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We've Lost Something Valuable

A letter to the Churches in Israel Part Three of four
Issued September 2017, translated into English November 2017,

Dear sisters and brothers,

Today, conferences, seminars and organizations fulfil duties that God laid by his word on churches. At the same time they deplete churches of talents and competencies that could have contributed to the health of the churches and their testimony to our people. Some organizations and conferences are doing good, even excellent, work but Messiah did not establish organizations, nor did he organize non-church conferences; he established churches. Christians are obliged to act in accordance with the word of God, not according to what they deem right in a given situation.

There are too many conferences. Because of their frequency, they take place at the expense of orderly, regular church life. Many prefer to attend such conferences instead of belonging to churches. But conferences cannot do what God has commissioned the church to do: teaching in the context of oversight, spiritual and moral discipline. None of the regular conferences and the greater majority of the intermittent conferences that are organized in the country are not subject to any congregation (although they are often organized by congregational "leaders", as they are described nowadays). No conference has contributed meaningfully to the health of the churches, while at the same time they presume to "make up for what is missing" in local Israeli churches. Without doubt, there is room for a conference here and there. But all Christian activity must be guided by scripture. For that reason, all public Christian activity must be subject to a church or to a body of churches.

We do not really have a message to the nation. We shear off one person here and there, collect another elsewhere, but even these do not always join with us for the right reasons. When did we teach them the fear the wrath of God and flee from it to Messiah? When did we define sin in terms of the Ten Commandments (the first of which is "I am the Lord your God"), instead of speaking about emotional angst, lack of purpose, low self-image and other such, all of which focus on man while the Creator of the universe and the Father of our Lord Jesus the Messiah is forgotten and, at best, invited to relieve us of the pains involved

in living in a sinful world than has risen against him, without ourselves forgoing the mutinous banner?

The Gospel is not logical in terms acceptable to the world, and every effort at proving otherwise is doomed to fail because the point of departure that the world recognizes contradicts the Gospel at its very foundation.

“And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

“Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written, ‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard nor the heart of man imagined what God has prepared for those who love him’.

“These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

“The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. ‘For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?’ ” (First Corinthians 2: 1-16)?

We can, therefore, amaze them with stories of miracles or convince someone of the existence of God, that the world was created in six days, that evolution is a farce, or of scores of truths, and yet they will not be saved (“If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead”, Luke 16:31). Salvation is a matter of being freed from the power of sin, even if ones errs on other matters.

Christian involvement in social issues is more than “good works” like those common among us, to which we made earlier reference (caring for the homeless, for refugees and the such like activities). First and foremost it is a willingness to challenge the national sins prevalent in our nation: materialism, hedonism, promiscuity, selfishness, homosexuality in its various forms, the erosion of the nuclear family, arrogant racism, the way we treat Palestinians and, above all, the lack of the fear of God. It is the willingness to criticize, openly and sharply, religious institutions in our country, the conduct of those in power, details of internal and external policies that are innocent of moral inhibitions.

We must call the nation to repentance, as a nation, and not be satisfied with an appeal to individuals. If we dare tell our people what they do not want to hear although that is exactly the message they need to hear, our message will be have more validity and will be much closer to that of the scriptures.

We must declare to our people courageously and without compromise, so that “whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that a prophet has been among them” (Ezekiel 2:5). What was said to Ezekiel in that context is as true today: “Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels, who have rebelled against me. They and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendants also are impudent and stubborn: I send you to them, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God’.” (ibid, verses 3-4).

We are not responsible for the way our people will respond. Our duty is to declare the Gospel, faithfully and clearly. After all, unless a person is born from above, by the Spirit, he will be unable to see the kingdom of God, and that all who do see, “were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13). We have no control over this matter.

That control is wholly in God’s hands. That is the message repeatedly noted, intertwined in all the amazing events described in the book of Revelation:

“I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, ⁴and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. And one of the elders said to me, “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

“And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying, ‘Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.

“Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!’

“And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, ‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!’ And the four living creatures said, ‘Amen!’ and the elders fell down and worshiped” (Revelation chapter 5).

That is why the history of our nation is not “a story told by an idiot”. There is a logic behind it, although that logic is unacceptable to our people, and we too find it difficult to embrace:

Hear the word of the Lord, O children of Israel, for the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land; there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed.

Therefore the land mourns and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field and the birds of the heavens and even the fish of the sea are taken away ... The more they increased, the more they sinned against me; I will change their glory into shame ... I will punish them for their ways and repay them for their deeds. They shall eat, but not be satisfied; they shall play the whore, but not multiply because they have forsaken the Lord” (Hosea 4:1-3).

Israel

Tensions on the border with Gaza have increased, largely due to the dire economic situation in Gaza and to Israel's marked success in discovering and destroying Hamas' attack tunnels, leading into Israel. The economic situation is due to Hamas' redirection of funds, food, building materials and medical supplies to its military purposes rather than improving the lives of the civilians subject to Hamas' regime. The destruction of the tunnels is robbing Hamas of what it considers to be a major means by which to attack Israel. It is estimated that, by the end of 2018, all such tunnels will either be destroyed or rendered useless by Israel's technological skills. Hamas is on tenterhooks as it frames a decision whether or not to attempt an attack before the end of this year, after which the tunnels will no longer serve any useful purpose.

At the same time, Iran is seeking to establish a front on Israel's north-eastern border with Syria to buttress the threat constituted by Hezbollah to the west of Syria. Israel has taken repeated military action to prevent this, but its' efforts can only slow down the process, not stymie it altogether. Israel is being rocked by police investigations of purported corruption on the part of the Prime Minister, the Coalition Whip, the Minister of the Interior and senior governmental and military officials.

Ministry and Family News

Noam, our eldest granddaughter, continues in the program here in Israel. She lives and volunteers a mere 35 minutes' drive from us, but the schedule is such that we get to see her no more than once every two weeks or so. Nevertheless, having a grandchild so close and being able to contact her readily every so often is a great joy. **Maya** and **Nadav** are doing well at school. **Maya** has entered onto a study-program that will accord her two years of College once she completes High School, and is making straight A's. **Nadav** is making steady progress at school as well. Following a season playing football, he is now enjoying basketball. **Avital** has set up her ceramics studio and continues to be busy teaching kindergarten in the Seattle Jewish Community Center while **Eran** works full time from his office at home, developing IT software for his company.

Keith has resigned his post as Pastor of the church in Camp Hill. Over the last three years, the congregation has doubled in size and 18 baptisms were held. But personal circumstances has forced his resignation at the same time that he must deal with difficult physical conditions. He and **Shlomit** are keenly challenged at this time. Most likely, they will be moving, and Keith will seek secular employment. The move will probably not take place before the school year ends. He and Shlomit are coping, but your prayers are both much needed and would be much appreciated. **Jonathan** and **Caitlyn** respectively enjoy school and kindergarten very much. They continue to be loving toward one another: they recently expressed their disappointment to have learned that they will not be able to marry each other. Little **Elinor**, as vivacious as her brother and sister, makes sure Mom is busy even when her siblings are away at school.

Marcus is doing very well at work. He has been sent overseas on a number of occasions on behalf of his firm (Boeing). **Tamar** is busy working at the local school attended by Yotam

and Avishai, as well as with her dietary program, in which she serves as counsellor. **Yotam** and **Avishai** both enjoy their school, their sister, **Eliya** (nicknamed Didi) and coming home.

Felix has almost completed his second year of nursing school, while progressing in his study of both French (Quebecois) and English. **Katya** has suffered from repeated back pains, brought on by her work as a surgical nurse. They are hoping to purchase a home in the near future, once they sell the flat they own in Israel. **Maya** and **Emma** are both well, although repeatedly challenged by a recurrent flu.

Rose continues her studies. She was recently accorded a poor grade, not because her academic work was sub-standard but because she dared disagree with the lecturer – a source of frustration but a moral challenge for her.

Bracha and I enjoy excellent health. Although soon to be 69, Bracha still exercise three to four times a week, and I am still able to maintain a reasonably heavy workload. On January 18 we celebrate **49 years of marriage**. God has been good to us in countless ways.

My **commentary on Romans** is now undergoing design and layout. HaGefen Publishing did an excellent job on my commentary on Matthew. I'm hoping Romans will be in the same format. In many ways, this will be one of the most important books I have written, if not the most Important, and potentially the most influential. Pauls' discussion of the relation between salvation, grace, works and the unity of the church, his frequent reference to "all" – a major theme in this letter – and the way he applies the Gospel describes in chapters 1-11 to the practicalities he discusses in chapters 12-16 are all highly relevant to the church in Israel an a direct, challenging way.

I continue to publish my **daily expository devotions** as its' readership grows. I am in an quandary as to whether or not I should discontinue these in light of their rather broad readership. One the one hand, they provide an opportunity to expound the Scriptures systematically and to apply their principles in an inviting, non-threatening format for the average reader. On the other, writing them involves a great deal of work, which comes at the expense of more through exegesis that can provide Pastors with materials that will "speak" for generations to come.

Work on my book describing **church life, function and structure** is also progressing well. It is a hard slog, in many instances extremely enjoyable (does that sound like a contradiction?). Since there is nothing on the topic in Hebrew. I am hoping it will be a positive influence.

I've reviewed editorial comment on **my translation of the Gospels, Acts, Galatians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon and the Pastoral letters**. I'm presently reviewing comment on Pauls' letters to the Corinthians. One of my challenges is to ensure that we *translate*, not *interpret*. The former always involves a measure of the latter, but it is imperative that we do not cross the line, as did the New International Version, for example. My highly qualified linguistic editor is constantly pushing me to explain the text rather than translate it and I need to push back with persistent respect and goodwill.

At church I'm about to commence a series on First Corinthians. The church is undergoing a major crises, with its very existence hanging in the balance. Your prayers would be much appreciated. **At the church in Jerusalem** I continue my series on Galatians. This week-end we visited brethren in a small desert township in the northern part of the Negev. The Orthodox community has been harassing them and we thought they could do with some

encouragement. It was a blessed time of fellowship. We left, impressed with the brethren's humility, courage and wisdom as they deal with the opposition they are facing.

This is to confirm that our **2018 tour of the US** will be the last. As of mid-2019, I will be available to churches and conferences in response to invitations, but Bracha and I will no longer embark onto the extensive tours we've conducted over the last 16 years. There still are a few openings in the 2018 itinerary, particularly in Virginia (June 11-15, 18-19), North Carolina and northern Florida (June 18-19) Atlanta GA and the vicinity (July 9-10,12-13), Central Florida (July 23-24, 26), and in the Seattle area August 11-29. Interested churches should write as soon as possible because the program is fast filling up. Needless to say, we are eager to ensure every day is taken up with productive labor for the Lord.

In Christ by grace,

Baruch and Bracha Maoz

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