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A Personal Comment

June was an usually busy month, particularly toward the middle of the month. Bracha left on Friday June 17th to visit family in the US. Having dropped her off at the airport, I immediately began packing our possessions, selling and giving away some of our furniture, cleaning the house and preparing to hand it over to the buyers as well as for the move to our new home. On Monday we began the move. By the Wednesday a week later our home in Gedera had been cleaned and handed over to the buyers, our new home was clean and in order and I was on my way to the US, to join Bracha and commence our tour. At my age, I am as surprised as I am grateful to God for being able to manage.

Friends from both Grace and Truth and our present church assisted in the actual move and we are grateful to them. The new home is considerably smaller, but as warm and as welcoming as the previous one. Hopefully, in the course of time we will be able to make it as comfortable.

In the course of this time, I was unable to sit down and write the June issue of MaozNews. In some 45 years, we have never missed an issue until now and I apologize to our many friends for doing so this time.

We are presently engaged in a tour of the US. Bracha preceded me, flew to the West Coast and spent two weeks with the children and their families there, and then a week in Pennsylvania with Shlomit before I arrived. A day after I arrived we drove to Quebec and spent a week with Katya and her family, during which time I was privileged to minister in two congregations.

We then travelled to upper New York State to fellowship with a long-term friend in Christ pastoring a small church in the Adirondacks. I preached for him on the Lord's Day and addressed a Pastors' Fellowship before returning to Shlomit for a night and then proceeded to Vienna VA, where we visited friends and I ministered in a church nearby. Thence we drove to Lexington NC to minister in a church there on the Lord's Day and at a Bible Study Group and to continue on our journey to Knoxville TN. Following two meetings and a short stay we drove the next day, arriving at 08:00 am to Louisville KY where I had the pleasure of two extended

sessions (Servant Leadership and Expository Preaching) with fellow-Pastors at a local Pastors' Conference and a meeting with the men of the church (On Living for Christ in Our Respective Cultures. See the paper below). Thence we drove to Hartsville TN where, apart from private meetings with the Pastor and congregants I reported on the scene in Israel on Friday, on my work at Sunday School and preached on the Lord's Day. We left early in the morning of Monday to make our way to Olathe KS. In between I've been working on the translation of Matthew and on the final touches to the Hebrew of my Colossians commentary, making way to devote time to the translation of the book on church history.

We are still very far from making up for the financial **shortfall** caused by the end of Patmos' generous support over the years. Patmos kindly and unilaterally decided to extend their support for three more months, which helps to bide us over that longer period. However, our need remains pressing. We are thankful to those who have expressed their intention to increase or to consider increasing their support and continue to seek ways to make up for the significant shortfall.

Tax deductible support for our ministry should be written to the order of Berean Baptist Church, Special Missions Account and sent to Box 1233 Grand Blanc, MI 48480-3233. Transfers may be made to First Place bank, 2301 West Big Beaver Road, Suite 525, Troy, MI 48084. USA Routing Number 2412-W. Swiftcode Wells Fargo Bank San Francisco CA WFBUS65. Please designate "For Maoz Ministry." Receipts are sent at the end of the calendarial year or at the donor's request. We reserve the right to use personal funds for the ministry.

Gaza and The Syrian Border

Hamas in Gaza has repeatedly signalled its lack of interest in a renewed round of fighting and is endeavoring to restrain more militant groups in the Strip who seek to provoke Israel into another conflagration. However, ISIS and the Islamic Jihad as well as Hamas' own military arm are less than cooperative. It remains to be seen whether the political arm of Hamas will be successful in its efforts to impose its will.

Israel and Egypt have both accused Hamas of cooperating with ISIS in Sinai, training, equipping, providing logistical support and hospitalising the ISIS wounded in its attacks against Egyptian forces in the peninsula. Both countries have cooperated in blockading Gaza so as to restrict Hamas' ability to arm itself, resulting in Hamas' overtures to both in an attempt to establish a stability that will secure Hamas' regime in Gaza by alleviating the dire economic situation in the Strip. There has been talk of a medium-term truce.

Conflict in Syria is impacting Israel's northern border, at present especially due to increasing threats to the Syrian Druze population, close relatives to Israel Druze living on the respective sides of the border. Israeli Druze have expressed concern for their brethren, all the more so when the Syrian rebels declared their intention to convert the Druze who fall under their control. Israel has warned the rebels that it will not stand by if the Syrian Druze are attacked. On two occasions, Israeli military ambulances transporting wounded Syrian rebels to Israeli hospitals were attacked by Israeli Druze and, in one case so far, the Syrians were lynched by the angry mob.

Israel has reinforced its border with Syria and enhanced vigilance in light of Hezbollah's continued involvement in the conflict. On the one hand, Hezbollah is

gaining valuable combat experience. On the other, it is sustaining significant casualties, including the loss of some of its more competent commanders. What presently looks like losses on the ground to rebel forces is driving Iran and Hezbollah into a corner. The latter has given in to panic declarations while Iran increased its involvement in Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

Saudia, Egypt and other Sunni Arab countries are fighting a proxy war against Iran in Yemen, where Houthi rebels overthrew the Government and made great gains. Repeatedly vicious military response on the part of Saudi Arabia and the Sunni coalition have not managed to dislodge the Iranian-backed Houthis from their positions.

On Being a Christian in Our Respective Cultures

Prepared for La Grange Baptist Church, Louisville KY

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The Call

To a meaningful extent, we are shaped by surrounding realities, including our upbringing, education, culture, life experiences and the expectations of our elders and peers. Yet surely we agree that the primary factor that should shape us must be the will of God as expressed in his word. That being so, there is not an individual on earth who does not need to be challenged and changed.

We need to be changed for a number of reasons. First, because even in the Garden of Eden, prior to his sin, Adam had much to learn, internalize and implement of the image of God in him. Human perfection is relative, virile, ever-progressing. In eternity, as we gaze with wonder at the majesty of our God and Savior, we shall ever learn more of his glory, ever increase in love and adoration. Man was created to aspire and to grow.

As a result, even the best of factors that shaped us are but partial perceptions of the ultimate for which we were created and to which we should aspire. Our education, our culture and our personal backgrounds can, at best, provide us with aspects of truth and glory. They can also render us sensitive to perspectives others might not have. But their shortcomings incline to become blind spots. We therefore need the contribution of others to be what we are intended to be. That is why the full measure of the stature of Christ is attributed to the church as a body rather than to individuals. Adam needed Eve: **It is not good for man to be alone.** He needs **a helper suitable to him** -- and the Hebrew indicates the kind of help that complements him, that provides by way of contrast what he was lacking.

Second, sin has impacted every one of the factors that shape us from the moment of conception to the day we die. No culture, no experience of life, no social or educational background is exempt. **The whole world lies in the power of the evil one** (I John 5:19). We are conceived in sin, born with a distorted image of God in us. We are brought up by families and in societies that have likewise been impacted by sin. As a result, some influences are not only partial but wrong, contra-biblical.

These two realities teach us on the one hand that aspects of the influences that shaped us are positive because they reflect God's wonderful purposes either because they are premeditatedly Christian or because of the gracious work of God in what we often describe as "Common Grace:" positive influences apart from the Gospel. On the other hand they teach us that we should be bringing those influences

to the bar of God's word, measure them by it and then modify, embrace or reject them in proportion to their compatibility with that standard.

In other words, we do not have the privilege of being carried by the rush of the crowd. We are not free to embrace all of the standards, customs and values of our culture. We are obliged to be consciously, premeditatedly Christian. Rather than automats, the product of external influences, we are responsible human beings created in the image of God and called upon to glorify him by reflecting that image in the course of our lives.

The Biblical Background

Culture in the ancient world was as all-pervasive as today but far more compelling, primarily because it enjoyed religious sanction. Opting out of the accepted cultural standards was equal to opting out of society and risking the fate of outcasts: defenseless exposure to the whim of every passer-by, to abuse and often to death.

Ancient Middle Eastern culture was syncretistic. Most people worshipped the same gods under different names, and largely in the same way as did others. The gods were presented in the form of visible images. They were placated or moved to act on man's behalf by way of ritual, sacrifice and payment to temple priests. They were thought to be in perpetual contest with one another. Being, in fact, enhanced projections of those who worshipped them, they made few if any moral demands except those that helped maintain the *status quo* and support those in power. Their primary appeal was rooted in the way they served human needs and expectations. As always happens, the people became much like the gods they served, which is why we should be very careful as to how we think about God.

Israel was under strong pressure to adapt to these standards. To deny the existence of the surrounding nations' gods was the height of arrogance. To question the validity of the surrounding nations' religious and social practices was to threaten national income and disrupt crucially important international relations because the land of Israel's primary importance lay in the conduct of international trade between east and west, north and south, with Israel's land serving as the bridge. The human tendency to conform in an effort to find acceptance and the natural tendency to laziness also came into play, all the more so when, as we said, many of the cultural norms appealed to the human heart because they tended to fulfill felt human needs and expectations. Yet the Lord instructed the nation,

When you enter the land which the Lord your God gives you, and you possess it and live in it, and you say, "I will set a king over me like all the nations who are around me," you shall surely set a king over you whom the Lord your God chooses. One from among your countrymen you shall set as king over yourselves; you may not put a foreigner over yourselves who is not your countryman. Moreover, he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor shall he cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses, since the Lord has said to you, "You shall never again return that way." He shall not multiply wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; nor shall he greatly increase silver and gold for himself.

Now it shall come about when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. It shall be with him and he shall read it

all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, by carefully observing all the words of this law and these statutes, that his heart may not be lifted up above his countrymen and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, to the right or the left, so that he and his sons may continue long in his kingdom in the midst of Israel (Deuteronomy 17:14-20).

What is more, the God of Israel expressly forbade any attempt to represent him by way of a visible image. Sacrifices were said to be God's gift to man, not a means by which man procured the favor of God. Israel's God claimed not supremacy but exclusivity, his demands were eminently moral and man's interests were made subject to the will of Jehovah. Israel was not to take its cue from the nations; it was subject to the commandments of God: **For you are a holy people to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a people for his own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth** (Deuteronomy 14:2).

Rather than being embarrassed of being different, Israel was called upon to recognize the value of their cultural and religious giftedness: **What great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole law which I am setting before you today** (Deuteronomy 4:8)? Israel's conduct was to be subversive of all other cultures and religions and thereby serve as a light to the nations so that **it will come about that in the last days the mountain of the house of the Lord will be established as the chief of the mountains and will be raised above the hills; and all the nations will stream to it. And many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob that He may teach us concerning his ways and that we may walk in His paths"** (Isaiah 2:2-3).

The New Testament requirement is identical. Our light is to **shine before men in such a way that they may see our good works, and glorify** our Father who is in heaven (Matthew 5:16). The message of the Gospel is so subversive that, at the beginning, the majority of the apostles did not recognize its implications. They opposed Paul or viewed his endeavors with reservation when he insisted on there being **no difference** between Jews and Gentiles. They could comprehend the erasure of differences between slaves and freemen -- a revolutionary thought in Roman society of the period -- but not that between Jews and Gentiles.

Of course, one reason they found such equality difficult to comprehend is that recognition would threaten their standing in Jewish society: the difference between Jews and gentiles, drawn, emphasized, thickened and accentuated by Jewish history, culture and religion was a major plank in the nation's self-identity. Anyone threatening to question that difference would immediately be vomited out of society. After all, the apostles were engaged in preaching the Gospel to the nation. How could they effectively do that if their very right to do so as part of the nation was to be called into question by their conduct? Paul was too radical, even if he was right.

After more than 20 centuries of Gospel impact on Western society, we are unaware of how fundamentally the Gospel challenged Roman society and its culture. Rodney Stark's *THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY* (Harper Collins, San Francisco, 1991) serves as an excellent summary documentation of that challenge.

Stark tells us that pagans were helpless in the face of epidemics. Those who were able fled while Christians remained and tended to their own and to others afflicted by the disease. He quotes the overtly anti-Christian Emperor Julian as writing "that the pagans needed to equal the virtues of Christians, for recent Christian growth was caused by their 'moral character, even if pretended,' and by their 'benevolence toward strangers and their care for the graves of the dead' " (pp. 83-84). Infanticide, particularly of girls, was rife in Roman society except among the Christians, who also ran against the grain of society in their opposition to abortion, divorce, incest, polygamy, homosexuality and marital infidelity, in their generous care for widows and in the respect they displayed toward women.

Talk about contra-cultural: imagine slaves and slave-owners such as Onesimus and Philemon greeting one another as equals in the context of Christian community while retaining their relative status in society! Imagine a Christian slave owner treating his slaves with love and kindness, as fellow image-bearers, giving their fair portion, caring for their needs and defending their dignity in a society in which the skin of living slaves was used to burnish copper vessels and their very lives depended on the whim of their owner.

How, Then, Should We Live?

Since you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry for it is because of these things that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience, and in them you also once walked, when you were living in them. But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive speech from your mouth. Do not lie to one another since you laid aside the old self with its practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him— in which there is no such thing as a Greek and a Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all.

So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you (Colossians 3:1-13).

In other words, live out the Gospel.

What does that mean? Well, let's go back to where we started. We said at the start of this discussion, "the primary factor that should shape us must be the will of God as expressed in his word." We discover the implications of living out the Gospel from God's revelation to us, a lamp to our feet and a light on our path.

There we learn that God is to be first in our lives. That we are to **love him in all** that we do, even to the extent of eating and drinking to his glory rather than for the meeting of our legitimate needs. There might well be times when the right thing to do is to forgo legitimate needs, even life itself, for the glory of God. Our love for God should be visible through the lives that we lead.

Next we learn that God demands of us in relation to others an uncompromising morality. Our **yea** should be a solid yea and our **nay** no less dependable. Our measure should be exact, somewhat beyond or at least true to our undertakings. Our conduct should be characterized by kindness and generous sacrifice rather than selfishness; by God-orientated holiness rather than an effort to achieve worldly success; by humility rather than a striving after power, influence or popularity. Our conduct should be premeditatedly tuned to the word of God and our standards consciously derived from and constantly mended by the Word. We must be willing to pay the price of faithfulness to God and his word. Rather than acceptance with men, we should be given to pleasing him who created and redeemed us.

In other words, we need to be carefully thoughtful Christians, seeking to understand the principles of the Gospel rather than expecting those who teach us to provide detailed how-to manuals of behavior in the various circumstances of life. We need to understand and internalize the truths of the Gospel, by which I do not mean merely the facts presented in scripture but the underlying principles that gave those facts the shape and content they have.

To that end we need to be serious-minded Bible students and lovers of good preaching. We must not succumb to the laziness that characterizes the world around us, when people know more and more of less and less. When the Final Day arrives, **we will each have to give account of ourselves before God**. We are responsible individuals, must act as such and will be held accountable as such. In other words, to a meaningful extent and to the utter limits of our ability, we all need to be theologians and moral philosophers. We need to understand God's word. We need to examine ourselves, our values, standards and practice in the light of God's word and to undertake an ongoing process of reformation. That is what the Bible describes as sanctification. In other words, we need to invest –everything -- in growing in Christ. If we are not radical Christians it is likely that we are not Christians at all.

We should take nothing for granted, not even the Christian values and practice we taught at home and at church. We need to be able to either correct these or make them truly our own by arriving at them by way of the engagement of our hearts and minds with the word of God.

Every sphere of our lives should be impacted, every relationship, everything we own and do. Our duty is to be Christian in every walk of life and in the hidden recesses of our hearts. To that end we need to be dedicated, truly in love with God and therefore morally courageous. That is what will make us truer Christians, better persons, better members of our society, better citizens and better spouses, parents and children. That is how we, with **unveiled faces, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord**, will be **transformed into the same image from glory to glory** by the work of the Spirit of God (II Corinthians 3:18).

Could we aspire to anything higher? Dare we aspire to anything lower?

The Ministry

Crossbooks, who published my English commentary on **Malachi**, has closed its doors. A few score remaining copies remain on hand while I seek a new publisher. I am presently in touch with one who has shown interest. My **Colossians commentary** is

scheduled to be published next year by Founders Press while the book on the Messianic Movement (**Come Let Us Reason Together**, P&R) continues to sell at a slow but steady pace.

HaGefen finally came out with my **commentary on Matthew**. Difficulties encountered on the way were successfully overcome and the volume is one of the more attractive books I have seen published in Hebrew. The **Romans commentary** has been completed and handed over for editing in preparation for publication. I hope HaGefen does as fine a job on this volume as they did on Matthew. Work is proceeding on a **commentary on Hebrews** and a book on **The Fear of God**, the latter based on John Bunyan's superb exposition of the topic, while I put finishing touches to the Hebrew version of my commentary on Colossians and produce the second draft of my translation of Matthew, now that editorial comment has been received. **A Brief Introduction to the Life and Epistles of Paul** is being prepared for publication.

I am presently engaged in putting the finishing touches to the Hebrew version of my commentary on Colossians, fine-tuning my translation of Matthew following receipt of editorial comments and translating a book on church history.

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. This book is **presently unavailable**. We hope to republish in 2016.

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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