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A JEWISH MISSION'S RESPONSE TO MESSIANIC JUDAISM

The request to present a paper to this Lausanne Consultation on "Messianic Congregations from the Viewpoint of a Jewish Mission" gave rise to conflicting thoughts and emotions. The intervening years from my first contact as General Director of the American Messianic Fellowship with Messianic Judaism and Messianic Assemblies has made me realize that the issue involves more than just theological differences over Biblical interpretation; it is also a very emotional one.

While I do not shy away from confrontation when necessary, I do not seek it out. I have found that confrontation on this issue does on occasion give rise to heat, carnal emotions and even bitterness. Therefore, to raise the issue again at a time when fellowship between Jewish missions of diverse opinions is being sought seemed unproductive if not counterproductive.

On second thought, however, without being polemical, confrontational or arbitrary I see the necessity of investigating the issue to determine whether or not there is a basis of fellowship and mutual appreciation that will draw us to a common base of evangelistic outreach to the lost Jewish community. Therefore, I undertook the task with some trepidation in order to raise questions and some personally perceived objections to Messianic Judaism and/or the Messianic movement as it is evolving in some sectors today.

Obviously, this paper cannot address itself to the entire scope of the Messianic movement for it is too broad in its perspective. Therefore, it is to certain areas of vagueness in doctrine and practice that I address myself today. I speak from the perspective of one mission, but know that I reflect the concerns of a number of other societies, as well.

DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM:

The first difficulty I find in addressing this issue of Messianic Judaism and the Messianic synagogue movement is the apparent lack of a common denominator as far as doctrine and practice are concerned. When one is asked to deal with an area of concern it is normally necessary to identify that concern. To my knowledge and in my experience there is not such a clearly defined doctrinal position for all of the Messianic groups. Perhaps this is reflective of Judaism itself in that even the thirteen articles of Maimonides are not accepted by Judaism in their entirety to this day. Possibly, on the other hand, it is even more reflective of the entire human race that can be summed up in the words of one Scot when he said, "Angus, the whole world is daft except me and thee, and sometimes I wonder about thee." So then, it is difficult to grapple with an issue that is so diverse and ill-defined.

The second difficulty I find in addressing this issue is the thorny problem of, "Who is a Jew?" More specifically, who sets the standard for genuine Jewish identity? There is a political and ethnic identity, but in relation to our spiritual concerns as believers in Messiah the identity is a spiritual reality grounded in the Covenants of the Scriptures. The problem to me, then, is why

does the Messianic movement use the pattern for culture and worship that has been established by Rabbinic Judaism when, in fact, all Jewry does not adopt that standard.

To be specific there are numbers of different rituals, practices and word pronunciations that differ from group to group within Jewry. Even the Passover seder does not have a common Haggadah, nor final standard. If all Jewry does not accept the standards of Rabbinic Judaism, why do some Messianic groups follow it so slavishly? As a people who are now in Messiah Jesus why not take Biblical Judaism as the standard? This would be more logical. But it is obvious that they cannot for there is no longer a temple or priesthood. These have been abolished due to the Messiah's finished work at Calvary, and it was necessary for the Judaism that rejected the claims of Jesus to raise up a substitute - Rabbinic Judaism.

If a Hebrew Christian chooses to keep Kashrut, so be it, but why does he adopt the precepts of Rabbinic Judaism that keep milk and meat dishes separate when this practice has no basis in Scripture? By way of comparison it may be felt by a believer that vegetarianism is a healthy practice, but it still has no basis in Scripture that makes it a practice that has merit before God. Would we not react were someone to preach vegetarianism as a Scripturally preferred lifestyle for Christians? The parallel problems are obvious.

It was from this lack of a formulated position on faith and practice as well as Jewish identity that the Fellowship of Christian Testimonies to the Jews in October, 1975 felt nonplussed as they drafted a resolution concerning Messianic

Judaism. Every paragraph of that resolution begins with the words, "Whereas a segment of Messianic Judaism..." (rather than Messianic Judaism) "strives..., claims..., encourages..., adopts..., isolates..., opposes... or portrays...", etc. This lack of unity in faith and practice within the movement still provides a basic consternation for us as a mission in adopting a fixed response to the movement. So far, not one of the leaders of the movement has made a serious attempt to set forth clearly their doctrinal position. Hesitancy, reservations and doubt on the part of earnest Christians will not be allayed as long as evasiveness and equivocation remain as the order of the day. True, its excesses are frequently more noted than its benefits and, thus, often the whole movement comes under reproach for the actions of a comparative minority. However, this does not obviate our responsibility of speaking to the issue in a paper such as this.

Please bear in mind, then, that this is not meant to be a polemic, a diatribe, or condemnation of the whole, so much as a raising of questions and even on occasion opposition to stands taken by the movement as perceived by this mission, the American Messianic Fellowship.

THE BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE:

The charter and organization of the American Messianic Fellowship is the oldest independent witness to the Jewish community in the United States. Its founder, William Eugene Blackstone, held a strong doctrinal position on the imminent rapture and pre-millennial return of Christ. This bias grew out of an extended study of the Bible and greatly affects other doctrines such as evan-

gelism, ecclesiology and eschatology. That perspective continues at AMF to this day. Thus, I would like to address certain areas of great concern to us as we look at the issue as a whole.

First of all, the matter of evangelism is in the forefront. While it is obvious that methods change with the passing of time and circumstances the message must remain the same. Paul refused to adulterate that message of salvation by grace through faith alone no matter whom he approached or to whom he was speaking. In the final analysis a person is not wooed to salvation by human effort or empathy of approach so much as by the convincing and convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit of God (John 16:7-11).

I fear today there is a great deal of human effort and emotion applied in evangelism in order to persuade and cajole a person to accept Christ. Often, I fear, human methodology with a corresponding independence from the ministry of the Holy Spirit replaces a complete dependence on the Spirit of God as we present the claims of the Messiah to convict and draw the individual. There can be no resultant decision to trust in the finished work of the Savior for personal salvation apart from His convincing ministry. In fact, He must even give the faith to respond to the invitation.

Seeking to make Biblical Christianity attractive by cloaking it with familiar terms of old religious persuasions and traditions of the elders, and at the same time minimizing the reproach and foolishness of the cross is invidious to the work of Christ on Calvary, and destructive to a finished redemptive product that honors God and recognizes the utter need of the Savior's crucifixion as

the sole means of approach to a gracious, loving heavenly Father.

I am not insensitive to the background and needs of the Jewish people, but I am concerned that in our desire for sensitivity we not alter the specific approach God has given us for drawing near to Him today. It is antipodal to the Jewish religion. In some of the Messianic approaches the dependence on attracting and winning the friendship of Jewish people minimizes Golgotha in favor of maximizing the traditions of Judaism in their ritualistic and philosophic approach. Thus, the peripheral becomes the pre-eminent and the central issue the peripheral.

The very recent remark of one Jewish believer involved in a Messianic assembly is pertinent. This believer said in conversation, "I refuse to take the position of some in my assembly of not speaking of my Savior openly. It is in my mind degrading to Him." It was apparent that this believer was speaking of a very real issue in that Messianic assembly. The point in question is placed in bold relief from the Biblical perspective in I Corinthians 1:23, "But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called both Jew and Greek, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (N.I.V.).

Our second concern from the Biblical perspective regards ecclesiology. From the point of view of our mission the Church is the Body of Christ. It was formed on the Day of Pentecost by the baptism of the Holy Spirit which placed believers into that Body. According to I Corinthians 12:13, as a result of faith in Messiah Jesus and His finished work at Golgotha a believer is immediately

baptized (placed) into the Body of Christ. There is, according to Paul in Galatians 3:28, "Neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (N.I.V.). The middle wall of partition that existed prior to the crucifixion of Christ and the formation of the Church is broken down.

This does not mean that God's program and objectives for Israel have ended, but rather that the nation will be reinstated after the Church is removed from the earthly scene. The covenants given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will be consummated in their fullest sense. The Church, however, is distinct from Israel. The programs are not in opposition to one another, but are certainly separate. Every promise in the Old Testament given to Abraham and his physical seed after him is earthly. Every promise given to the Church, the Body of Christ, is heavenly. This does not imply that there will not be proximity on occasion nor fellowship, but it certainly maintains a distinction between the two groups in the Biblical perspective.

The Church has a distinct beginning apart from that of Israel. It has a distinct program apart from Israel and a distinct eschatology apart from Israel. They are not merged nor is there a confluence at some point in the distant future that I can find in the Scriptures. Therefore, to maintain distinctives found in the Old Testament that relate to Israel and then apply to Jewish believers in the Church, is counterproductive to the growth and understanding of the believer's position in Christ. It brings to mind one of Paul's admonition in Hebrews to "leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts

that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment" (Hebrews 6:1-2 N.I.V.). It is a simple case of "let us go on."

The simplicity of forms of worship in the New Testament Church was distasteful to Jewish people. Still it was necessary for them to recognize that "Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through His own blood. Let us, then, go to Him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace He bore" (Hebrews 13:12-13 N.I.V.).

As a result of the baptism of the Holy Spirit a unity has been created between all believers. It is not a unity we make, but it is one which we are to guard according to Ephesians 4:3. That there are age long factions within the Church is a rebuke on the Body of Christ as well as a blemish on that unity created by the Holy Spirit among believers. Nevertheless, the matter is not resolved by creating new factions. We must seek to guard the unity and recognize the integrity of the Church, the Body of Christ.

The ethnic Jew can accomplish within the local church, the visible manifestation of the invisible Church, something that cannot be achieved in a segregated group where the interest and preponderant attraction are forms of Judaism that are rabbinical rather than Scriptural. He can accomplish a visible representation before the world's lost community, both Jew and Gentile, of the unity of those who are one in the Savior. The Messianic assembly, on the other hand, emphasizes worship forms not found in "Gentile" churches and propounds the view, "We do not feel welcome or comfortable in 'Gentile' churches." Yet

they do not hesitate to make overtures to Gentile believers to wean them away from their accustomed practices in order that they might participate in Judaistic ritual and traditions. This is "Judaizing" and not "evangelizing" and this fractures the Church still further.

Third in our concerns in the Biblical perspective is eschatology. Just as God made certain promises to Israel He has made equally valid promises to the Church. The Church has a heavenly home. Christ related to the disciples in the Upper Room that He was going to prepare a place for them and that He would come again and take them to Himself in order that where He is they might be also (John 14:1-4). It is obvious from that text and context that He is not referring to the physical land of Israel, but to heaven. Thus, the Church's prospect is an eternal home in heaven.

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob along with their physical seed looked forward to the physical land and God's blessings upon them in it. That those promises will never be repealed nor nullified is obvious from the New Covenant given in Jeremiah 31. Once again we can only address some of those in the Messianic movement that pose very real Biblical problems from this perspective. When a Jewish person accepts the Savior he becomes a member of the Body of Christ by the baptism of the Holy Spirit. He is moved from one distinctive grouping of humanity into another, for the Scriptures speak of the Jew, the Gentile and the Church of God in I Corinthians 10:32. The problem that is faced by some Jewish believers is their position in relation to Israel during the millennial kingdom? In other words, if a person becomes a member of the Body of Christ he is removed from the promises of Abraham and given a whole new set of promises.

His future perspective is one of heaven and not of the physical land. That does not mean there will not be an association and fellowship during the millennial kingdom between the Church and Israel, but the distinctive promises are still not the same. Thus, the Jewish believer in the Church is looking beyond the millennial kingdom and its fulfillment of the covenants concerning the land to a heavenly home with a whole set of promises that are distinct from those given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

For some Jewish believers this poses a very real problem in that they call themselves "completed Jews" and they merely look forward to the continuity of the promises given to their forefather Abraham as though they were still part of his inheritance. In passing we should remember that the phrase "completed Jew" was coined by Benjamin Disraeli who described his own spiritual position as, "a flyleaf between the Old and New Testament." Apparently he found no comfort in either Testament, but really took the position of an assimilated Jew. This is another Biblical perspective that points up the problem of identity for one who is involved deeply in the Messianic movement which seeks to continue the traditions of rabbinic Judaism.

THE ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE:

I do not believe any of us can adopt the Jesuit policy that "the end justifies the means." At least, I do not believe we can adopt it and maintain a Biblical perspective. The ethics of our approach to the world must be solidly based on the Scriptures. Again, we can only address some segments of the Messianic movement, for we cannot categorize all Messianic groups as adopting these

ethics.

There are certain terms used within Judaism that are part and parcel of it and have nothing to do with the Church in regular, normal conversation. They have a distinctive Jewish meaning that is so conceived by all people today. Certainly, one cannot reverse the flow of history and recapture the past. Yet, this is the attempt on the part of some in the Messianic movement. For example, the use of "rabbi" by some of the leaders in Messianic movements is misleading to Jewish people. These men, for the most part have not begun to approximate the standards or pre-requisites of those who have studied for the rabbinate and been ordained as rabbis. I can think of several who have not even finished college let alone gone on for formal training in Talmudic studies as well as the Scriptures, yet they call themselves "rabbis."

We castigate those who gain doctoral degrees from "diploma mills," yet are expected to give credence to those who simply adopt the title of "Rabbi" without the pre-requisite training. It does give rise to a question concerning their ethics. To the Jewish person the title "Rabbi" speaks of one who has spent extended periods of time in Talmudic studies and related rabbinic disciplines. To adopt the title and use it to attract the attention of Jews, whether observant or not without the related associations to the title is unethical.

Most Jewish people perceive of the Messianic movement as deceptive, cultic and unethical. The use of terms that have commonly accepted meanings to describe something else is deceptive. The term "synagogue" is used to denote a

congregation of observant Jews while the term "church" is used to speak of a group of observant believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. Whether there is only a nominal belief or a vital acceptance of the fact is immaterial. Terms do have meanings and those meanings cannot be abused with impunity. The charge of unethical behavior, no matter how we rationalize it, is just and carries a degree of righteous indignation with it. Why should we be ashamed of presenting ourselves in the power of the Holy Spirit as those who represent the Savior using the term He used in Matthew 16:18 and as commonly adopted in the book of Acts in contrast to the synagogue, "the Church"?

Appended to this paper is a recent article from the Chicago Sun Times. It was published on Friday, March 8, 1985 on page 3. For those who know the circumstances surrounding this article the judgment of the ethics involved becomes quite apparent. First, the individual in question attended the Grand Rapids School of Bible and Music for only one year in 1949-50. This is the extent of his formal training. Yet he allegedly desires to be regarded as a "rabbi."

The second and more glaring breach of ethics is that he is no more Jewish than I am. He is a Gentile by birth and a Christian as a result of accepting the Savior. Yet, to present himself as a Jew when it is not true does give rise to a severe reprimand. His peers gave that to him in rejecting his application for fellowship in the local clergy association. It is a sad day when the world can rebuke a believer for his lack of ethics.

While the desire to see Jewish people won to the Savior is real (I do not

question his sincerity), the methods employed to reach those people are highly questionable and objectionable. This, by the way, is not an isolated case.

In other instances, the ethics of presenting oneself to a congregation of believers for prayer and financial support on the basis of "it takes a Jew to win a Jew" or implying that unless you are Jewish you cannot expect to win Jews is not only reprehensible, but a denial of the clear teaching of the Word of God that all of us are to be seeking to win Jewish people to the Savior. Yet, some elements in the Messianic movement would present that case. It is all too easy for Christians today to "buy the services of others to do their evangelistic work." We are seeking to fight that attitude not reinforce it. Thus, to encourage support or attract interest because of a Jewish ethnicity is to undermine the work of faithful believers who desire to see every Christian involved in evangelistic outreach to Jewish friends. Yet, this writer is aware of that very appeal on the part of some Jewish workers.

One also has to question the ethics of striving to attract those who are Jewish and have accepted the Savior to a form of religion that they often did not practice before accepting the Savior. I speak of non-observant Jews who have trusted in Messiah Jesus and then because of their ethnicity have been encouraged to adopt rituals that they did not follow previously. Instead of "going on" and enjoying the fellowship of all believers they are encouraged to segregate themselves into those assemblies that are following the regimen and discipline of rabbinic Judaism which is not the teaching of the Old Testament, but a distortion of it. It was the exponents of those traditions whom the Lord denounced so strongly in Matthew 23 and Mark 7.

The ethics of urging Jewish believers already involved in local church life to abandon that in favor of a Messianic assembly are deplorable to say the least. They ask those very churches to support their ministry and then fracture them by inveigling Jewish believers to their own assembly. This practice, too, is not restricted to one or two instances.

THE PRACTICAL PERSPECTIVE:

I had occasion to drive one day near a small village in Andra Pradesh, India. We passed a very old Hindu temple with a cross fixed atop it. My associate who lived in that village and ministered to the people as an evangelist explained that this was a very old Hindu temple that had been taken over by Roman Catholics. They simply took the old images that had been used for years by the Hindus, washed them, baptized them with holy water and dressed them in sanctified cloth. Hindus continued to come to their temple and worship the same images they had worshiped for generations. Now, however, they were Roman Catholic saints, and the people attending were called "Christians." This is religious syncretism and is abhorrent.

How much Hinduism can a new believer maintain in order to expect edification as a child of God? How much of Islam can a person keep in order to enjoy his culture and at the same time be a "new creation in Christ Jesus." How many of the traditions of the Roman Church can the new believer maintain as he walks in the liberty that he has found only in Christ Jesus? How much of the old wine skins of Judaism can the believer in the Messiah maintain and "grow in

grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ?" In other words, we are to be growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Savior. "Old things are passing away behold all things are become new." This is a new wine skin. There are new forms of worship and there is an entirely new approach to God in contrast to Judaism. To try to integrate the old with the new is in the end destructive of both.

Nowhere is this more evident than in one of the Messianic synagogues in a major city in Canada. Recently several leading Jewish believers in the Lord Jesus Christ attracted to the Judaic content of the services finally turned their backs on Messiah and returned to the synagogue. That to which they had turned was modified by Christian content but so distorted that they returned to the old rather than "going on with the new."

In Romans 9:30-33 Paul points up the "pride of the Jews" in their works of the law as the cause for their rejection of the Messiah. Jewish people do not have a corner on the "pride market" but anything that feeds their pride of Jewishness can only be destructive. They, like Gentiles, are sinners saved by grace. There is no room in the Church for inordinate pride of face, grace, place or race. To foster that is to do Jewish believers an injustice and stunt their spiritual growth.

Yes, there are very practical problems that face the Jewish believer in his new life in Messiah. They are not resolved, however, by striving to maintain a split identity from the rest of the Church. This is the practical outcome of the Messianic synagogue movement. They cannot accomplish in a Messianic

synagogue that which can only be achieved in the framework of a local church.

The fact that some do not feel comfortable in a "Gentile" church is not sufficient cause to seek a radically different alternative. Some, in fact the great majority, of our great Hebrew Christian leaders have fulfilled their tasks in the context of a local church apart from a segregated Judaistic congregation.

We should, rather, maintain the integrity and unity of the Church, the Body of Christ, by joining together and demonstrating to the world, both Jew and Gentile, that we are a "new creation in Christ Jesus, and the Church of the living God."

Jew's belief in Jesus bars him

By Gary Wisby

Because spiritual leader Michael Becker is a Jew who believes in Jesus, a North Shore clergy group won't let him become a member.

Becker, who heads Congregation B'nai Maccabim in Highland Park, was refused membership in the Highland Park-Highwood-Fort Sheridan Clergy Association last month.

The Highland Park Human Relations Commission agreed to mediate the dispute, but yesterday the clergy association turned down the offer.

"The matter is ended," said the Rev. Richard Weston-Jones, president of the clergy group, in a letter to the commission. For that body to become involved in the affair "would only tend to set it ablaze again."

In an interview, Weston-Jones said Becker was not being excluded on theological grounds, but for "deceptive religious leadership."

"The so-called Messianic Jews are really evangelical Christians," said Weston-Jones, who had declared in a letter to Becker:

"It's like putting a Mercedes-Benz symbol on your BMW auto. Both are great cars and it may fool your gullible neighbors, but it is deception. It is misrepresentation."

Weston-Jones said Becker, who is not a rabbi, would have been accepted for membership if he had applied as a Christian clergyman.

"That is discrimination," retorted Becker, a leader of the 24-member synagogue since it was formed nine years ago. "For Jews to be born Jews and then not to be able to claim to be Jews is ludicrous."

Messianic Judaism, with thousands of adherents in this country, follows nearly all the religious and cultural practices of more traditional



SUN-TIMES/Robert A. Reeder

Michael Becker, a Jew who believes in Jesus, says a clergy association's ban discriminates against him.

American Jews.

"I see no difference except that we believe in Jesus, or Yeshua, as messiah," Becker said. "We believe in two comings, they only believe in one."

The clergy association, with Jews, Protestants, Catholics and Unitarians among its 30 members, includes nearly every clergyman in the three communities.

"There has never been a theological test for membership," Becker noted. "I feel [the association] is almost

becoming a denomination, when it says 'You can't be in and this one can.'"

Congregation B'nai Maccabim holds services at the Evangelical Congregational Church in Highland Park. Before being rejected for membership, Becker attended two association meetings as a guest of the church's pastor, the Rev. Gary Brown.

"The New Testament was written by Messianic Jews," said Brown, and for the association to spurn one of their leaders "is to repudiate the foundations of [Christians] faith."

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