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On Being A Jewish Christian

Following is correspondence, enlarged and edited, touching issues typical of the those many Jewish Christians face, directly or indirectly, in the context of their church life.

Dear Pastor Baruch,

Whenever I post things about Israel, my Facebook friends go very quiet. Nonetheless, when they have an opportunity in private to ask questions about Judaism, they are continuously inquisitive. Of course, dispensationalists get all excited about being a "completed Jew." Oh my. I do not understand if this is a kind of anti-Semitism, or something else. Some days it all makes me feel like I am a man without a people. Am I to be a gentile because I am a Christian? I have some black Christian friends. They say sometimes they feel this strange contradiction in their own lives.

You helped me once when I asked you about my Mezuzah on my door -- it is still there -- but sometimes I almost feel like I should go back to hiding my heritage. Why is this so confusing, sir? Given Ephesians 2, I would think that the diaspora would give way to unity among the elect.

Do you have any suggestions?

In Him, XXXX

Dear XXXX,

I cannot and dare not presume to be able to indicate the reasons for your personal conflict -- all too many factors are beyond my reach. We all have our background experiences as well as our social and emotional baggage, and we often function on differing sets of expectations and assumptions. I do hope in the Lord that my following response will be helpful to you although I must restrict response to generalities. To the extent that these touch upon your personal conflict, you will be able to apply them more wisely than I would. Rather than addressing each of the issues you raise, allow me to focus on what I think is the main one,

namely the sense of estrangement you experience due to the apparent conflict between your faith in Christ and your Jewish ethnic and cultural identity.

That such a conflict exists in fact is undeniable. Two thousand years of conflict have made that to be the case. Both church and synagogue worked hard at estranging their respective members from each other. Initially, it was not so. Faith in Jesus is as Jewish as kosher food, Matsa balls and Sabbath candles. No! – It is far more Jewish because those and most other Jewish customs came later and are in no sense the product of God's revelation to our fathers through the prophets. But faith in Jesus is the inevitable, natural consequence of faith in the truths God taught our people from the first day of Abraham's calling, through Moses and the giving of the Law, by means of the prophets and in the course of our scripturally recorded history.

The synagogue has labored with determination to create a distance between Jewish fealty to God and to inspired faith and custom on the one hand and a living faith in Jesus on the other. The church followed with its own version of disenfranchisement, morally buttressed by a prejudice that paralleled Jewish disparagement of Gentiles.

A dark hue of anti-Semitism invaded the life of the church and has, to a meaningful extent, colored its view of scripture, determined its reading of scripture. Still further, it crystalized a largely unconscious suspicion of anything Jewish on the one hand, and, on the other, a fascination with things Jewish as if they were playthings or relics of a long-gone past that shed light on presently cherished truths. That has become part of the church's culture.

The parallel you draw with blacks may be intuitive, but I believe it is correct. Much of modern evangelical Christian culture is the product of snow-white American engagement with the Gospel, including its individualistic loss of community, its consumerist assumptions and its relativizing of truth. It is unquestionably a culture, and cultures incorporate those who belong by excluding those who do not (be they black, Jewish, Hispanic or anything else).

You and I, and others like us, are born into such a reality.

The solution many have sought is to accept such a reality and then choose between denying their giftings as black, Jewish, Hispanic or whatever, by seeking to submerge themselves into a foreign culture that purports to be Christian. Such a choice inevitably creates the kind of conflict you describe. Although self-denial is to be preferred to self-assertion and is unquestionably a biblical, Christian virtue, I believe it to be less than biblical in this context.

Paul writes to the Corinthians, (I Corinthians 7:17-19): "let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches. Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God".

Others opt for what I believe is a far less biblical option, yet is the one chosen by the majority, and that is to create their own distinctly separate cultural Christian ghettos in which their culture -- their language, customs and preferences -- become pre-eminent and the major source of shared coherence. Thus Christ is shunted to the sidelines to varying but generally unintended degrees, whereas he should be at the center of all true Christian life, thought, hope, aspiration worship and service.

The possibility never occurred to Paul that a possible resolution of tensions experienced in the churches he was used to found and which arose due to the differing cultural and social backgrounds of the members of those churches would be to divide into separate purportedly Christian enclaves. To the contrary, the way they were to manage their differences and the love they shared for one another were an important aspect of their witness to an arrogant, self-indulging 1st Century Hellenized society:

“As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

“One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

“Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God’.

“So then each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding” (Romans 14:1-19).

Your reference to Ephesians Chapter two is apropos. Paul speaks of the One New Man formed in Christ. THAT is what we should reflect: “Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands — remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the

hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:11-21).

To that end I believe we Jewish Christians should hesitate to be openly Christian among our people and openly Jewish among our fellow believers, without parading our differences, without making an issue of them. There is no room for Jewishness, blackness or anything else of the sort in the church. God is to be worshiped only as he has commanded. But each of these and others can make a valid contribution to what should become over the course of time a unifying Christian culture, with differing hues naturally imbibed from the context in which any church might find itself.

Such is not the reality today. We have black and white churches, redneck and white collar churches, Korean, Hispanic and Russian churches, and Messianic Assemblies. None of these should exist. They are all in need of reformation, attuning themselves to God's word and daring to challenge the world's narcissistic, selfish, exclusivistic self-preoccupation rather being taken up with our glorious God, the majesty of his amazing grace in Christ and the sufficiency of Christ's accomplishments.

Some of us find living in the context of present reality oppressing. But it can and should become an opportunity to grow. To love patiently and with gentle understanding, to reach out of ourselves and touch others with the grace of the Gospel. To grow to be more like him who, for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despised the shame, took on himself the form of a servant and gave himself for many.

For myself, I hope and intend to initiate an effort to encourage Jewish Christians to join themselves without reserve to the church at large while, at the same time and with equal abandon, retain their circumcision rather than deny it, practicing Jewish custom at home and being faithful Christians at home, in church and in the world.

Yours in the grace of the Gospel,

Baruch

Friends: It is my hope and intention, upon relocating to the States, to renew efforts to form an international Fellowship of Evangelical Jewish Christians, which will have as its purpose to encourage Jewish Christians in their respective churches while giving them a voice for Christ and his Gospel among our people. Away with individualistic selfishness! Up with the banner of Christ! All for the unity of the body of Christ! Any willing to assist are invited to write (bmaoz@themaorzweb.com), inform others and pray. In due time, a conference will be convened as our starting point.

Israel's Interest's vis a vis Netanyahu's

The elections, held in March, resulted in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's party, the Likud, neck and neck with Benny Gantz's Blue and White, with 35 seats in in our 120 seat parliament (the Knesset), but with the Prime Minister's bloc (comprised of 3 other right-wing parties and the religious bloc) 5 seats larger than that of the centre and left wings combined.

Mr. Netanyahu was accordingly tasked by the President with forming Israel's next Government. His efforts to do so collapsed when one of the parties in his bloc, Israel Beiteynu, led by Avigdor Liberman refused to join the Government unless previously agreed-upon legislation which would force Orthodox religious young men into one form or another of national service was agreed upon. The Orthodox bloc refused to accede.

In such circumstances, Mr. Netanyahu was to return the mandate to the President, who would then consult with the parties and commission someone else to form a Government. However, Mr. Netanyahu is fighting grievous indictments for accepting and offering bribes, breach of trust and abuse of office. He has sought to promote legislation that would protect him from such indictments and is unwilling to vacate the Prime Minister's seat for fear this proposed legislation would not pass. Consequently, he refused to return the mandate. Instead, he took advantage of a legislative loophole, manipulated the recently-elected Knesset, which voted to dissolve, and imposed new elections.

The consequences are enormous. New elections will cost the Israeli taxpayer \$130,000,000 in direct expenses and at least as much in indirect expenses. Meanwhile, Israel is to be governed for what will amount almost to a year by a hamstrung caretaker Government: the national budget cannot be legislated; no legislation on other issues, however urgent, can be introduced; Israel's Defense Forces' plans for a revamping of its' structure is stalled; long-term policies cannot be framed; instability is disaffecting Israel's economy, and the housing industry and the national medical services – in dire need of attention and significant funding – cannot be dealt with. Mr. Netanyahu is sacrificing Israel's national interests for his own. To top it all, by all present estimates, next elections, to be held on September 17, will conclude with results very similar to those under which Mr. Netanyahu's recent efforts to form a Government were unsuccessful.

But then, while he is no statesman, Mr. Netanyahu is a consummate, Machiavellian, politician. He may well pull another rabbit out of his morally uninhibited hat.

Ministry News

I am nearing the end of translating **Bible study notes on the book of Isaiah** and will soon be turning to Jeremiah while resuming work on my **commentary series on the Minor Prophets**. Last week we completed the first stage of editing John's letters, leaving only Revelation for this all-important process. My editor is meticulous, very much alert to linguistic and grammatical issues and therefore often calling me to account – a much needed and much appreciated contribution to the final product. After all – we're dealing with God's word and should always do so with extreme caution. The tension created by linguistic considerations on the one hand and theological considerations on the other, combined with a shared desire to be as close to the original text as possible, leads to helpful results.

I've been invited to **preach** for two other churches, while preaching approximately once a month at our own church. Our church has asked me to help train budding preachers, so I am presently **teaching a course on "How to Preach and Listen to Sermons"**. We meet every other week. Two of the trainees preach for 15 minutes on a text or a assigned to them. They are then assessed by the class, attended by congregants as well as aspiring preachers. A lecture on preaching is then offered and discussion ensues. In all, we spend some 2-2.5 hours together. It is an invigorating experience which I much enjoy.

Family News

Keith's health is holding up. The children are delighted to have their father back and Shlomit's burden has been considerably alleviated. Thank you for your prayers. Keith and Shlomit are now seeking employment. They will be able to place the children in school once they know what their income will be. Meanwhile, Keith has undertaken odd jobs here and there. His still needs to be nursed back to full health – the ongoing illness of the last few years have taken their toll.

As God would have it, efforts to **sell our home** have not been crowned so far with success, further delaying our **relocation to the US**. We await God's pleasure but I admit we're tempted to kick against the pricks of his providence. Shame on us! Since **Rose** is to be wed on August 7th, we do not plan to relocate before that date but would be delighted if the Lord would see fit to enable us to do so soon thereafter. To our joy, **Avital, Eran and the children** will be in Israel for the whole of July. We look forward to spending time with them.

Marcus and Tamar have decided to home-school Avishai – no small challenge for Tamar on whose shoulders the main burden will fall: she is very much a people's person. Investing more time than usual at home, teaching, rather than reaching out to help people and socializing with them will be a new experience.

In Christ by grace,

Baruch and Bracha Maoz

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Come Let Us Reason Together (On the Unity of Jews and Gentiles in the church). Christ as the fullness of divine revelation and his work as sufficient for our whole salvation, Presbyterian and Reformed.

Jonah: A Prophet on the Run a devotional commentary on the book of Jonah, Shepherd Press.

Malachi: A Prophet in Times of Distress a devotional commentary on the book of Malachi. Founders Press.

Colossians: The All-Sufficient Savior a devotional commentary on the book of Colossians. Founders Press.

The commentaries are suited for personal devotions and group studies

Baruch's sermons may be heard on **Sermon Audio**

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Intermittent bulletins are produced as necessary



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