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## **FOR THE JEWISH BELIEVER: MAINLINE OR MESSIANIC IS THERE A CHOICE?**

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A few years ago I attended a western regional conference of the UMJC in Anaheim. My principal reason for going was to press the flesh and circulate. After all, I was an anomaly within Messianic Judaism - a Jewish Lutheran who had been called by the conservative Missouri Synod as a full-time missionary for Jewish Outreach. As far as I knew at the time, I was the only Jewish missionary representing a mainline Christian denomination for the express purpose of stimulating, educating, training and encouraging thousands of Lutheran laymen and church workers within the Pacific Southwest District (Southern California, Arizona and Nevada) to: (1) Recognize the scriptural imperative to go to the Jew first with the Gospel of Yeshua; (2) Teach them how to be bold and confident in their proclamation; (3) Train lay leaders from 275 congregations to encourage others; and (4) Develop a worshipping congregation of Jewish and gentile believers under the Missouri Synod banner.

So I went to the UMJC Conference, handing out my business cards to as many who would receive them, and poking at the various tables and booths. Suddenly, a lady I had met at several Bible study groups and Messianic worship services I attended in the past came over to me. She knew what I did, and she knew I was serving the Lord as a missionary for the Lutheran Church. But she did a very strange thing. She placed both her hands on my shoulders, looked squarely into my eyes, and in a

pleading, urgent voice, said, "Milt, Milt, you've got to get out of the Lutheran Church!"

I was taken aback, but what she said has been repeated many times since by other like-minded, self identified "Messianic Jews" ... "Get out of that 'goyishe' church and come back to where you belong!" The inference of such a plea is clear: A Jew who comes to faith in Yeshua **MUST**, not only should, but **MUST** be a member of a Messianic congregation.

I have a real problem with that. For instance, I don't see the apostle Paul ever saying that Jewish believers ought to separate themselves from others in the body of Messiah. Nor do I see anything in the Scriptures which speak of a separate section reserved for Messianic Jews at the banquet table in heaven. Nor do I see where a cultural or traditional identity as Jews mandates maintaining that distinction once we come into the fullness of faith in Yeshua.

I know these statements may promote disagreement. But I think it's high time that those of us who are serving in the forefront of Jewish outreach recognize that Jewish believers come in all shapes and sizes. There are those who have come into fellowship following a lifelong association with Jewish culture and Synagog worship, and find it difficult, awkward or uncomfortable stepping into a Gentile Christian church with all its "goyishe" trappings. Fine! For those who feel that way, let them seek a Messianic synagog home. But for what is by far the great majority of Jews, those whose exposure to synagog worship or Jewish traditions and culture are minimal; those who have lived a secular life -- coming into a gentile Christian church is no

problem... What is the problem, apparently, is the perception - and even worse - the absolute certainty, that Jewish believers must identify themselves as Jews first, and by so doing, avoid at all costs their identification as "Christians."

#### EXAMPLES:

(1) A young lady friend in Yeshua, whose husband leads a Messianic congregation, wrote a detailed newsletter in which she painstakingly explained her fervent belief and rationalization that Jewish believers should always identify themselves as Jews first, so as not to confuse them with Gentile Christians.

(2) The spiritual leader of a Messianic congregation in the East, in responding to an intermarriage survey I conducted, replied by saying that all of his congregants, as a condition of membership, had to agree that they would all become Jews (even the Gentiles) and eventually emigrate as a body to Israel.

(3) A Jewish brother in Yeshua, representing Jews for Jesus, wrote an impassioned and carefully reasoned paper supporting his contention that Jewish believers should marry only other Jewish believers, so that the image presented to the non-believing Jewish world would not be confused or tarnished.

(4) A gentile believer in Los Angeles who is married to a Jewish believer and worships with him in a Messianic congregation felt alienation and separation from the body because she was not fully accepted and accorded the same status of those in the body who were Jewish by birth. This manifestation is prevalent in many Messianic worshipping communities.

Friends, these attitudes, perceptions and beliefs DO NOT serve the cause of

unity among Messiah's people! If anything, they serve only to further the breach, the separation and their alienation of Jewish believers from the rest of the body of Christ.

We must pay more attention to the uncounted thousands of Jews who have been brought into the family of God through the prayers, love and witness of Gentile Christians, and who have found a worship home within a variety of denominational or independent Gentile Christian churches. We seem to largely ignore them, or write them off as a minority of Jewish believers who have turned their backs on their Jewish roots.

A survey I conducted in 1990-91 of 1400 intermarried couples revealed that the greatest number of Jewish respondents, 18%, listed Gentile Christian churches as their primary worship home. Messianic synagogue affiliation was listed by 11.8% of the Jewish respondents. Clearly, this reflects a statistically valid breakdown of choice of worship.

Two Jewish believer brothers within my own LCMS denomination preferred worship and fellowship in LCMS congregations. Both had attended Messianic congregations and actually felt alienated from them. Yet, they proudly maintained their Jewish identity.

Jewish believers in Yeshua populate a wide variety of Gentile Christian churches throughout the country. In the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles, it has been reported that at Church on the Way, a Foursquare church with the largest membership of any in Los Angeles County, 1000 Jewish believers are members! Lest anyone think that they chose to affiliate with this church because of the lack of

available Messianic congregations, there are no less than five such congregations within a ten miles radius!

My point, dear colleagues, is that we need to expand our horizons beyond the single focus of developing and maintaining distinctive Messianic congregations, while we largely ignore those brethren of the faith who have found their Messiah and serve Him in a wide variety of worship settings. There are thousands of Jews who have come to faith through the work of non-Messianic congregations where they worship and fellowship. They are being used by God where they have been planted. It is therefore not as essential for Jewish believers to only worship in Messianic congregations and restrict their life partner choices to Jewish believers. Nor is it necessary, or even desirable, for non-Jewish spouses to become Jews, as some Messianic leaders are urging. Messianic Jews, along with all other members of the Body of Christ, should serve and worship where God has led them. We Jews have no corner on elitism! Rather, we should encourage our brethren to worship and serve God first where He would have them serve, wherever they may be.