

What Does the Lord Require of the Ecumenical Movement Today? Boycott, Divestment & Sanctions as Nonviolent, Loving Actions

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[Note: this draft paper offers a theological reflection on BDS actions by churches in the US from 2001-present. It does not list every single church action but rather seeks to note key actions, lessons learned, and ongoing challenges that have helped build momentum within the global ecumenical community for the nonviolent moral actions of BDS. It urges the ecumenical community to take up the moral imperative of boycott, divestment and sanctions now more than ever.]

2015 marks the 10th anniversary of the Palestinian civil society call for boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS). The call for BDS as nonviolent, moral, economic actions has sparked a vibrant and growing global movement seeking justice, freedom and equality in solidarity with the Palestinian people: justice for Palestinian refugees long denied the right of return and reparations; freedom from Israel's military occupation; and equal rights for Palestinians living inside the green line who comprise 20% of Israel's citizens. The movement now includes universities, trade unions, human rights organizations, churches, municipal governments and even some corporations as well as countless grassroots community groups and individuals.

For decades churches in the United States have issued statements and denominational resolutions calling on Israel, Palestinian leadership and the international community to support a two-state solution. We have had decades of high level delegations and thousands of holy land pilgrimages that visited, and many creative grassroots actions seeking just and lasting peace in Israel/Palestine. Yet only with the rise of the BDS movement have US churches begun to examine the "log in our own eye" of economic complicity with ongoing Israeli settlement expansion and systematic discrimination and dispossession against Palestinians. As churches join the BDS movement, we have begun to answer the question, "what does the Lord require of us" with actions rather than only statements calling on others to act.

This year also marks the 15th year since the outbreak of the second intifada and the 30th anniversary of the Kairos South Africa document that condemned apartheid as a sin and called on churches to reject both "state theology" that sought to give theological justification to apartheid and to reject "church theology" that sought to make peace with apartheid by only seeking reforms of its most egregious aspects. Kairos S. Africa gave inspiration to the Kairos Palestine document launched in Bethlehem in December 2009. Both of these documents more accurately embody ecumenical liberation movements that have inspired and catalyzed prophetic actions for justice, freedom and equality in the global ecumenical community.

The Power of Nonviolent Resistance in the Face of Expanding Israeli Land Theft & Racism

"If your brother or sister is being injured by what you consume, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you consume cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died." Romans 14:15

The first intifada sparked a powerful, grassroots nonviolent resistance to expanding Israeli settlements and ongoing military occupation. Palestinian mass strikes, stone throwing, and noncooperation were met with Israeli policies of 'broken bones,' mass imprisonment without trial, and continued land theft at gunpoint (armed Jewish settlers defended by Israeli soldiers). The first intifada exposed the one-sided nature of violence, dispossession, discrimination and demonization that Palestinians in the occupied territories faced. With the Oslo peace process in September 1993 there was a sense of immediate relief from the intensity of violent repression. Yet the noted Palestinian intellectual, Edward Said, as well as BTselem, an Israeli human rights organization, among others warned of the apartheid-like bantuzation of the Areas A, B, and C implemented under Oslo.

The shift from the first Intifada's nonviolent resistance in the face of increasing Israeli state violence and repression to the priority on a negotiating process of the Oslo period had a profound impact on US churches in reframing the violence and injustice in Palestine. For many US churches, the Oslo process served to transform a nonviolent liberation struggle against injustice into a peace process to end conflict between two sides. Too many churches rushed to embrace interpersonal reconciliation projects without any examination of the inequalities in power between the Israeli state and Palestinians. Churches stressed the need for balance when there was nothing balanced about the situation. This is a key value of "church theology" that must be challenged.

During the Oslo so-called peace years (1993-2000) Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank doubled. Yet many portrayed settlements as a temporary setback rather than a systemic state-sponsored crime of land theft. In the US the framing of the situation as a conflict invariably invoked our cultural tendency towards dualistic division of 'good guys' and 'bad guys.' Dominant US culture still evaluates conflicts around the world as between cowboys (good, settlers, white) and Indians (bad, natives, people of color). I would argue that US churches, like most of the global ecumenical community, never fully analyzed their affirmation of a two-state solution in the face of glaring inequities of power. Israel has had a state since 1948 while Palestinians were largely refugees and civilian populations living under military occupation and unending dispossession from their land.

A Nonviolent Revival in confronting violence & discrimination

"How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." 1 John 3:17-18

In September 2000, Israeli leader, Ariel Sharon, visited al Aqsa with several hundred Israeli soldiers and the second intifada erupted in protest. The second intifada marked the collapse of the so-called Oslo peace process, though it took years before the US and other governments fully acknowledged this collapse. Under the Oslo framework from 1993-2000 as the number of Israeli settlements doubled, Palestinians faced mounting frustrations over a captive economy and continued dispossession from their land. During the Oslo period there was also a key shift in international discourse from a framework of longstanding Israeli military occupation, dispossession and discrimination against Palestinian struggle for self-determination, to a framework of a political conflict between two sides – Israel and a Palestinian Authority.

As Palestinian resistance to intensified Israeli military operations of closures, curfews and collective punishment grew, so did international solidarity actions. A new generation of young Palestinians in diaspora communities in North America and Europe became active on campuses and communities often for the first time. Groups such as Christian Peacemaker Teams and the International Solidarity Movement drew people from around the world to join Palestinian communities in nonviolent resistance against home demolitions, uprooting of trees and expansion of Israeli settlements. Many grassroots church people became active through CPT, ISM, and campus activism in 2001 and brought these advocacy efforts back to their respective denominations.

In May 2001 some church advocates gathered in New York with other longtime human rights advocates in an effort to build a campaign based on upholding international law and focused on challenging US policies that helped sustain and defend Israeli aggression. This meeting led to the formation of the US Campaign to End Israeli Occupation that had corporate divestment and military sanctions (i.e., ending US military aid to Israel) as two key action areas. See www.endtheoccupation.org Then in July 2001 the WCC convened a meeting in Geneva of Palestinian Christians and ecumenical leaders that led to creation of EAPPI as part of the Decade to Overcome Violence year on Israel/Palestine.

At the NGO Forum of the UN World Conference Against Racism (Durban, South Africa, September 2001) the Ecumenical caucus played a crucial role in retaining language condemning “foreign military occupation” as a form of racism in the NGO declaration. The US and Israel delegations later walked out of the governmental meetings in an attempt to discredit and delegitimize global anti-racism efforts as anti-Israel. Only a few days after the WCAR closed came the attacks of 9/11. The US and Israel continued to mobilize former colonial governments of Europe to vilify and marginalize the outcomes of the WCAR and shift global framing to a war on terror. Suddenly the racial profiling of the global war on terror displaced a growing global anti-racism movement.

A series of events in spring 2002 – the siege of Church of Nativity, the levelling of Jenin refugee camp area by Caterpillar D9 armored bulldozer, and the rapid rise of closures, curfews and suicide attacks – catalyzed greater nonviolent actions among grassroots and US church activists. A high level NCCCUSA delegation was in Jerusalem and among the first internationals to visit Jenin but made no mention of US policy or of role of CAT. Frustrated by fearful church leaders retaining values of ‘balance’ and a conflict between supposedly equal sides in the face of escalating violations of international law, grassroots activists in churches, campuses and local communities globally began to focus corporate campaigning against CAT. At the US Campaign to End the Occupation first national organizing conference (June 2002), members committed to increasing corporate campaigning with CAT as a major focus.

Construction beginning in 2003 on the *hafrada* (apartheid or separation) barrier/wall in various parts of West Bank & East Jerusalem also involved levelling thousands of olive trees, shops and seizing of Palestinian land as a buffer zone. Growing numbers of divestment movements on US university campuses and at community level started researching which corporations were involved in construction and in military contracts supporting the wall and settlements. As the US government mobilized for an

invasion and war of aggression against Iraq, the anti-war movement struggled to include Palestinian rights in the movement. Many US church officials opposed war in Iraq but in their desire to broaden anti-war efforts as widely as possible they resisted linking war on Iraq with ongoing Israeli aggression and collective punishment against Palestinians. In March 2003, just days before the massive US assault on Iraq, Rachel Corrie, a US activist with ISM, was killed by a CAT D9 bulldozer that was destroying many Palestinian homes in Gaza. As the US invasion and military occupation of Iraq unfolded, more and more grassroots and church activists articulated the connections with Israel's occupation and settlement expansion. Soon United For Peace & Justice, the largest anti-war coalition in the US, made the connections explicit at every demonstration with signs like: "Occupation: wrong in Iraq, wrong in Palestine." Yet the NCCCUSA and denominational leadership remained reluctant to voice publicly such connections.

Two key decisions in 2004 greatly accelerated US church involvement in economic efforts that would become the BDS movement. First, in June the PCUSA voted to take up a process of "phased selective divestment" from companies supporting violence and the occupation. Hate mail, death and arson threats soon flooded PCUSA phones, faxes and emails from pro-Israel sources. But the decision initiated concerted research and shareholder advocacy by the Presbyterian Mission Responsibility Through Investment (MRTI) committee. MRTI identified several companies among their holdings that were complicit with settlements, the occupation, and violence against civilians: CAT, Motorola, ITT, United Technologies, and Citigroup.

Second, in July, the International Court of Justice issued its opinion confirming that the wall violated international law and should be dismantled with reparations paid appropriately. These two decisions contributed to a growing movement among churches towards divestment from international companies profiting from business activities supporting Israeli settlements and military occupation. At the same time, secular and grassroots groups steadily increased calls for boycott of settlement products and a boycott of Israel. (I will address the issue of boycott in more detail below).

Here are some recent actions in the growing push among churches for divestment. In mobilizing church support for divestment, church advocates initially avoided the boycott part of BDS but gradually became more active on that as well.

2005:

- WCC Central Ctee issues call urging churches to take up economic measures as part of seeking to end the occupation.
- US Campaign to End Occupation holds 1 day meeting on boycott & divestment strategies on CAT.
- Two United Methodist Annual Conferences adopt divestment resolutions & New England AC forms a Divestment Task Force that researches and engages companies profiting from occupation.

- Palestinian civil society organizations issue BDS call on anniversary of the ICJ ruling against the wall.
- United Church of Christ & Episcopal Church USA debate divestment, positive investment & shareholder advocacy regarding companies profiting from occupation.
- Sabeel issues booklet, “Morally Responsible Investing” addressing responsibility of churches to take actions on companies profiting from occupation.
- Friends of Sabeel Canada holds conference on Morally Responsible Investing in Toronto. It’s denounced by major Jewish organizations before it starts.

2006:

- At the February 2006 WCC Assembly in Porto Alegre, Brazil a strong Palestinian Christian contingent called on US churches to take up economic measures. As a result, an Ecumenical Action Group of US church shareholder advocates and pension funds held its first meeting to take up the call from Palestinian Christians. EAG continues to meet 2-3 times/year. For nine years it has met with companies, filed shareholder resolutions with CAT, Motorola, HP, ITT, United Technologies, and others.
- Several more United Methodist Annual Conferences adopt calls for divestment.
- Under enormous pressure, PCUSA General Assembly retracts “phased selective divestment” wording but continues corporate engagement seeking only companies that make positive contribution to peace.
- Starting in 2006 to present, Jewish Voice for Peace, the US Campaign to End the Occupation & other allies join with PCUSA and UMC advocates at each of their respective church wide meetings to support divestment resolutions.
- Anglican Church, Methodist Church of Britain and other European churches take up corporate engagement and divestment from CAT, and other companies involved in occupation.

2007:

In June 2007 the WCC convened what became known as the Amman Call. It included an economic measures workshop, but the majority of churches present kept BDS from being included as an action in the call. The PIEF formed out of the Amman Call with economic measures as 1 of key work areas from its beginning. The next year the PIEF Economic Group met in London where for the first time European and US advocates of economic measures met and shared strategies.

2008:

- Diakonia Sweden issues report on Assa Abloy operations in an Israeli settlement industrial zone. Within 24 hours, Assa Abloy announces that it will withdraw its factory from settlement and relocate inside Israel.
- American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) adopts investment screen to bar companies profiting from the occupation, but fearing violent threats from pro-Israel groups is nervous about publicizing their action.
- PCUSA & UMC debate and fail to adopt divestment but the movement in each church grows.

2009:

- Diakonia Sweden works with other civil society advocates to get Stockholm city council to reject Veolia bid on light rail in large part because of its operations in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Ethical criteria for the decision: “Stockholm political officials listen to the ground and we made the ground tremble.” In the six years since, Veolia has lost billions in contracts around the world in part because of grassroots activism (that often involved local church folks) against Veolia’s continued involvement with Israeli occupation and settlements. Veolia has now ended almost all its contracts with Israel in the OPTs.
- US church advocates meet with Norwegian advocates & Norwegian Oil Fund divests from Elbit.
- Kairos Palestine launched in Bethlehem. Includes call for churches to join in BDS actions.

2010:

- First Kairos groups in Netherlands, United Methodist Kairos Response, and other countries form as faithful response to the call in Kairos Palestine.
- British Methodist Church issues report that calls for boycott of settlement products.
- Church groups work with Israeli women’s group Who Profits on documenting corporate complicity with settlements, the wall and occupation.

2012:

- Both UMC & PCUSA fail to adopt divestment but both adopt boycott of settlement products (and UMC also a boycott of companies involved in occupation & settlements).
- Friends Fiduciary votes to divest.
- United Church of Canada adopts boycott of settlement products.

2013:

- WCC Assembly at Busan calls for an ecumenical BDS working group.

2014:

- PIEF Working Group on BDS convenes several skype calls & 2 face to face meetings.
- PCUSA votes to divest from CAT, Moto Solutions, and HP.

2015:

- The UCC in US votes to divest from CAT, HP, Motorola Solutions, Veolia

Churches Take up Boycott as Nonviolent action against discrimination

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Romans 12:21

2015 also marked the 50th anniversary of the civil rights march in Selma, Alabama and the assassination of Malcolm X. In a context of continued protests around police brutality and racial violence against the Black community with cries of “Black Lives Matter,” it is important to reflect on calls for boycott of

settlement products and a broader boycott of Israel in the context of US church involvement in boycotts as part of the struggle for civil rights in the US as well as the global anti-apartheid movement.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s letter from a Birmingham jail was in direct response to a letter from white clergy in Birmingham. The white clergy labeled King as an outside agitator who was bringing trouble to their city. They warned King against bringing extremist, radical ideas that would only provoke violence. King in his 1963 prophetic letter asked, "was not Amos an extremist for justice [?] So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?" In the face of attacks today that label boycott as an extremist, anti-Semitic threat to Israel, we need to join King and affirm: Yes! Boycott, divestment and sanctions embody extremely passionate actions for nonviolent, moral change; and we in the churches must become more involved if we hope to continue following our biblical mandate of love and justice.

Invariably, churches and other civil society groups turn to BDS when they are blocked by governments from pursuing justice and equality. The civil rights movement was blocked by unjust Jim Crow laws of segregation and so they took up nonviolent direct action and boycotts. Since 1970 when the US government cast its first veto in the UN Security Council, it has used the veto more than the other four permanent members combined. This constitutes a huge log in the eye of US churches that we must seek to remove through nonviolent action. One third of US vetoes were to block international criticism of apartheid regimes in southern Africa and half were to block international criticism of Israeli government violations of international law in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and nearby countries. When efforts by the international community are repeatedly blocked, civil society turns to nonviolent actions of boycott and divestment.

Churches are particularly key communities in the efforts of boycott and divestment because they have used them so effectively as nonviolent acts of conscience and of solidarity in many human rights struggles for years. Historically, boycotts are nonviolent moral tools of noncooperation used primarily by colonized and oppressed communities and their allies to challenge unjust governmental power and unjust laws. Colonial expansion and land theft is inherently racist in that it divides so-called civilized citizens from barbaric natives and treats them differently. Thus economic, cultural and academic boycotts are primarily tools of noncooperation and non-participation in the systemic racist practices of so-called democratic, colonial governments.

Gandhi, for instance, led a national movement in India in a series of boycotts that included boycotts of schools, cotton, and salt. He described the boycott of government wrongdoing as an act done out of love! Kairos Palestine and churches take up this same notion of boycott as an act of love to end wrongdoing. Churches and grassroots activists boycott unhealthy relations in order to seek justice and equality for all.

The anti-apartheid movement also used cultural, academic and sports boycotts to challenge white rule in S. Africa. The S. African Kairos document insisted that white S. Africans had to make a choice: to renounce their white privilege and join in resistance, or face a boycott.

Invariably, when the oppressed challenge power structures, they get attacked. Almost every boycott movement has been accused of being violent, racist and a threat to peace. In fact, the reverse is true: boycott movements seek to end longstanding violence and racist discrimination imposed by the powerful. Yet the attacks of the Israel lobby can be quite threatening and intimidating.

While the Palestinian civil society BDS call is for boycott and divestment and sanctions, churches initially worked only in the area of divestment from international companies. From the first Presbyterian resolution calling for divestment in 2004 up to 2012, church advocates in various denominations pressed only for divestment from companies. In 2012 both Presbyterians and United Methodists added additional petitions calling for boycott of settlement products, and Methodists also included companies operating in the settlements, but the organizing was almost entirely focused on divestment. While church-wide divestment did not prevail in 2012, both Presbyterians and Methodists adopted boycott language as acts of conscience by consumers that are part of longstanding church tradition of nonviolent actions. Both denominations had recently endorsed farmworker-led boycotts to bring about better wages and working conditions in the fields. In these boycotts, farmworkers – many of whom are undocumented – were landless and subject to racist discrimination yet they took the lead in nonviolent boycott actions.

Loving our Enemies by rejecting attacks on BDS

“So do not let your good be spoken of as evil.” Romans 14:16

Part of our task as churches is to challenge and reject fearful and often vicious accusations made by pro-Israel attack groups. I call them attack groups because their main agenda is to silence moral nonviolent actions and voices within the churches. They do not offer alternative nonviolent actions; they seek only to block boycott and divestment actions. However, it’s important to note that attack groups of the Israel lobby are not against boycott and divestment per se. The very same organizations were among the leading exponents of divestment from companies in Sudan and Iran.

The Israel lobby falsely seeks to equate BDS nonviolent actions today with the identity-based boycott of Jewish stores under Nazi Germany in the 1930s. On the contrary, boycotts of Israeli settlement products and even the economic, cultural and academic boycott of Israel are nonviolent actions opposing any identity-based, systemic discrimination. It is the discriminatory, racist apartheid policies of the Israeli state that are being boycotted. Similar to boycotts against S. Africa, a boycott of Israel is challenging the vast majority of Jewish Israelis -- who repeatedly vote for these racist policies of settlement expansion and discrimination against Palestinians – to join in nonviolent resistance or face a boycott.

The Montgomery bus boycott was not against buses, or even against the bus company but against its practice of segregation and discrimination. Boycotts of S. Africa were not anti-white or anti- South

Africa but against the laws and practices of apartheid. So too, the BDS movement today opposes both anti-Semitism **and** the identity-based discrimination of the Israeli state: checkpoints, Jewish-only settlements on Palestinian land, segregated roads and the many other Israeli identity-based laws. When there is a law of return for Jews that's protected and a right of return for Palestinians that's denied, churches are starting to say, that's wrong! We should have equal rights for everyone, and nonviolent BDS actions are necessary tools to realize full equality.

Reclaiming a Prophetic Faith of Justice & Love: BDS as a Call to Repentance

"Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die oh house of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!" Ezekiel 18:31-32

Let us reflect on the biblical concept of repentance in relation to the call to join the BDS movement. Sin was when people turned away from God and away from loving their neighbors in need. Repentance was a call to turn back to God and back to one's neighbor. Turn away from unjust practices! Turn away from violence against one's neighbors. Repentance is like a boycott: give up those awful practices; stop robbing your neighbors; stop discriminating! It really is a call to boycott and divest.

John the Baptist as a voice in the wilderness invited people to repent: to turn away from the ways of empire. He challenges people who come out as spectators to reject any identity-based ethics and instead take action! *"Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor.'" (Luke 3:8)* When the crowds ask John what they should do, he offers specific actions to people in different positions to break with the unjust practices of the empire: people should **share**; tax collectors should **practice fairness**; and soldiers should **stop extorting money, stop using threats and false accusations** (see Luke 3:10-14)

The Sermon on the Mount in effect offers Jesus' call to boycott both the ways of violence and the ways of submission by *"turning the other cheek"* and standing face to face on one's ground. It is a powerful call to nonviolent resistance out of love. Kairos Palestine as a movement invites us all to take up the Sermon on the Mount and Paul's 13th chapter of Corinthians (faith, hope and love) as our guide in seeking justice in Palestine/Israel today.

In 18th chapter of Ezekiel, he challenges the notion of collective punishment. In many biblical stories, the whole family or a whole community suffers for the wrongdoing of one person. Here Ezekiel rejects collective punishment and instead declares that each person is judged by their actions, not their identity. *"Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign Lord. "Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?" (Ezekiel 18:23)* Boycott and Divestment today, like the call in Ezekiel, is urging us to turn from our complicity as churches, and it also calls on companies to turn, on the Israeli government to turn, and on the international community to turn, to repent and to live.

In the text above (18:31-32), Ezekiel challenged the people and government of his day, out of deep love, to stop discriminating, to stop taking others' land, to stop going the ways of the empire and the ways of 'might makes right.' Today, it is the same challenge that Palestinian Christians and the BDS movement are pressing churches and everyone to take up when they call for boycott, divestment and sanctions against injustice.

It's time to Boycott & Divest ourselves of Fear-based, Discriminatory readings of the Bible

"Fallen, Fallen is Babylon the Great!... Then I heard another voice from heaven say: 'Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins.'" (Revelation 18:2a, 4a)

Christian Zionists have repeatedly distorted the theology in the Book of Revelation as being only about the end times thousands of years after John lived. There are many critiques of Christian Zionism, but I also hope we can reclaim the powerful critique John offers in Revelation of the ways of empire in his day. When he wrote, Babylon was already part of history, but if he named the Roman empire he likely would have been killed. Here in the 18th chapter of Revelation, John invites people to "come out of" Babylon, that is, to stop cooperating with the unjust and violent practices of the empire.

What happens when people join together in noncooperation, when people boycott and divest from the ways of empire? In Rev. 18:11 we read, *"the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore."* John goes on to state, *the sound of harpists and minstrels and of flutists and trumpeters will be heard no more."*(Rev. 18:22) That is like a cultural boycott! But churches today, like the early church in John's day, are fearful of taking on a cultural boycott of Israel.

John's challenge to boycott empire is one of many texts that gives theological grounding to boycott movements in colonized India, in apartheid S. Africa, in Jim Crow United States, and to today's economic, cultural and academic boycott of Israel. It will not be easy, but a full economic, cultural and academic boycott of Israel **invites churches to confront the log of racism that is still in our own eye, in our ecumenical institutions, and even in our reading of the Bible.** If we in the global churches fail to take up cultural and academic boycott of Israel at this moment, then like the white moderate clergy in Birmingham, Alabama who accused Martin Luther King of going too fast, we will be tacit supporters of the racist policies of Israeli government and our own respective governments.

We don't have to reach consensus on each and every boycott of Israel action. What matters is affirming that economic, cultural and academic boycott of Israel challenges the Israeli public, companies, and the international community to break all ties with the racist practices of the Israeli state.

The Bible calls cultural cooperation with unjust state powers whitewashing! Biblical condemnations of false prophets are similar to call for cultural and academic boycott of unjust practices. For instance, Ezekiel declares: *"Because they lead my people astray, saying, 'Peace' when there is no peace, and because when a flimsy wall is built, they cover it with whitewash, therefore tell those who cover it with whitewash that it is going to fall."* (Ezekiel 13:10-11)

In Matthew 23, Jesus urges the crowds and disciples to reject/boycott the cultural captivity of leaders in his day. *“Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead people’s bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.”* (Matthew 23:27-8) It is not the religious/ethnic identity of Pharisees, but their unjust ways and accommodation with the empire’s evil practices that Jesus condemns. Part of a cultural and academic boycott of Israel involves boycotting the theological whitewashing ways of years of Christian-Jewish dialogue that repeatedly silence criticism of injustice.

More than anything, we in the churches need to stay on message that the BDS movement is a nonviolent moral movement to end longstanding suffering of the Palestinian people at the hands of a discriminatory system that continues daily to seize more and more land. And the time to act is now! Last year the number of home demolitions and new settlements were higher than in years, and there was a devastating war on the people of Gaza (half of whom are children).

It’s time for global churches to stop whitewashing racism by joining the BDS movement, including an cultural and academic boycott of Israel. Churches will be attacked when we speak up and take actions, so it’s vital that we start somewhere! And it’s vital we support one another as we seek to follow Jesus in the struggle for dignity and justice for all. When we boycott injustice we express our love for Palestinian sisters and brothers, for Israelis, and for ourselves.