
A Listening Paradigm for the North American Church in a Globalized World

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The world in which we live has undeniably grown rapidly globalized, and only continues to do so at an ever-quickenning pace. It is now more common than ever before to interact with coworkers, friends, and even family who stem from nations, cultures, and religions other than one's own. In 2015 it was found that 40 percent of married Americans were of a different religious identity than their spouse.¹ The West continues to grow quickly more diverse and traditional cultural and religious boundaries are being blurred. As such, exposure to various perspectives and interpretations of faith throughout the world are also spreading through the diffusion of people, and thus cultures, to new places.

Churches themselves are also growing diversely within their bodies as a 2018 Baylor University research study argues that the number of multiracial/cultural churches in the United States doubled from 1998 to 2012.² As the Church in North America continues to grow more diverse, an important question about culture and its contribution to normative Christian theology and praxis emerges. When the diversely growing Church disagrees on a matter of orthodoxy or practice across ethnic or cultural lines, what or whom is the authority to resolve the dispute? Is it actually possible to be of *one* Lord, faith, and baptism in our complex diversity, or will white masculinity continue to set the norm for the Christian faith in North America?

In this article I propose a paradigm that guides the North American Church to hear and celebrate the voices of our sisters and brothers of various Christianities throughout the world. Finding the lenses through which our co-pilgrims in Christ come to understand and interpret the world around them is vital to finding Gospel community in a twenty-first century, globalized world. The examples of Christian expression throughout the world that

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might be used to help construct such a paradigm truly abound. Christianity is incredibly diverse and unique to the peoples who practice it within their own context.

There are a number of marginalized groups of Christians whose theology and hermeneutic offer a beneficial frame for proposing a paradigm of listening. However, I believe that Palestinian Christians are a unique and specifically important group for North Americans to consider as we seek to develop a model for listening to Christians throughout the world. In 2020, *Christianity Today* cited sources that claimed there were 47,000 Palestinian Christians, down from 70,000 in 1922. This group just barely makes up 1 percent of the population of the region of Israel and Palestine and is by all standards a minority of minorities.³ Caught in the midst of being Palestinian but not Muslim and living in

1. Caryle Murphy. "Interfaith Marriage is Common in the U.S., Particularly among the Recently Wed." *Pew Research Center* (September 03, 2020): <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/06/02/interfaith-marriage/>

2. "Multiracial Congregations Have Nearly Doubled, But They Still Lag Behind the Makeup of Neighborhoods," Media and Public Relations of Baylor University (June 20, 2018): <https://www.baylor.edu/mediacommunications/news.php?action=story&story=199850>.

3. Jayson Casper. "Why Many Christians Want to Leave Palestine. And Why Most Won't." *News & Reporting* (August 4, 2020). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/august/palestinian-christians-survey-israel-emigration-one-state.html>.

the region of Israel but not being Jewish causes the Palestinian Christian people to live within one of the most complex religious situations in the world. Additionally, the precarious entanglement of the United States and Israel, Zionism, political and economic interests in the region, and widespread eschatological speculation makes these Christians an important group to highlight.

We must build a framework for listening to Christians from around the world through asking questions such as: “Which voices are we listening to?” “How are we reading the Bible?” and “Which Jesus are we following?” Our Palestinian sisters and brothers, specifically through the work of priest and theologian Naim Ateek will help us answer these questions and build a framework for listening to our friends from around the world. These are the questions that ought to guide the North American Church as it continues to take steps into the globalized future of the Western Church.

Which voices are we listening to?

In the work of building a paradigm for listening to the global Church it is vital to first ask, “Which voices are we listening to?” Normally, the voices that are most likely to be heard are those that are loud and are associated with power and authority. For example, in North America it is undeniably true that the voices that are most heard, in every sector, are those of white men. While our culture is beginning to make some long overdue changes in this regard, the definition of what is normative, and in the Christian sense orthodox, overwhelmingly stems from the mouths and the pens of white males. Yet, it does not take much exegetical work to notice God’s preference for non-normative people within the narrative of Scripture. God certainly works in and through those who fit neatly within the normative culture, but most vividly seen in the life and ministry of Jesus is a preference for the small and powerless voices. Jesus calls fishermen, tax collectors, prostitutes, and demoniacs to be part of his “rag-tag” band of people who would change the world.

By all accounts, the Palestinian Christian people tend to fit this “rag-tag” mold. Stuck between cultures and living without rights under an oppressive regime they resemble many of the earliest followers of the Way of Jesus. From their perspective, the Palestinian people are descendants of the indigenous people of the region of Israel who have remained connected to the land through countless generations and political regimes.⁴ These indigenous people suffered under both the Christian and Muslim crusades, yet their lineage has survived to the present day. However, after both the Zionist movement of the late nineteenth century and global political restructuring following WW II, they now live as an occupied, politically voiceless people on miniscule tracts of the land of their ancient Canaanite ancestors. In 1947, Jewish immigrants to Israel were given more than 55 percent of the land of the region in response to the atrocities committed against them

4. Naim Stifan Ateek. *Justice, and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 16.

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during the Holocaust. Ateek argues of this land division, “the plan was totally unjust and absurd. It was imposed on the Palestinians by the wishes of the victorious Western powers that refused to allow the Palestinians their right of self-determination.”⁵

Throughout the course of Israeli advancement on Palestinian territory, more than 78 percent of the land mass of the region would eventually come under control of the Israeli government. Further, the Palestinian people have had both their physical movement (being barred from leaving and entering certain regions) and their voices constricted to utter suffocation. The Nakba (translated literally, “catastrophe”) marks the horrid advancement of Israeli forces on Palestinian communities in order to begin the process of forced migration and ethnic cleansing. For the Zionists, their interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures affirmed their right to the land, which Palestinians have resided in for arguably all of history. Yet, their interpretation of Scripture led to more than 5 million Palestinian people living as refugees, separated innumerable families, and utterly robbed the Palestinian people of material possessions, their cultural identity, and their even their faith.⁶ In this instance, the voices of power and authority both from the West and the Jewish people of Israel quenched that of their Palestinian neighbors.

The global community, including Zionist Christians in the West, have made it very evident throughout this tragedy whose voices they would choose to listen to. The loss of Palestinian life is largely not covered by media, nor tracked by international sources, but the number of those who have died at the hands of the Israeli state since 2000 is estimated to be more than 10,000.⁷ Their blood

5. Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice*, 21-22.

6. Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice*, 25-29.

7. Max Fisher. “This Chart Shows Every Person Killed in the Israel-Palestine Conflict Since 2000.” *Vox*. (July 14, 2014): <https://www.vox.com/2014/7/14/5898581/chart-israel-palestine-conflict-deaths>

cries out from the Palestinian soil but no one is listening. In light of this, we ought to ask ourselves, “Which voices are we listening to?” In conflicts of orthodoxy and interpretation do we listen to those with links to power, money, and guns, or to those whose blood saturates the earth beneath our feet? Whose interpretation most appears to align with the abused and scorn Christ hanging from the cross? The North American Church must begin to listen to the non-normative voices within its midst, and reassess the concept of orthodoxy, especially when certain interpretations *literally* implicate life or death.

How are we reading the Bible?

When approaching the biblical text, it is vital to consider if we are actually reading it adequately if it causes us no problems or pains in our interpretation. The Bible is a liberative text, and the process of liberation implies purification by fire of those things that bind us. The normative interpretation of Christian scripture in North America tends to favor the political, economic, and systemic predispositions of white, wealthy North American Christians. In this interpretation, various passages are metaphorized while others are literalized in order to affirm cultural predispositions.⁸

People of all cultures and ideologies do this, and a “pure” interpretation of Christian scripture truly does not exist. However, there are certainly ways to seek a true and good interpretation of the Bible and make application of it to the lives of Christian people. We just must first ask, “How are we reading the Bible?” We must acknowledge our unique predispositions as readers. Then, we must also seek to understand if those particular predispositions have been tested and refined by the arching narratives of the Bible. There are certainly parts of the Bible that ought to be read literally while others must be framed within their ancient context. Our Palestinian sisters and brothers provide a great example of properly understanding this necessity.

One of the key questions for Palestinian Christians is what to make of the Old Testament, particularly passages which are genocidal in their nature. Ateek writes, “we see those biblical texts that do not pass the Christ hermeneutic or the love hermeneutic as morally and theologically offensive; they have no authority for us.”⁹ Ateek and other Palestinian Christians read the genocidal texts of the Old Testament as stemming from a tribal and ethnocentric perspective. While these texts remain in their Bibles, they are not publicly read for worship and are suitable only for private lament. Further, it is not just that these texts do not apply to Palestinians, but these believers believe that these texts hold absolutely no authority for anyone.¹⁰

For the Palestinians, the greatest test for the authority of an Old Testament text stems from Jesus’ usage of the Hebrew

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scripture. Ateek makes the important clarification that nowhere in the Gospels does it appear that Jesus quotes from the books of Numbers, Joshua, and Judges.¹¹ Ironically, it is these very texts, among others, that the Zionists (including Western Christians) use to claim their sole possession of the land of the region of Israel and Palestine. Their interpretation of scripture is what has provided the fodder for the work of extinguishing the Palestinian people. Ateek explains, “they believe that he [Yahweh] is their nationalist god, who gave them the land, and they are now claiming it in his name.”¹² Yet, in what capacity do these texts (such as Num 33:50-53, Deut 7:1-3, or Deut 23:3-4, 6) reveal the true, arching narrative of Scripture which is God’s salvific plan for all people regardless of their tongue, tribe, or nation? Simply put, they do not. Palestinian Christians utterly reject these texts as not holding any value or spiritual authority, claiming that they stem from the imagination of a tribal people seeking land, blood, and revenge.¹³

Similarly, ethnocentric texts such as Ezra and Nehemiah, which advocate for the breaking up of culturally blended families in order to maintain Israel’s purity, are also rejected. Rather than ascribe authority to these texts, Palestinian Christians lean toward texts such as Ezekiel 47:21-23 in which the inclusive nature of God is made clear to the Israelites. Ateek believes that the texts written during and after the Babylonian exile are much more inclusive and significantly less tribalistic than those that were formulated in the ancient days of the people of Israel.¹⁴ The exclusive and narrow tribal vision for what Israel was intended to be began to fade as prophets such as Ezekiel and Isaiah caught vision of God’s desire for God’s people to be an invitation to the whole world.

8. For example, the majority of North American Christians read passages such as Mark 10:17-27, and Luke 10:25-37 as teaching a metaphorical, spiritual idea rather than a literal command of the Way of Jesus.

9. Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice*, 48.

10. Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice*, 49.

11. Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice*, 49.

12. Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice*, 50.

13. Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice*, 54.

14. Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice*, 61.

Palestinian Christians believe that these prophets fully understood God's progressive plan for Israel and that texts such as Leviticus (developed immediately prior to Ezra and Nehemiah) are attempts at maintaining an exclusivist vision of the people of God. Ateek writes, "Leviticus wanted to preserve the past by idealizing it. The prophetic school after exile was looking toward the future and developing an inclusive theology which included the other."¹⁵ Palestinians believe that God has always had a vision for expanding God's people beyond a singular group and favor the texts in which the prophets of Israel call the people to understand this. For this reason, the book of Jonah is extremely important to Palestinian Christians in that its narrative is entirely focused on the inclusivity of God despite the exclusive nature of a prophet among the people of Israel.

These followers of Jesus believe that the Bible is an amazingly liberative text, but that it has wrongly been used to subject their very own people to violence and displacement by an oppressive government. For them, how the Bible has been read has literally been a matter of life and death. So, while for many in the West the Bible is something to tit and tat around about in the seminary and on the internet, Palestinian daughters and sons are *actually* dying because of how it is being read.

The Church in North America must grasp the reality that how we read the Bible and the predispositions that we use to do so carry consequences for people beyond mere matters of orthodoxy. How we read the Bible matters. Our Palestinian brothers and sisters, and others like them from around the world, are calling their Western neighbors to consider that their interpretation of the text is not exclusive and untouchable. God has brilliantly placed wise and Spirit-filled women and men throughout time and place on this planet who approach the texts of Scripture and have drawn the hermeneutical arch to their own communities and people. Exclusivist claims are not needed. For this same reason, we must ask ourselves, "Which Jesus are we following?"

Which Jesus are we following?

Key to the Palestinian Christian experience is the discovery and search for an understanding of the historical Palestinian man called "Jesus of Nazareth." For these followers of his Way, the places in which Jesus walked are not far off mystical lands that they pilgrim to in tour groups. The places in which Jesus physically walked the earth are the indigenous lands of the Palestinian people. The Christians in this land trace their lineage through generations, stemming directly to some of the very first followers of the Jesus movement. The Gospel never arrived on their shores from a distant land or in a language they did not understand, it was born here. Ateek writes, "When Palestinian Christians recognized and accepted his full humanity, it was a turning point that drove us directly back to the Gospels to study Jesus's life and teachings."¹⁶

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Jesus who lived under an oppressive Roman regime, they see a man who directly understands their life and experiences. They read and talk about the man called Jesus who taught a completely alternative way of living to the tribal Yahwism of the ancient Jewish people. They find within the Gospels a man who suffered under an oppressive religious and political force and was executed as a state criminal for crimes he did not commit. They envision their brother, cousin, father, or friend who has suffered the same fate by the Israeli government simply for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Yet, in the Gospels the Palestinians find the story of a man who got up from the grave proclaiming a vision of hope and nonviolence. Ateek writes that, "the central Christian message is one of freedom and that this message has powerful implications for each specific context."¹⁷ The context of the Palestinian Christians demands that their only response to the suffering that they experience is to demonstrate the sacrificial, non-violent love of God and neighbor as expressed through Jesus.

Ateek affirms that overcoming fear through the manner of nonviolence is the prophetic witness of the Palestinian people today. He writes, "It is fear that stifles and paralyzes us and prevents us from taking risks. This is the malaise of human beings, no matter who they are or where they live. In this sense, the opposite of love is not hate but fear."¹⁸ To live in fear will naturally cause one to stem toward violence when confronted with an oppressive force. For the Palestinian Christians this is simply not an option. As such, their call is to live in radical love toward their neighbor despite their ethnic, religious, or political background, a love which casts out all fear. Ateek claims, "There is nothing new or impressive about hating or killing an enemy. To love and be merciful to an enemy is the truly radical behavior, because this lifts the person to the level of the truly human."¹⁹

17. Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice*, 11.

18. Naim Stifan Ateek, "Who Is My Neighbor?" in *Interpretation* 62 (2008): 163.

19. Ateek, "Who is My Neighbor?" 164.

15. Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice*, 64.

16. Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice*, 42.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, followers of Jesus have been given the capacity of radical enemy love, which is a truly transformational practice in a violent world. Undoubtedly, there were times when Jesus proclaimed his message with zeal, but as “Veggie Tales” creator, Phil Vischer, recently Tweeted, “If table-flipping Jesus is our favorite Jesus, we’ve lost the plot...If the Jesus who, out of love for others, laid down his rights and picked up his cross--and called his followers to do the same--isn’t the Jesus we’re devoted to, we’ve lost the plot.”²⁰ The Jesus that the Palestinian followers aim to follow is not one who teaches an exclusive message that casts the weak and powerless to the wayside. No, the Jesus they follow is one who calls them to love the Israeli soldier who spits on them as they pass by. Ateek explains that for the Palestinian Christians their missionary call is, “not a call to go out but to stay put. A call for a continuing presence, so that the candle of the Christian life will go on burning and shining in the midst of society.”²¹ The Jesus that Palestinian Christians know and follow is one who calls them to a peaceful witness through love of God and neighbor in the very midst of the suffering they experience.

As the North American Church considers its witness in society the guide of our Palestinian family is one that we ought to heed. If the Jesus we claim to follow is not one who leads us towards suffering, marginalization, and eccentricism, we must reconsider who we are actually following. Many in our time and culture aim to speak and lead on behalf of a “Jesus,” but their Jesus does not look anything like that who Palestinian Christians are seeking to follow. The normative expression of Jesus in North America tends to lean toward the themes of white masculinity that favor power and authority over meekness and suffering. Have we in the West completely missed what it means to be a follower of the true God-human named “Jesus”? In order to find the lens of our sisters and brothers throughout the world who meet Jesus in their poverty and suffering we must confess our thirst for money and power. Instead of thinking of Jesus as one who only saves us in a spiritual manner, we must begin to seek the Jesus who walks with us in the flesh and loosens the chains of the systemic sins which bind our daily lives. We must find a way forward.

A way forward: Christ as hermeneutic

Ateek consistently explains that the life and teachings of Jesus Christ are the only proper hermeneutic through which Christian people are capable of understanding Scripture, and thus live faithfully within the world. He writes, “In Palestinian liberation theology Jesus Christ becomes the hermeneutic, the lens or principle of interpretation through which Christians can examine, test, evaluate, and determine the authentic word of God for them.”²² By becoming students of the teachings and life of Jesus as expressed in the Gospels and expounded upon in the New Testament writings Christian people are able to interpret and

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understand their role as his witnesses in the world in which they live.

Through the incarnation, Christians have been made vividly aware of the heart of God, and the manner in which they ought to live in response to this knowledge.²³ When faced with any sense of doubt about how they ought to respond to challenges and suffering, Christians need look no further for an interpretive lens than the life of Jesus. When questions of orthodoxy arise, having Christ as the hermeneutic provides the capacity to cut through our cultural predispositions and shed that which is false and sinful. By being devoted students of Jesus who live into his calling by mimicking his character we may even find that many of our orthodox controversies begin to mysteriously fade.

As the North American Church seeks to offer a relevant and faithful witness within its diversifying and globalizing context, it is vital that the questions posed here are raised to the surface. Calvin argued that the human heart is a perpetual factory of idols. As such, we ought not be convinced that our idolatrous hearts are incapable of making idols into our perceived notions of what is true and orthodox Christian belief. Our nationalism, ethnocentrism, greed, and thirst for power, which we swim in within our culture, has the unfortunate capability of seeping into the voices we listen to, the way we read the Bible, and the “Jesus” we seek to follow.

By seeking to keep Christ as our hermeneutical lens, and by learning from our sisters and brothers in places throughout the world we will begin to understand what a faithful Gospel witness in a twenty-first century, globalized world looks like. The incredible privilege afforded to us today by advancements in technology presents us the opportunity to listen to and learn from Christian people in times and places throughout human experience. This is something that grants us no excuse to fail to ask the question, “Are we living a true and faithful Gospel witness in the world today?”

20. Phil Vischer, (@philvischer), Twitter Post. April 12, 2021.

21. Naim Stifan Ateek, “And Having Done All, to Stand” in *International Review of Mission* 75 (1986): 395.

22. Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice*, 44.

23. Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice*, 84.