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The Church in Israel: Conditions, Challenges and Concerns

Conditions

The Israel church is young, with a significant number of congregants from the US, Europe (the majority of whom came from the former Soviet Union) and Ethiopia. There is a slow but steady growth in the percentage of Israeli born and bred believers. Exact figures are not available, but I estimate that approximately 70% of professed believers in Hebrew-speaking congregations are immigrants or first generation Israelis who have yet to absorb Israeli culture to a significant extent. Some congregations have a higher percentage of veteran Israeli and Israeli born believers. The number of such congregations is growing but they do not yet form a majority.

Such a percentage of newcomers gives rise to a cultural gap between us and Israeli society, rendering us and our Faith culturally suspect in the eyes of fellow Israelis. This, in turn, tends to promote among us a desire to conform, often with scant awareness of the doctrinal and moral implications involved. This desire is accentuated by a series of additional factors.

First, many Israeli Christians are Gentiles whose Jewish roots are at best remote: either one of their parents is not Jewish, their mother is Gentile, or they belong to families with little knowledge and scant practice of traditionally Jewish cultural norms.

Second, we are seeking to establish ourselves in a society that has been physically, religiously and culturally downtrodden for over 2,000 years, in the course of which Jewish society has developed a strong sense of threatened identity. It is presently faced with the threat of physical destruction by avowed enemies on and within its borders. Some among us are tempted to defend the integrity of our national identity by substituting a healthy patriotism modified by the Gospel with forms of nationalism that do not sufficiently take the Gospel into account. For example, our preferred eschatology often serves to buttress nationalist propensities while disenfranchising those who subscribe to a different view.

Third, we are perceived by the majority of Israelis to have embraced the faith of our nation's traditional persecutors. With few exceptions, Christianity has a long, sad and shameful history in relation to Israel. The average Israeli cannot distinguish between Evangelical and non-Evangelical Christians, nor have all Evangelical Christians been noted for their kindness toward the Jewish people. The Messianic Movement has latched on to this factor and fed into its resultant inhibitions. An unbiblical willingness to distinguish oneself from the Church Universal is often the result. We insist, for example, that we are not Christians but Messianics. On the other hand, due to the enthusiastic political and financial support Evangelicals, especially in America, accord our State, we hesitate to affirm a distance that would threaten such support.

Fourth, the Church Universal, particularly the Evangelical church, is viewed by many Israelis as a fawning body with little moral fiber. Its support of Israel is viewed by many in our

society to be motivated by a desire for conversions rather than by moral considerations, sincere affection or a communality of interests. We Israeli Christians are often viewed as belonging to such a disrespected community. As a result, our willingness to distance ourselves from the Evangelical body overseas is accentuated.

Fifth, due to the fact that so many of us are immigrants or first-generation Israelis, we and our families often belong to the lower levels of the social and economic ladder, struggling to make ends meet, provide an education for our children, buy a home and secure a financial future. The cost of living in Israel is extremely high. A 1,500 sq. ft. apartment in an average city center costs US\$775,000. Outside city centers the same apartment would cost an average of US\$575,000, with a present-day mortgage rate of %2.54 plus linkage to the Cost of Living index. Reduced economic ability born of these factors implies greater difficulty in climbing the social ladder. It also implies reduced social credibility.

Sixth, the above-described circumstances contribute to pressures that impose on churches the duty to provide congregants with more emotional support than would be the case in an average congregation overseas. Such pressures further weaken the force of our witness. As noted, these factors combine to create a strong impetus to social insecurity that leads to an eagerness to conform to Israeli social and national expectations on the various levels of the fascinating Israeli enterprise. One expression of this is the repeated effort to find acceptance by claiming to be a stream within Judaism and by the increasing adherence to rabbinic norms, at times at expense of the Gospel.

Meeting the Challenges

The church in Israel is not as well equipped to meet such challenges as one would hope.

First, we do not have a strong spiritual tradition from which to draw guidance, cautionary indications and strength. We are seeking our way through trial and error, much as did every fledgling church in the course of history. But, as the saying goes, those who refuse from history are doomed to repeat its mistakes.

Second, we suffer from a weakness that is the result of a lack of biblical and theological education. There is a dearth in solid, broad-minded, informed, thoroughly evangelical biblical scholars and theologians. Happily, a slow but steady improvement in that area can be seen, but there is room for more. Many of those who lead our congregations are noted more for the strength of their personality and their ability to garner financial support than by the breadth of their education, their godliness, their informed spirituality, their pastoral skills or their humility.

Third, having accepted to varying degrees the paradigms of the Messianic Movement, the Israeli church has reduced much of its significant ties with the Church Universal to the receipt of moral and financial support. As a result, sources of knowledge accumulated over generations of walking with God are lost to us. Few good books are available and fewer are read. Speakers from overseas are often chosen so as to ensure that they will accommodate rather than counter present trends in our churches. Criticism, in the few times it is offered by an emasculated Western church, is seldom received and, if received, it is first filtered through a Messianic and Israeli grid and the grounds that our situation is any more unique than that of any others. There are encouraging improvements in this realm as well, which justify a hope that there will be more such as we mature in Christ and come to recognize the value of differing perspectives.

Fourth, most of the Christian influences in the church in Israel have been from well-meaning, dedicated Christians who have traditionally placed little stock in informed considerations of reality in the light of biblical teaching. Theology retains a poor reputation among us. A good deal of the preaching is *ad hominem* rather than the product of a thorough study of God's word and of the human heart. As a result, all too much of the preaching in our congregations is limited to moral exhortation, messianic prediction or eschatological speculation.

Expository preaching that is buttressed by careful exegetical preparation is relatively uncommon. Overtly theological books are generally spurned. The Israeli College of the Bible is making an effort to rectify this lack but, to my mind, is some way off from identifying and countering a number and correcting others. Still, as of this writing, 44 students have undergone the College's course on expository preaching – a welcome development.

Fifth, the church in Israel largely lacks healthy church examples from which to draw. In relation to our society, the church has become increasingly engaged in responding to social and emotional needs and in promoting evangelism. These are extremely welcomed trends, but ought not be the focus. They often serve as a means to seek acceptance in society to an extent that is unacceptable. At the same time, our churches are less concerned with the cultivation of the kind of biblical understanding that tends to lead to godliness, humble spirituality, God-oriented moral courage and a sweet walk with God. Felt needs are not always born of the right perspectives. Nor are they always the best guides for ministry.

Sixth, language-based churches in which either Russian, Ethiopian or English is almost exclusively spoken, create cultural ghettos in which members are isolated from Israeli society. Such isolationist communities present the Gospel in terms that are irrelevant, at times even hostile, to society. In addition, they do not create the kind of challenging space in which conflicting cultures meet, clash and modify each other in areas in which modification is in place. Nor do they allow for the kind of compelling, day-to-day cooperation that should be seen among us.

Seventh, we are burdened with the generous, uncritical moral and financial support that overseas Christians accord some of the most least-respected, theologically-erroneous and morally questionable causes among us. Over-generous aid has also encouraged a measure of financial dependence that is not helpful to our churches. Few congregations provide, even partially, for the support of those who serve them.

Eighth, a good deal of talent and effort is directed at evangelism and to no less social activity. Inroads are being made where they were not to be seen in the past. The use of the Internet has been innovative and encouraging. A number of shelters for the homeless and for those considering abortion are run by Israeli Christians. At the same time, all too little attention is given to cultivating the fear of God, an informed attitude to the word of God that will dare break away from accepted norms, respect for the Church Universal or the kind of spiritual devotion that promotes a sensitive conscience before God and a humble walk before men.

Finally, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict imposes on the church in Israel a division in terms of culture, language and national affiliation that renders almost impossible the kind of practical, congregational unity that should exist among Christians. Arab and Jewish Christians rarely worship in the same congregations, even where it is possible. The national conflict is allowed to spill over into inter-congregational divides that have no room in the kingdom of God because they run contrary to the Gospel.

Encouraging Trends

In the goodness of God and in spite of these challenges there are encouraging trends evident in the Israeli church.

First, there is a warmth of commitment and a strength of conviction that, if supplied with mature biblical knowledge translated into daily conduct, could well transform our churches and constitute a much-needed corrective to Israeli society. There is a growing generation of young Israeli Christians who are determined to make their way in the context of society and who are making progress in the realms of the military, the academic world and of personal enterprise. I remember the days when the mere mention of a believing community evoked concern for fear of exposure. Nowadays Israeli Christians have no fear of their pictures posted on the Internet or the congregations attended by unknown newcomers.

Second, Israeli society has a growing acquaintance with Israeli Christians and is forming a more positive view of us than in the past. As members of the younger generation complete their military service, obtain an education and establish themselves in society, they are increasingly making their mark, gaining credibility and influence. They are outspoken about their faith. On one hand, this contributes to an erosion of our social insecurity and its replacement with a growing confidence. On the other, it is lending a growing measure of credibility to our witness and may well be the harbinger of things to come. In the course of time, the pressure on the church to conform may be reduced, or successfully withstood.

Third, there is a growing sense of dissatisfaction among the younger generation with the present state of things. While few if any have any idea what changes should be enacted, still fewer are willing to contribute to the status quo.

Fourth, there is evidence of increased interest in biblical and theological learning, cultivated and promoted by the Israel College of the Bible and encouraged by some local church leaders. A number of scholars and educated Pastors have arrived from overseas and are contributing to the trend.

Fifth, fellowship between our churches has increased, which could lead to unity.

Cooperation between churches is increasing and discussion of theological matters has laid the ground for further cooperation and mutual edification. The various inter-congregational activities held, particularly for children, youth and young adults, have eroded barriers between churches and may lead to still further advances in areas of mutual agreement, to the blurring of the edges of disagreement and to a healthy emphasis on major issues instead of on minor. Hopefully, this will not be at the expense of truth but in its service.

Challenges

Apart from the normal challenge every Christian faces to grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord, those facing the Israeli church are the product of conditions described above, as well as of others of which I am not sufficiently aware.

First, I am convinced that our churches' greatest need is to be driven to an informed, spiritually-minded understanding of the word of God. The challenge is for those of us who share a concern for and a commitment to the long-term welfare of the church in Israel to find ways to fulfill our part to that end by using the means God has put at our disposal, and to prayerfully seek and await an act of God that will lead to the spiritual, moral and cultural revolution we all so desperately need.

Second, we need to be moved by the Spirit through the word of God so that we refuse to be conformed to the image of our environment. Instead, we should be constantly transformed to reflect the kingdom of God, his holiness, his sovereignty and his saving grace in the contexts of life -- personal, familial, congregational and social. We must dare to be Christian, dare to be different, dare to exercise a prophetic role in our society by challenging it in areas in which it needs to be challenged, of which there are many.

Third, it also means that, while we continue to insist on our Jewishness and on the fundamental Jewishness of our Faith, we dare reject rabbinicism and expose it for what it is: a departure from the word of God. Rabbinicism is not Jewish because it is not biblical. Faith in Messiah Jesus is the epitome of a Jew's obedience to God and a fulfillment of his national calling.

Taking such a stand would mean the risk of unpopularity, of persecution and of rejection, but it would also mean a piercingly clear and challenging call for our nation to repent and believe the Gospel. Our people desperately need to hear such a call. Corruption, overt sexuality, promiscuity, indifference to the suffering of others or to their sense of injustice (including that of the Palestinians), head-strong materialism, homosexuality, the horrific rate of abortions performed in Israel, the high rate of divorces, selfishly indulgent hedonism -- these and many other ills threaten our society with the wrath of God. If we continue in the

same direction, we may find ourselves subject once again to severe punishment. We Israeli Christians cannot, dare not be silent.

Fourth, premeditated efforts could be made by Christians overseas to promote our social progress by various means that would encourage education, assist in professional training, in the purchase of homes and the establishment of viable businesses and industries.

Fifth, no legitimate initiative can alter the fact that many of us hail from non-Jewish or barely Jewish backgrounds. Nor ought we be ashamed of the fact; it is true of Israelis as a whole. The proportion of integrally Jewish Israeli Christians is likely to increase in the course of time. Until it does, this is a reality with which we shall have to live. The same is true of language-based congregations, Jewish and Arab congregations, or of congregations that make cultural identity – any cultural identity – their hallmark. I have no doubt that the conviction that such congregations have biblical justification is mistaken. The church in Israel needs to develop a more biblical view of the church, one that conditions membership on nothing but the grace of God, so as to reflect the Gospel and to accord spiritual and moral credibility to our message.

Sixth, this is likewise true of the tendency in our churches to distance ourselves from the Church at large. The more we recognize that we belong to one another, the more readily will we be able to learn from those who preceded us and from those whose qualifications equip them to teach us how to make up for our shortcomings. It is only in fellowship “with all the saints” that we can be filled with “all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:17-19). A humble willingness to accept criticism may then develop among us and lead us to ever more fertile pastures.

Seventh, the better we understand the Gospel, the higher view of Christ we will have because we will have a better understanding of divine grace. Christ’s sufficiency is the only grounds of that grace, and his divinity is the source of that sufficiency. These are the truths that distinguish a faithfully Christian church and that form the basis of its life and unity. If we are granted a larger, more biblical view of Jesus, the Son of God, we will be rid of our insecurities, willing to go against the grain of our society where obedience to God requires us to do so. We will dare to be Jewish without submitting to Judaism’s diktats. We will dare to be Israeli without succumbing to nationalistic tendencies. We will dare to be Christian in the face of national disapproval. We will dare challenge the Church at large to help us call our people into account where they err and where our society departs from God’s just and holy standards. Evangelism will then be the product of sanctified lives rather than a means of self-defense or self-promotion.

Eighth and to that end, solid, broad-minded, intelligent, inquisitive and godly biblical and theological education in Israel should be encouraged by the Church at large and a more critical approach adopted toward various causes in Israel. The Church overseas should exercise a far more critical approach to the ministry of the Gospel in Israel. It should more willingly heed local evaluations of individuals and of ministries and rid themselves of the kind of thinking that attributes more importance to the State of Israel than the promotion of the kind of godliness that is necessary for the church in Israel if it is to fulfill its God-given role to our nation.

Concerns

I close with an expression of some concerns. My **first** concern is the complacency with which, it seems to me, the majority in Israel and abroad view the scene in Israel. Mere numerical growth is often viewed as a sign of health. There has indeed been a numerical increase in Israel both in congregations and professed believers in Jesus. However, the faith of many is often as biblically shallow as the warmth of their devotion is heart-warming and sincere.

Second, the eagerness of the younger generation to see change, coupled with a lack of

biblical knowledge and translated into a passionate search for substance, could well transform this promising generation into a lost opportunity if its members are persuaded to pursue a wrong direction. In spite of the warmth and sincerity of their devotion, they presently have limited means by which to evaluate options and identify those most in accordance with the word of God.

Third, the Israeli church is still focused on finding acceptance in society, in the meeting of valid social needs and on numerical growth rather than on the cultivation of an informed, warm-hearted, biblically-oriented walk with God that involves humility, holiness, the fear of God and spiritually-motivated moral standards. The Law is largely perceived in ritualistic terms, often as dictated by the rabbis, while the moral aspects of the law are seldom promoted. Instead, a kind of moralism prevails. Many of those who serve congregations are scantily trained and have little or no previous church experience. Nor is there sufficient awareness of the need for the Pastors to train themselves or to accept peer and congregational accountability.

Fourth, vested interests on the part of foreign bodies working in Israel or supporting causes in the country make increased accountability and more critical engagement unlikely except for an extraordinary act of God.

That is precisely where our hope is to be found. Jesus has undertaken to build his church so that the very gates of hell will not prevail against its onslaughts. Isaiah (Chapter 29) spoke of the day when Jacob will glorify the Holy One of Israel when Jacob sees his children, the evident work of God's redeeming hands, in his midst -- a virile church in Israel made up of those who are Jewish but, far more important, courageously and obviously Christian. Salvation is of the Lord, all of it, from beginning to end. A redeemer will come to Zion and turn ungodliness from Israel because this is God's covenant with them. This is our hope and the grounds of our confidence.

Ministry and Family News

God willing, by the time you receive this letter Bracha and I will have just completed our 2016 tour of the US – we are scheduled to return home on July 15th. In the course of the recent trip we drove some 10,000 miles and held 51 meetings and services, spent just under three weeks with our daughters (Avital and Tamar) and their families in Seattle, during which time the family gathered to celebrate Passover; a further two weeks or so off and on with Shlomit and her family in Camp Hill PA and just under one week with Katya and her family in Montreal Canada.

I'm still editing my translation of the BOOK ON CHURCH HISTORY before submitting it to the publisher, a process that began while we were on tour. Editorial comments on my translation of Matthew in the TRANSLATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT have been received and were but barely reviewed in the same period – in spite of my efforts, I was unable to do much in this realm as we travelled, and there is some urgency to complete translation of the book on church history.

My DAILY DEVOTIONS continue to be produced, with a slowly growing readership. I've completed Peter's two letters, John's three and Jude's one and am about to proceed to James'. Writing these expository devotionals continues to be a challenge and an experience of grace to my own heart.

Following is my FINAL REPORT on the details regarding the BREAK-IN AND WATER DAMAGE. The insurance company has rejected our claim for water damages, leaving us with a much lower compensation level than expected. We paid the contractor \$18,000, less than what we originally owed, due to faults in construction. Due to technicalities onto which the

Insurer has latched, it is also unlikely that we will receive the promised \$3,600 for medical expenses, paid as an advance for the operation (as you will recall, the hospital and the surgeon forgave the remaining \$31,500). However, the news is not all bad; to the contrary:

Using round figures, the total costs of repairs following the break-in and discovery of water damage came to \$97,700. Our loss in the theft totaled \$85,000 and we paid \$3,600 as an advance (other expenses mentioned in our previous reports are not included). We received from the Insurance company \$23,600 and Bracha's surgery cost us \$3,600. God's people, amazingly, provided us with \$92,000 and the bank has agreed to convert our \$64,500 debt into a 5-year mortgage, with no penalty for earlier payment. We paid the contractor from the remainder of our savings and have no debts (or savings) but the mortgage.

Loss and outlay: $98,000 + 3,600 + 85,000 + 18,000 = 204,600$

Income and Christian generosity $23,000 + 92,000 = 115,000$

Sum forgiven (surgeon and hospital) = \$31,500

As you can see, more than half of our losses were covered. A hearty THANK YOU! is due all who so generously helped us, and PRAISE TO GOD for his kindness, expressed through you.

Efforts have to make up for the loss of monthly income due to the withdrawal of a major supporter last year. We would be relieved to increase our monthly income by any sum up to \$2,850, but recent providences only serve to remind us that we can – and should— trust the Lord and his goodness. We will not be reporting further on this issue unless there is a significant development in any direction.

In Christ by grace,

Baruch and Bracha Maoz

You can help by purchasing copies of Baruch's books from Barnes & Noble or from Amazon by asking for them at your local bookstore and **by posting reviews of these books** on Barnes & Noble or Amazon websites. Positive reviews help sell the books!

COME LET US REASON TOGETHER (On the Unity of Jews and Gentiles in the church), P&R. This book presents Christ as the fullness of divine revelation and his work as sufficient for our whole salvation.

JONAH: A PROPHET ON THE RUN, Shepherd Press, a devotional commentary on the book of Jonah.

MALACHI: A PROPHET IN TIMES OF DISTRESS, a devotional commentary on the book of Malachi. Founders Press.

**The devotional commentaries are well suited
for personal devotions and group Bible studies**

Baruch's sermons may be heard on [Sermon Audio](#)
To remain abreast of developing circumstances in Israel, visit the [MaozWeb](#)
or "follow" Baruch on [Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#) and on [Twitter](#) (@BaruchMaoz).

Intermittent bulletins are produced as necessary



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