

# Following Jesus in Jerusalem

## A sermon for Peace Sunday

Kevin Derksen

*But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, the hostility between us. (Eph. 2:13–14)*

We come to Peace Sunday against the backdrop of war.<sup>1</sup> Alongside the countless other protracted conflicts, invasions, and civil wars playing around the world, our attention has been daily tuned to Israel and Palestine. Our prayers have circled around hostages and slaughtered families and the retribution being exacted by ground assaults and the pummeling of whole cities and populations. And we wonder how we can talk about peace when there is no peace.

### Acts 15

On this Peace Sunday, we pause at the Jerusalem Council described in Acts 15. Acts is a narrative that tells the story of emerging Jesus communities in decidedly complicated times. And it's a narrative that is plenty familiar with the mingled realities of religious and political conflict. At the Jerusalem Council, leaders in the early Christian movement gather for a critical moment of discernment and decision-making around what it means to be a community of Jesus followers in this new age of the Spirit.

I've participated in my fair share of church conferences over the years, and I suspect some of you have attended many more than I. So perhaps you can imagine the setting for what was playing out here in Jerusalem. A lot of mingling and greeting, a lot of hugs and reunions. Some folks are working the room, while others who are less connected are feeling a bit awkward and settling into the corners clinging to the first-century equivalent of coffee cups and Danishes from the reception table. There is some inspiring worship—songs, scriptures, sermons, and greetings. And then, at a certain point, the business session begins. Maybe a few formalities and

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softball issues are cleared out of the way before the pressing agenda makes it on the table. And if it's anything like the church conferences I've been to, it's a mixed bag of important conversation and wasted opportunity.

The agenda item in this Jerusalem conference began back in Antioch. This is where Saul and Barnabas had spent quite a bit of time ministering among the cultural Greek population such that the city had become home to an emerging faith community of both Jews and Gentiles together. So it caused a serious commotion when a group of Jewish Christians came to Antioch telling these Greek folks that they needed to take on all the

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traditional requirements of Jewish religious life if they wanted to be followers of Jesus. Paul and Barnabas disagreed, and some pointed discussions were had in Antioch.

Even from our perspective so far removed from the historical and cultural context of Acts 15, we can see that the stakes are high. There are major theo-

logical questions here about what Jesus had done and what it would mean to live as his disciples in light of his death and resurrection. But there are also some thorny practical considerations. It's no small thing to take on the traditions of Moses, particularly for folks who haven't learned them from childhood. And perhaps thorniest of all, the traditions of Moses would include circumcision. So we can understand why the Gentile believers in Antioch are holding their breath as this argument played out. These sharp discussions have the potential for some rather sharp implications!

Eventually, it is decided that this local issue needs some broader discussion. And so Paul and Barnabas head off with some others to Jerusalem, where the coffee and the Danishes are waiting. Jerusalem is where many of the earliest apostles had remained as *de facto* leaders of the emerging church. They were the Jewish inner-circle around Jesus, and so there is no guarantee how this discussion will go. We might wonder if the Jewish Christians who had come to Antioch in the first place might themselves have come from Jerusalem. And certainly when Paul and Barnabas arrive, they are met right away by more from this same camp. It's a setup that doesn't bode well for their cause.

The text describes much discussion at this point, and I can imagine the proceedings starting to spin and lose traction in the mire of compet-

ing perspectives. But then Peter starts to speak, and something shifts in the room. He shares an impassioned plea not to burden these new Greek believers with additional requirements. The room falls silent. With this encouragement from Peter, Paul and Barnabas then take their turn sharing stories of what God had been doing among the Gentile communities they had met on their travels. Finally, James—who had become something of a leader to the whole movement—stands up. He reflects on what he’s heard and draws from the scriptures to affirm with Peter and Paul and Barnabas that there should be no additional requirements made of Gentiles who are turning to God. They should be counselled to avoid a few key things, like meat sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality. But otherwise, they should be free to join the community of Jesus followers without taking on the rest of the Jewish religious traditions.

The delegate body at this conference seems to be on board by this point, and the whole Jerusalem church agrees to send a couple of their people back to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas to deliver a letter written to the Greek believers there. The letter outlines this perhaps surprising but welcome affirmation that the believers in Antioch could follow Jesus without additional requirements of adherence to Jewish law. The relief is palpable among the Antioch crowd when this letter is read—as one can imagine given that they were otherwise going to be facing a tough test of commitment to their newfound faith. And the Jerusalem envoy returns home bearing greetings of peace from far-off people now accounted as sisters and brothers in Christ.

## **Ephesians 2**

I think we can see the Jerusalem Council as a practical outworking of what Paul says in Ephesians 2: that now, in Jesus Christ, the wall has come down. The barrier of hostility that separated God’s chosen people from all others has been broken. “He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace” (Eph. 2:15).

For Paul, a core affirmation of the gospel—perhaps *the* core affirmation of the gospel—is this making of peace where there once was division. It’s a breaking down of barriers and hostility. This is the good news: that there is no longer an inside and an outside, a near and a far-off. There are no longer borders; there is no longer a wall. There is no longer enmity, suspicion, anger, and fear. There is no longer violence across the chasms

of religious tradition. There is no longer me and you; there is now simply “us” in Christ as we come through one Spirit to our God.

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And on a Peace Sunday, it is perhaps impossible. I think this is appropriate. What is playing out in Israel and Gaza today is deeply entwined with the church’s historical failure to live up to the good news that got Paul so excited in Ephesians 2. The good news that sent a delegation from Antioch back to Jerusalem with greetings of peace. On Peace Sunday, we must add to our prayers and

laments a confession of the devastating effects that both Christian antisemitism and Christian Islamophobia have had past and present.

The whole Jerusalem Council was necessary because in the early days it simply was not at all clear that what it meant to be part of this new community of Jesus followers was something other than being faithfully Jewish—as Jesus himself was. It was a live question and not a foregone conclusion, so close were and are the connections between the story of the Hebrew people and the good news of Jesus. Do new converts to the Way need to become Jewish and follow the law of Moses? Even as the Jerusalem Council answered no, this was not intended to mark a break. It was not intended to create a new wall or division. As Paul says in Ephesians, precisely the opposite is happening here: not a new dividing wall, not a new Christian “us” to place over against “them,” but a new peace through the cross that puts to death the enmity between us.

When Paul talks about Christ proclaiming the good news of peace to those far off and to those near, it’s the Gentiles who he sees as far off. We’re the ones who are being drawn closer into something that has already been at work for generations. We are the guests to this tradition, the gracious recipients grafted onto a faithful root. We are the ones who get to be part of this story by the pure and amazing grace of Jesus Christ.

And yet the history of Christianity is in so many places a history of enmity toward the Jewish people. A history of prejudice and persecution. A history of dividing walls and ghettoization. A history of scapegoating and violence that in the twentieth century found expression in an unspeakable holocaust. The origins of the current state of Israel are complicated,

but its roots are all over tangled up with this history—with our history as the Christian church in so many times and places. So as war rages on, we lament and confess how far short we have fallen from Paul’s vision of barriers broken and hostilities ended with those whose ancient faith we now claim as our own.

In the same moment, we also must acknowledge the Christian racism and Islamophobia that has fueled the politics of the Middle East for decades. The cries of Palestinian people for justice have so often gone unheard in the West. Their stories of displacement and occupation, of villages razed and homes destroyed, of dividing walls and illegal settler encroachment, of unequal access to resources and water, of blockades and controlled movement, of the open-air prison in the Gaza Strip that produces ever more angry young extremists with little to live for and nothing to lose. Our faith is entwined here, too, buttressing policies of injustice that must give us pause as people of peace.

And yet, our faith is also entwined in the struggle for justice and peace that is continuing to play out in this land. Easily forgotten in the crisis and the chaos is that this ground on which Jesus walked and the first elders and apostles conferenced has remained a home for communities of Jesus followers ever since. The Palestinian Christian community is a small but vibrant presence here—and one that in many places has become an important voice for Palestinian justice and liberation. In the face of ongoing oppression, crisis, and conflict, many Palestinian Christians have found common cause in this witness for justice in the land. It should be no surprise that the Jesus of the Gospels began to resonate with occupied Palestinian believers in a unique way. He was a fellow Palestinian living under occupation in a complex religious and political environment.

In the early 1990s, a specifically Palestinian liberation theology began to crystalize as ecumenical partners from Christian communities of all kinds gathered to reckon with what it means to be followers of Jesus in a context of injustice and oppression. Naim Ateek is an Anglican priest and one of the founders of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre in Jerusalem. Here’s how he describes this development:

*For most of our Palestinian people, including Christians, the predominant understanding of liberation involved armed struggle. The word Liberation was pregnant with military and violent connotations. . . . Palestinian liberation theology brought a new understanding to the struggle. True liberation can be*

*achieved more holistically and authentically through nonviolent struggle. . . . For us, walking in the footsteps of Jesus Christ and using his nonviolent methods can make a difference in spite of the thorns and hurdles along the road. . . .*

*Indeed, it is right to resist the evil of the illegal occupation of our country and to pursue peace and liberation for all the people of our land—Muslims, Jews and Christians. We must work for the liberation of the oppressors as well as the liberation of the oppressed. . . . With the emergence of Palestinian liberation theology, the prophetic word of peace and justice was again heard in Jerusalem and throughout the land.<sup>2</sup>*

This prophetic word stretches back at least to Paul’s own proclamation of the gospel in a time when Jerusalem was already a place for the church to gather and discern together: “so he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near” (Eph 2:17).

In 2007 a Palestinian woman named Manal Hreib wrote the lyrics to a new song as she prepared for a peace event in Nazareth marking both the Palestinian “Nakba”—the day to mourn the loss of Palestinian land—and the Israeli Day of Independence to mark the formation of the State of Israel. She wrote the text in both Arabic and Hebrew. These lyrics were then set to music by a Jewish Israeli woman, Daphne Rosenberg, who also translated the text into English. This event in Nazareth saw groups of Israelis and Palestinians dancing and singing the song together in all three languages.

We have this song in the *Voices Together* hymnal as “Between Darkness and Light” (808). I close by sharing this simple refrain, both a lament and a prayer for hope as we continue to hold the grief and the loss of our troubled world.

*Between darkness and light I will always walk  
And wherever I will go,  
I will open a window of light, and will plant the seeds of love.  
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## **About the author**

Kevin Derksen is a pastor at the Bethel Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

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2 Naim Ateek, *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Orbis, 2017), 4–5.