empire. We return, again and again, to the original kairos –the confrontation of a visionary, prophetic figure with the evil of empire – the man from tiny Galilee standing up to the greatest power in the world. And so isn't it right that the compelling kairos for the church today is calling to us from the very place in which this drama unfolded 2000 years ago, the very place that gave birth to a church that is now calling its followers to discipleship?

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