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Oneness in Christ

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There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28).

Biblical Foundations

To a real extent, we are unaware of the tensions that existed with the church of Jesus Christ in the days of the apostles. Such tensions were so real that Paul devoted a large part of his ministry to countering them with the Gospel. In just about every one of his letters, he makes direct and indirect reference to the subject. All the controversies in which he found himself engaged had to do with the unity of the body of Christ, with what the title of our assigned conversation denominates as "oneness."

From a Jewish perspective in the world of those days, the primary social tension had to do with relations between Jews and Gentiles. From a Roman perspective the primary tension had to do with issues of social status: aristocrat and commoner, citizen and non-citizen, slave and slave owner. A secondary social tension existed between male and female, with women excluded from many of the privileges enjoyed by men. From a Christian perspective, none of these distinctions had relevance.

I wish to draw your attention to a phrase I used in my opening statement, because it is an excellent summary of what I have to say: "Paul devoted a large part of his ministry to countering such tensions with the Gospel." In other words, Paul believed that any lack of oneness in Christ is a denial of the Gospel, and that unity in Christ is a proclamation thereof. He believed that the Gospel runs against the grain of social tensions because it runs against the grain of social, racial, cultural, educational or gender differentiations.

How so? It is really quite simple. Paul makes the argument, for example, in his letter to the Romans. In Chapters 1-3 he insists that **all**, Jews and Gentiles, **have sinned and fall short of the glory of God** (3:23). In (2:6-10) he explains that God **will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for**

everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality (2:6-11).

In chapter 4, he insists that this blessing is not reserved for the circumcised. It extends to the uncircumcised. In chapter 5 he shows us why: Jesus is the new Adam, the head of a new humanity, not a new Abraham, the head of a new Israel. Not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations" (4:16-17). Paul then goes on in chapter 6 to lay an equal burden of duty on both Jews and Gentiles in Christ. He describes in chapter 7 the same struggle in which both are engaged and, in chapter 8, the hope that comforts both.

Throughout the epistle, Paul has shown how all who came short of God's glory are justified by His grace (3:24). There is an important reason for this, which Paul spells out: it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all (4:16). He further shows that all are likewise the object of continuing grace (5:21), are not subject to the law but to grace (6:15), and are to receive one another, on the same grounds and in the same generous manner in which they themselves were welcomed by grace to the glory of God (15:7) -- which is the point Paul spells out in practical terms in chapters 12-16.

Hence, as Paul draws his letter to a close in chapter 15, he makes much of the fact that God's gracious intentions always included the Gentiles: I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy (15:8-9). He then seals his letter with the exhortation, I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites (16:17-18).

Having assured them, in face of the social tensions which they inevitably face in their mixed congregation (as all congregations should be), that God will shortly crush Satan under their feet, Paul signs off with a word of praise to God in Christ and intimated exhortation to his readers, now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen (16:25-27). In other words, they are to obey the Gospel – "they" being Jews and Gentiles in Christ – by maintaining the unity of the body in the bond of peace.

Of course, one could make a similar case from Paul's letters to the Galatians, the Philippians and the Colossians, let alone that to the Ephesians. However, it is my purpose to demonstrate how very much oneness in Christ issues out of and touches upon the very essence of the Gospel, and how grace is the basis of fellowship because it is the basis of salvation and of the Christian life. In His letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul's concern is, of course, to present the Gospel he preached. Nevertheless, he repeatedly reverts to the issue of oneness because of the close relationship between the Gospel and oneness.

That is why I have preferred to resist the temptation and deal here with the letter to the Ephesians. Suffice it for me to say, that the same inherent relationship between grace, oneness and fellowship lays at the basis of what Paul has to say in his other letters.

One more point needs to be made, and it is an important one. Grace, as the basis of salvation, the Christian life and oneness, is contingent on the sufficiency of the glorious source

of grace, namely Christ. If he has not, **by one sacrifice, forever sanctified those who come to God through him**, then grace is not sufficient for salvation because it cannot secure sanctification, cannot ensure glorification, and is an unstable foundation for oneness. However, Paul insists upon Christ's sufficiency. He insists that it is such that **those whom God foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom He predestined He also called, and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified (8:29-30).**

Therefore, nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (8:39) and therefore, Paul exults, **what then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (8:31-39).**

This is, indeed, a glorious Gospel! It is the very power of God to save, to forgive, cleanse of guilt and transform. Paul includes all, regardless of race, cultural background, social standing, language or differences of doctrine within the range of evangelical faith. It is the means by which God transforms societies, alters the course of history and glorifies Himself. That is what the church should be exemplifying. Moreover, if sin cannot negate God's grace toward us, how dare we negate our grace toward others because they differ from us?

Where the Rubber Hit the Road

Let us now try to imagine the nature of the tensions that would exist in an average Christian church in the days of the apostles. As we noted, such churches were not segregated. They were not divided as are ours nowadays, into language-based churches, white and blue collar churches, black and white churches, Baptist, Presbyterian and Pentecostal churches, and suchlike. In those days, the church was visibly one. It was no easier then to live together in one church than it is today, but the early Christians' view of the church differed from ours. They did not view the church as a club in which veteran members decide if others may join and who, nor of a club which we decide to join. They viewed the church as the realm God's sovereign grace in Christ. He alone ruled in the church, and he did so by his Spirit and according to his word. For that reason, the first Christians were far better equipped to give practical expression to the Gospel of grace by way of their congregational life than we are today.

In those days, Jews seldom spent time in the company of Gentiles and certainly would not eat their food. They despised the Romans for their idolatry, their promiscuous behavior and homosexuality, their indulgence in food, their habit of exposing unwanted babies to the elements in the city dump-heap, their crass materialism and their worship of Caesar. Romans despised the Jews for their perceived prudery, their strange dietary habits, their faith in an unseen God and their social “stand-offishness”. Judea, the land of the Jews, had seen repeated uprisings over issues that the Roman mind could not comprehend, and Jews refused to swear

by the genius of Caesar or perform the civic duty of worshipping at his altar. They were viewed as an arrogant, troublesome people with but scant loyalty to the welfare of the Roman State.

Yet all this was done away with when Jews and Gentiles met in Christ. They were united by a common goal, members of the one kingdom of God, governed by the same divine laws and recipients of the same divine grace. They worshipped the same God, ate the same food, bore the same duties, and rejoiced in the same hope as they aspired together to holiness and to evermore of the presence of God.

One hardly needs to describe the differences in social status that pertained between slave-owners and their slaves, although not all slaves were treated with the kind of cruelty that we usually associate with their social status. Still, slave owners had every legal right to dispose of them as they deemed fit. Slaves were used for the gratification of sexual desires, their bodies for the polishing of utensils and their marriages for the promotion of the wealth of their owners. They had no rights. An owner could kill his slaves for any reason or for no reason at all and there would be no consequences except the loss of property represented by the slave's commercial value. Mistreatment of slaves was commonplace, as were instances of theft, murder and flight on the part of slaves. At one stage, the Senate considered requiring all slaves to wear identifying garb but decided against the idea, lest that would make the number of slaves in the Roman society too obvious and encourage the slaves to rebel.

All this was done away with when slaves and slave-owners met to worship God in Christ. They shared the same status, were united by mutual regard and belonged to the one kingdom. They were governed by the same divine laws and recipients of equal grace. They worshipped God side by side, addressed God as "Father" and rejoiced in the same hope as they aspired together to holiness and to evermore of the presence of God, whose presence they experienced equally when they worshipped together as one body.

Time will not allow me to describe the difference between men and women in Jewish or Roman societies. Suffice it to say that in both societies women had few legal rights. They were considered the possession of their fathers until marriage and then of their husbands. In Roman society, children were placed upon birth at the feet of their father. He could choose at will to recognize or reject them. If rejected, the child would be left to die. Baby girls were often considered a liability and not recognized.

All of this disappeared in the church. Male and female were acknowledged to have been created in the image of God and therefore accorded equal honor and protection. The church amazed both Jewish and Roman worlds by their highly moral, contra-cultural norms and by the practical way in which Christians over-rode distinctions and practiced a kind of social cohesion the world had never seen.

These were not the only differences to which Christians refused to accord priority over their oneness in Christ. Peter and Paul had strong disagreements regarding conduct and practice. Such disagreements issued out of important differences of emphasis in their understanding of the Faith. So stark were these that Paul challenged Peter in public, accusing him of conduct that *was not in step with the truth of the Gospel* (Gal. 2:14), rendering Peter condemnable (2:11) and hypocritical (ibid verse 14). Lest we think this was a mere spat over minor issues, Paul went on to imply that Peter was nullifying the grace of God and implying that *Christ died for no purpose* (ibid, verse 21). No more grievous charge could be made. Yet neither Paul nor Peter chose to break away one from the other and establish separate congregational associations. They knew they belonged one to another in Christ and therefore, refused to take personal umbrage (imagine how a modern-day Christian would respond to

Paul's accusations). Instead, they chose to live and serve alongside each other while working out their differences. Earlier, in Acts 15, mutual accommodation was prescribed, not separate congregational associations.

Why? Because Christ loomed larger in the eyes of the early Christians than their differences. Because they knew that the grounds of their fellowship was grace, not agreement, language, a shared culture or anything else. Because they paid more than mere lip service to their recognition that Christ has but one body and God has but one kingdom, to which they all belonged whether they liked it or not. They therefore learned to like it. They chose to live out the Gospel in the face of their differences and, once again, amazed the world by the love they showed one to another.

That, I propose, is our calling. The world is no longer amazed by the church, unless it is by the inanity of our moral standards and speed by which we embrace the world's cultural norms. The church has ceased to be contra-cultural; it apes the world in style, conduct and standards. It is high time that the church reverted to being the Church of God, holding for the word of truth in the midst of an increasingly crooked and perverse generation. It is time that we ended the establishment of our respective fiefdoms and chose to live and labor together for the glory of God.

Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes! It is like the dew of Hermon which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore (Psalm 133). Something of eternity is savored when brothers dwell in unity.

It is high time for the church to become once again unworldly -- other-worldly, God- and God's kingdom-orientated. It is high time for us to be one as the Father, Son and Spirit are one, that the world might know that the Father sent the Son to be the savior of the world. It is high time for the church to dare be the church again.

Ministry and Family News

Bracha and I arrived home just four days before our youngest, Tamar, arrived with her family for a two-weeks plus visit. Bracha was amazing as she scurried about readying the house for the anticipated and very welcome invasion. She moved to the living room where she slept, while I moved to the office, where I was to spend the nights. We inflated two air mattresses and placed them on both sides of our bed. We set out the toys, the coloring table, with colors, coloring books and plenty of paper. We child-proofed the house (as best we could) and Bracha filled the fridge with cakes, goodies and all the food the children love. Today (Monday, August 8) they left, leaving a hole in our hearts.

A major step was made with both the translation of the BOOK ON CHURCH HISTORY and of THE NEW TESTAMENT, by migrating them to Word's new Mac-compatible version and rendering editing easier and therefore quicker.

My DAILY DEVOTIONS continue to be produced, with a growing readership and encouraging responses. Once we have reached the 365-day mark, I expect to have these produced in book form, providing an expository study of James' letter, the two by Peter, the three by John, Jude and whatever other New Testament books I manage to bring within that framework. The next, God willing, will be based on the Pentateuch. In this way I am able to continue my project of producing as many expository works in Hebrew, as God will see fit to enable me to produce.

The next big project is, as indicated earlier, A BOOK ON THE CHURCH.

Our Pastor has left for a six-week working vacation. I will be supplying the pulpit for most of this time, excepting one occasion when I am scheduled to preach elsewhere. Upon our Pastor's return I am scheduled to alternate with him on a three-months basis in teaching the mid-week Bible study. I have, therefore, following consultation with a church under whose supervision I hope to come, discontinued the Monday Bible studies.

An invitation to preach to the Jews for Jesus Israeli team on their day of prayer, and to teach their short-term trainees on the spiritual walk afford further opportunities for ministering God's word.

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

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