

THE MESSIANIC JEWISH CONGREGATION -
A UMJC PERSPECTIVE

Presented At
The North American Coordination Meeting
of the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism
April 10-11, 1985 - Dallas, Texas

By
Richard C. Nichol

PART I - Profile: The UMJC

The Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations traces its roots to initial planning in 1976 and its formal establishment in July 1979 in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Membership has grown from eighteen to forty-four associate and full-member congregations in the United States and Canada. Membership is open to those assemblies which share a vision for a congregational movement among those who name Yeshua (Jesus) as Lord. These must also have ten or more Jewish families represented in their memberships, have regular Friday or Saturday worship services and stand for the verities of biblical faith - the Messiahship of Yeshua, his virgin birth, his divine and fully human natures, his resurrection, forgiveness of sins on the basis of his atonement (as opposed to a system of "works-righteousness") and his coming again.

The UMJC is governed by its elected Executive Board along with non-elected committee chairmen comprising the Steering Committee. Each full-member congregation receives two delegate votes at annual business meetings so as to prevent larger congregations from amassing inordinate power.

Theologically broad-based, the UMJC has no power to legislate doctrine or practice beyond its Statement of Faith. Many member congregations are charismatic in orientation. Others are not. Some leaders hold a pretribulation rapture viewpoint, others mid or post. Some member congregations enjoy a more Orthodox Jewish expression. Others are more moderate. This broad-based approach has the great advantage of developing mutual respect and healthy cross-fertilization of ideas, thus lessening the potential for

an intellectually stifling atmosphere. "Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another."

The UMJC is leadership-oriented. That is to say annual conferences, local conferences, pastors' fellowships and the Yeshiva program are primarily designed to assist congregational leaders to develop themselves and their lay leadership.

Undergirding the philosophy of the UMJC is a basic belief in the value of the local Messianic Jewish congregation as the focal point of Jewish evangelism, discipleship, family nurturing and national/cultural expression. We now turn to the theological and practical rationale for this conviction.

PART II - Theological Considerations

Fundamental to our discussion on the legitimacy of Messianic Jewish congregations is the weight or emphasis placed on the lifestyle of the earliest followers of Yeshua as it shapes our understanding of key biblical teaching in these areas. Opponents of a UMJC perspective elevate a particular understanding of passages in the Pauline epistles and Hebrews while downplaying the obvious "Messianic Jewish" lifestyle of Paul, Peter, James, and the thousands of Jewish believers in Jerusalem. The Book of Acts is viewed as strictly historical, with little value as determining doctrine or normative practice. Advocates of the UMJC position feel differently. There can be little doubt that the period covered in the Acts is in some ways transitional. For example, the writing of Scripture ended with the death of the original

twelve Apostles. However, Acts provides a context for understanding the Epistles without which we may end up with distorted ex^egesis. This point cannot be overstressed. In order to understand another human being, we must consider what he says and what he does. Both taken together inform us of his true thoughts and intents. God himself invites us to understand what he is like by speaking to us of his justice and mercy and by acting in history - the Exodus, the Dispersion, the resurrection of Yeshua and so forth. Therefore, Messianic Jews place a higher premium on the didactic nature of the book of Acts as it helps shape our understanding of where the Apostles "are coming from" in their epistles.

As W. D. Davies notes in Paul and Rabbinic Judaism, "We begin with the significant fact that throughout his life Paul was a practicing Jew." Many passages may be cited proving Davies' point but two are particularly striking.

Acts 21:17ff describes Paul's reception by the elders of the Messianic Jewish community in Jerusalem. It was a happy reunion flawed only by James' mention of a potentially dangerous rumor: "They," (the believers) "have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to the customs." The resolution to the problem involved a public show of Torah observance in the Temple. This would squelch the rumor before any dissension or strife could develop, the end being that "everybody will know there is no truth to these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law." (v. 24b)

James, the brother of the Messiah and as history tells us a pious Jew, says to Paul, "You are an observant Jew," - a powerful testimony to his lifestyle as noted by a man who was in a position to judge.

Acts 18:18 is most interesting because public testimony cannot be invoked as a rationale for Paul's action: "And Paul, having remained many days longer, took leave of the brethren and put out to sea for Syria, and with him were Priscilla and Aquila. In Cenchrea he had his hair cut, for he was keeping a vow." No reason is given why the Apostle of grace - God's premier spokesman for the New Covenant truth - would have taken a Nazarite vow. Perhaps it was in response to the stresses of the second missionary journey: "Lord, help me and I will dedicate myself especially to your service." We don't know. But, one implication is clear: No understanding of his epistles regarding the Jews and Jewish lifestyle is valid if it makes Paul a hypocrite. Whatever he meant by "being under the law" or "the letter kills but the spirit gives life" must agree with the pattern of his own life. This is not to say that the status of the Old Covenant has not changed. Hebrews 8 and 9 make it abundantly clear that Moses provided us with helpful pictures - shadows of fuller truth. But Messianic Jews argue that a distinct Jewish lifestyle employing even some of the shadows to highlight the atoning work of Yeshua can be rich, and thoroughly biblical. If it was good enough for Paul, its good enough for us!

Again, following our principle that people are best understood when we consider what they do as well as what they say or write,

we may significantly penetrate the self-concept of the Apostles. Put, simply, they saw themselves as possessing a dual identity. Peter, James, Paul, et al., saw themselves as leaders of remnant Israel, living within the historical flow of their covenanted nation and as members of the larger body of Messiah. They remained true to both identities. Passages such as I Corinthians 10:32, "Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God," which some take as God's final word on the relationship of Jewish believers to the larger community, must be considered along with other passages which reflect how their

teaching operated in their own lives. Larry Rich comments:

"During Paul's continuing ministry he observed the holidays (Acts 20:6, 16) and did not hesitate to have Timothy circumcised in deference to his countrymen. Following his third missionary journey (the epistle to the Romans having already been written) he returned to Jerusalem and fulfilled a requirement of the Mosaic law as a sign of solidarity with his fellow Jews (21:17-26). In the late stages of his ministry, when most of his key epistles were already in circulation, he continued to identify himself as a Jew who believed in the Messiah rather than as a convert to something separate and distinct. He declared 'I am a Jew' (22:3) and 'I am a Pharisee' (23:6). He had gone up to Jerusalem for the purpose, he stated, of worshipping in the temple (24:12), and indicated that he understood his faith in a Jewish perspective (24:14). He continued to observe Jewish practices (24:17-18). Later he was imprisoned for the sake of the hope of Israel (28:20), and even as the Book of Acts ends, the Messianic faith is widely known as a part of Judaism."¹

The last words of the risen Yeshua to his disciples speak volumes: "And so when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, 'Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?' He said to them, 'It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit

1 - "Consultation on the Variations of Life and Expression of Jewish Believers," November 18, 19, 1977, Response to Paper by Rev. William Currie entitled The Traditional Approach to Witness to the Jews, by Mr. Larry Rich, Moody Bible Institute Dept. of Missions.

has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.'" - Acts 1:6-8

Can there be any doubt that their question was born of a thoroughly Jewish self-concept? Israel was the Lord's! They were of Israel - a remnant chosen by grace, yes - but they were Jews, dreaming the dreams, hoping the hopes and in their minds, sharing in a Jewish future. "Lord, is now the time when ours will finally take its place of honor among all the nations? Will You, Lord, now defeat the godless Romans and set up your throne?" The Messiah's answer is instructive. He did not challenge their Jewish perspective but merely reminded them that the timing of Israel's future glory is God's business. Meanwhile there was work to be done. Israel's remnant would fulfill the nation's commission - the whole world was to learn about the true God before Messiah would return and rule from Jersalem.

If we become willing to put on our tunics and sandals and step into the world of the New Testament writers and walk with them in the Temple courts, sit with them in the circle of the Rabbis and hear the Sh'ma from their lips, the allegedly anti-law, anti-Jewish passages in the New Testament take on new colorations. This is because our exegesis is informed not only by statements in the epistles but also by the deeds of their writers captured without error on the pages of the Acts.

Some have tried to reconcile their difficulty with Paul's blatant Jewishness by claiming the Apostle was "in the flesh" not living in accordance with the pattern of his own theology. We find this explanation utterly untenable because it must be remembered that the issue here is not an occasional slip into

outdated practices, but the entire pattern of the man's life. James' comment in Acts 21:24b, "but that you yourself also walk orderly, keeping the law," clearly carries this sense. Paul says of himself in Acts 23:6b, "Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!"

These considerations must be taken along with the Apostle's teaching (in the Epistles) regarding status of the law of Moses, his freedom in Messiah, the spiritual equality of Gentile believers, etc. Otherwise, distorted perspectives may emerge. Some of the specifics will be discussed late in the paper. For the moment one major point must be made: when Messianic Jewish congregations seek to express faith in Yeshua within a Jewish framework, the good examples of the Apostles light our paths.

Now that we have established the basic direction of our Messianic Jewish perspective we may make necessary assurances, qualifications, and provisos. First and foremost, the New Testament is clear - all believers' primary identity is with Messiah his worldwide assembly. Yes, we are remnant Israel. Yes, we wish to live Jewishly but not at the expense of downplaying His central place in our lives or unhealthy separation from the Body. There is no inherent contradiction here, just the demands of a dynamic tension which we happily bear.

Nineteen centuries have passed since the days of our Apostolic forefathers. Rabbinic Judaism has long since become the dominant religious expressions of our people. How shall we view this faith?

Evangelical believers often seem too quick to dismiss Rabbinic Judaism as a cold, spiritless, even cult-like religion. Is such a negative view warranted? What of the Rabbi's humanitarian concern? What of the loving zeal for Ha Shem? What of the ennobling values of family, hard work, and study? What of the painstaking care in hand-copying the Scriptures? What of this faith which produced a people able to endure horrors of which we Americans can hardly imagine? What of this religion that produces a people that lifts up and blesses every land in which it finds itself? Rabbinic Judaism without the Messiah, Yeshua, will not grant heaven but it is not an evil cult. Truth here is to be found between two extremes. Messianic Jews recognize the inadequacies of Rabbinic Judaism but we also note its glories and strengths. And our borrowing of some of its worship forms, symbols and values is rooted in Apostolic example and motivated by a love for our heritage, and our desire to live as a Jewish remnant in what may be the end of this age.

We must now consider the question, is it right for Jewish believers to establish Messianic Jewish congregations? The simple answer is why not? Believers have normally aligned themselves along doctrinal, socio/economic or ethnic lines. Why should Jews not have this opportunity? Consider some of the advantages of such congregations:

1. Unbelieving Jews visit and often feel comfortable in culturally-familiar territory.
2. Jewish believers can be nurtured in Messiah along the lines of their unique identities. Acts 15 allowed the same for Gentiles.

3. Members are taught to tithe, creating a very cost-effective outreach to the Jewish community.
4. Holiday observance is woven into the fabric of congregational life providing a rich background for appreciating Yeshua's atoning work.
5. The special issues and problems facing the Jewish believer are among the primary concerns of the Messianic Jewish congregation, whereas these are not, nor should they be of Baptist or Presbyterian or other assembly.
6. Outreach-oriented indigenous congregations have great potential for growth, so missiologists tell us.
7. A Messianic Jewish congregation provides the best atmosphere for transmitting our unique perspective and values to the next generation.

PART III - Nitty Gritty Questions Regarding the Messianic Jewish Congregation

QUESTION: Don't Messianic Jewish congregations cause unhealthy divisions in the Body?

ANSWER: Some opponents of the congregational concept have charged sinfuleseparation from the rest of the Body. As in the case of any individual believer, church, or denomination, the Evil One would seek to divide and conquer - to seduce believers into thinking theirs is the only way to God's heart. This problem may be found in many quarters but to no greater degree among Messianic Jewish congregations than any other group. Many UMJC

leaders have established significant relationships with local churches in their areas. Pulpits are shared, congregants visit one another's assemblies, holiday services involve many from the churches. Can examples be found in which Messianic Jewish congregations have developed spiritual xenophobia? Of course. But this is true of some Baptist and Methodist and other churches as well. The legitimacy of the congregational movement, however, should not be judged by the errors of some Messianic Jews.

QUESTION: Are you not putting yourself under the law?

ANSWER: Biblically being "under the law" refers to a system of justification in which a person seeks a right standing in God's sight on the basis of his righteous acts. Being "under grace" (Romans 6:14) refers to another system in which forgiveness of sins, regeneration and the related spiritual blessings are received as gifts from God because of the finished work of Messiah. Messianic Jews have no illusions in this matter. Whatever holiday-keeping we may do, whatever foods we may avoid, whatever Jewish practices we may enjoy, we know that no one has ever been or will ever be justified by works. Only faith in the risen One can provide the salvation all men need. Again, we live Jewishly-keep features of the law, if you will - because it is our privilege to live as a remnant of Israel.

QUESTION: Are you not perverting Jewish symbols, customs, and observance by infusing them with New Testament theological ~~content~~ significance?

ANSWER: Some practices require no alternation in theological content.

For example, many Messianic Jews honor the Sabbath for the very reasons offered in the Bible: it is a memorial to creation and the Exodus to be enjoyed each week; it is one of the Ten Commandments. Holidays such as Yom Kippur require significant reinterpretation because atonement has been provided once for all through Yeshua. Here, the holiday is celebrated as a day of thanksgiving for the forgiveness we enjoy as believers. We fast not for ourselves but our brothers according to the flesh who are outside Messiah. We stand in the gap for them, interceding on their behalf, asking God to grant t'shuvah to thenation. This is not a perversion of symbols, just a legitimate response to the fulness of God's revelation in Yeshua. The alternative is to let the holidays and customs go. But this would leave the Church without any significant connections with her Jewish heritage and leave Jewish believers without a rich and colorful context for their faith in Yeshua. The Jewish community should not kvetch. The breadth of understanding among Jews of even the most basic theological ideas is staggering. For example, Humanist Jews even deny the existence of God! There should be some room in the sun for Messianic Jews.

QUESTION: Isn't Messianic terminology like "Yeshua" and "Ruach Ha Kodesh" (Holy Spirit) confusing and divisive?

ANSWER: One hears occasional stories of Jewish people who embrace "Yeshua" but almost gag when they learn they just prayed to Jesus. These are few and far between but they do remind us how this messianic "shop talk" has to be clearly defined among our people. On the other hand, we understand that language is a powerful means of communicating values and perspective, and the Hebrew terminology

is helpful in this regard. The name "Yeshua" carries with it an atmosphere which is desirable and right: he was a Jew, we are Jews, and we honor him in a Jewish way.

QUESTION: The UMJC requires its member congregations to have Friday night or Saturday service. Is this not a sinful throwback to pre-Messiah religion?

ANSWER: The Sabbath, a fabulous gift to Israel was kept by early Messianic Jews. This alone could provide adequate rationale for our keeping the day. However, additional reasons may be offered. The Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments. It is a creation ordinance, the roots of which run deeper than the specifics of the Mosaic Covenant. And, we have no New Testament teaching as to which day believers must meet. If the UMJC wishes for the sake of testimony, authenticity, or any non-salvific reason to have such a standard, the organization is perfectly within its rights to do so. Has such observance dulled our appreciation of Messiah's resurrection, theoretically honored on Sunday in many churches? Not at all. Messianic Jews are keenly aware of the centrality of the resurrection as other believers who may enjoy Sunday services. There is a practical advantage to worshipping on Shabbat - the opportunity for Jewish believers to visit churches and vice versa. Meaningful contact in the body is of great importance to a healthy Messianic Jewish congregation.

QUESTION: Should all Jewish believers be in Messianic Jewish congregations?

ANSWER: The many advantages of the Messianic Jewish congregation

should make it the first choice of Jewish believers. Here we have the opportunity to shine brightly in our communities as Jews who embrace a thoroughly Jewish message - Yeshua as Lord. We have the structures by which parents and children can develop clear identities in a confusing world. We have the privilege of becoming self-supporting, self-propagating communities in which Jewish believers can walk tall, developing our unique expression of biblical faith. It is difficult to live as part of remnant Israel in most church settings. The dominant evangelical/fundamentalist culture is powerful and all pervasive and Churches are not, nor should be oriented toward small Jewish constituencies. Thus, the Jewish member must often find it difficult to develop a unique lifestyle. His children attend Girls' Auxillary and Boys Brigade, and later they marry in the church. Their grandchildren know grampa was Jewish but there remains little vitality to their own sense of Jewish identification. Having said all this, there still may be good reasons for some Jewish believers to make their homes in a sound, biblically-centered church. Many smaller cities are without Messianic Jewish congregations. And of course a church is to be preferred over a doctrinally aberrant messianic assembly. And then, some Jews are utterly blasé about their heritage. These should not be made to feel guilty for not aligning themselves with a Messianic Jewish congregation.

QUESTION: Since Jewishness is so important don't Gentiles in Messianic Jewish congregations feel like second class citizens?

ANSWER: This need not be the case. In a biblically balanced congregation the Gentile members are appreciated as those with a

"Jewish heart" - called by God to bless Israel and to share in the rich nourishment of the Jewish olive tree. These are also "joint heirs with the saints," citizens of commonwealth Israel, who God loves as much as any Jewish believer. Liturgy is presently being developed by the UMJC which honors the non-Jews in our congregations (naming ceremony, for example) and a comprehensive theological outlook is in the works as well.

PART IV - A Case Study: Congregation Ruach Israel

A. History

Ruach Israel, Boston's Messianic Jewish congregation had its unpretentious beginning c. 1978 when a small group of Jewish and sympathetic Gentile believers begin meeting monthly. The group grew, through a doctrinally unfocused period and by 1980 developed a quasi congregational status. In 1981, Congregation Ruach Israel was formally registered with the state and in August of that year I was called to become its full-time leader. The thirty or so in attendance could not afford a full salary but I had a number of personal supporters who were and continue to be very helpful. Since August of 1981 we have grown from eight to forty-two members, from about thirty to eighty in regular attendance. Of our formal membership seventy per cent are Jewish.

B. Structure

Congregation Ruach Israel is governed by the pastor along with two other elders (Zakenim) - one Jew and one Gentile, supported by three deacons (Shammashim) and two deaconesses (Shammashot), a cantor and paid secretary. These are selected by congregational

vote and serve indefinitely.

Our non-charismatic though lively worship services have a fair amount of formal liturgy counter-balanced by free-flowing song times. Raising of hands to God is common and Israeli folk dancing often spontaneously flows during worship.

C. Erev Shabbat Service

Our regular order of Friday night service includes singing followed by announcements, lighting of Shabbat candles, Scripture reading, brief prayer, a cantorial from the traditional liturgy or B'rit Chadashah (New Testament), a sermon, another cantorial, a longer song time, a reminder about tithes and offerings, the Mourner's Kaddish, Sh'ma, Kiddush and Ha Motzi and the Aaronic Benediction. Oneg Shabbat follows immediately after the one and a half hour service.

D. Ministries of the congregation include:

Operation Lechem - providing food and clothing for Boston's poor Jewish families.

Menorah ministry - our nursing home visitation team.

Mobile Prayer Unit - providing prayer at homes of congregants in need.

Messianic Perspective - our radio program.

Tape of the Month Club - a subscription cassette program.

Foundations Class - our discipleship program for new believers.

Weekly Home Groups - Bible study in different parts of the city.

Kids Class/Parent Support Group - meets simultaneously on Sunday mornings.

Beth Shalom - a congregation being planted in Springfield, Ma.

The Sisterhood of the congregation.

E. Spiritual Emphasis and Goals

We deeply desire our people to become all they can as those made in the image of God. Not only are they encouraged to grow morally and ethically, but in the areas of talent as well. A major emphasis is the factual evidence for our faith, the concept that biblical faith is not blind, but rooted in the realities of history. Members are encouraged to view their faith as true not just helpful. We deeply desire our Jewish members to feel and live as Messianic Jews, that is, to develop a commitment to Eretz Yisrael, and our rich cultural heritage. Most important we seek to instill a desire to reach out to our people and show them the good reasons why they should trust Yeshua. The leadership works hard to avoid a two-class mentality. Gentile members are treated no differently than Jews except for our regular reminders that we all should seek to bring Jewish friends to services and slight differences in certain liturgy. An atmosphere of warmth and acceptance has developed embracing all who walk through our doors, Jew or Gentile.

We leaders emphasize the taking of personal responsibility as a key element in spiritual growth and emotional well being and teach our people to become decision-makers not overly dependent on special revelation from God as a prerequisite to moving on with life. We stand for the enjoyment of life in the will of God. Here the ancient rabbis had a biblical insight many believers in the Messiah have missed.

Ruach Israel Israel cooperates with other Jewish outreaches in Boston, specifically Jews for Jesus and the ABMJ and has

extensive contact with area churches through pulpit supply, Passover demonstrations, etc. We are committed to helping believers understand the Jewish roots of all our faith in Yeshua and to help them relate spiritually to Jewish friends. Some of our members visit churches regularly and church people are with us each week. So far the rabbinic community has ignored us but this may change as our outreach becomes more visible.

Ruach Israel is a stable, healthy congregation with all of the normal challenges any congregation faces. Almost every member is a first generation believer, so areas of immaturity are evident but genuinness, honesty, and joy are characteristic. God has been good to us and we are profoundly grateful to him.

PART V - Conclusion

We have sought to demonstrate the biblical justification for Messianic Jewish congregational life. The concept is biblically justifiable when the book of Acts is viewed properly - as a context for understanding the Epistles.

We have also sought to demonstrate the practical of such congregations in terms of potential for outreach, discipleship, and "lifeing" in general. Standard objections to the concept were discussed and the real life example of one of many successful congregations was explored.

A final word of exhortation and encouragment is in order: For those who may have had difficult experiences in the past with a Messianic Jewish congregation or leader, our movement

is very young. At times enthusiasm may have gotten in the way of sound judgment and the discovery of new biblical truth may have eclipsed equally important "old" truth. Try not to judge us too harshly. We are learning and maturing. God is at work in our midst and we need your blessing and love.