

When Jews Assimilate Into the Christian Faith

✖ In the early 1970s, a significant number of Jews committed their lives to Yeshua and came to the conviction that they should call themselves Messianic Jews rather than Christians. There were several reasons for this. One was the history of institutional Christianity and its impact on the Jewish people.

From a Jewish perspective, Christianity was a movement of semi-paganism, oppression and anti-Semitism. We wanted to project ourselves in such a way that the Jewish people would take another look at Yeshua without the barriers of their pre-formed perceptions of Christianity.

In addition, we really wanted to promote the truth that Jews who come to faith in Yeshua are still called to identify and live as part of the Jewish people. Romans 11:29 states that the Jewish people are the subjects of an irrevocable election and calling from God. Romans 11:1, 5 identifies Jewish believers in Yeshua as the saved remnant of Israel.

“I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! ... Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace.”

We wanted our people to see that embracing Yeshua does not mean betraying and abandoning our Jewish heritage. If we do not live as part of our people, we are not showing ourselves as the saved remnant that sanctifies the whole (Romans 11:16).

Planting Messianic Jewish congregations was considered a central part of the vision. We also saw Jewish believers in Yeshua living and identifying as Jews as a key to ushering in the last days and the catalyst toward all Israel being saved.

Some of us also understood how important it was at the same time to live out the truth that we are one with the body of believers as a whole. This was somewhat controversial since we were the only movement that professed oneness with the body of the Messiah that did not use the word Christian as our self-designation.

The history of the last 35 years has been one of great gains in the Messianic Jewish movement; hundreds of congregations have been planted in the United States, hundreds more in Europe, Russia, and Ukraine and about a hundred in Israel along with scattered congregations in South America, Africa, and Australia. All these grew from a mere handful of congregations before 1975.

The Present Situation

Today we still find that the great majority of Jewish believers in Yeshua are in Christian churches and identify themselves as Christians. I

n addition, this great majority is not living a Jewish life and is often strongly resistant to the Messianic Jewish call. They and their children are assimilating into the Gentile world and do not strengthen the saved remnant of Israel. They are, instead, weakening the numbers of the Jewish people. It is likely that later generations may not identify as Jewish in any way.

On one occasion I spoke to a Jewish missions leader who recommended church membership to Jewish Yeshua-believers. He was totally blind to the diminishing of Israel/Jewry that was taking place. Assimilation was not a problem for him. I pointed out to him that if it were not for assimilation, there would be hundreds of millions of Jews today.

Wars and pogroms alone where many were killed cannot explain the demographics. We are a small number of only 13 million according to mainstream Jewish statistics. Messianic Jews who

count children of Jewish fathers add many millions to these figures, but it is still a small number in world population terms.

Are we willing to lose what may amount to hundreds of thousands of Jews in churches who are assimilating? (There are of course exceptions, and there are some examples of Jews in churches committed to Jewish life.) Is there a mission to them, something that can be done to recover them and their children to be part of our people?

Some are Threatened by the Message of Jewish Calling

The message of the Jewish calling proclaimed by Messianic Jews is a threat to assimilating Jewish Christians who perceive it as a message that rejects their experience and commitment to the Christian churches.

Pastors are also threatened; they think that if their Jewish members accept this message, they will lose them. Many of these Jewish Christians have had a positive experience in the churches. They enjoy and appreciate the Christian heritage, much of which is worthy to be appreciated! In addition, many were won to Yeshua through the powerful witness of Christian friends. Modern Jews have many more contacts with Christians than with Messianic Jews. If these Christians display the reality of Yeshua in their lives, it is natural that these Jews follow them to their churches.

A very few Messianic Jews have been so greatly pained by this process that they want to exhort Christians not to win Jews to Yeshua. They say that only Messianic Jews should do this so that the new believers stay within the Jewish world. This is not biblically defensible. Christians are called in Romans 11 to make Jewish people jealous.

The Answer: A Mega-Shift in Church Leadership

I am convinced that the answer is a shift in the pastoral leadership of the churches. Church leaders must adopt a doctrinal foundation that insists that their Jewish members identify and live as Jews. This was anticipated in R. Kendall Soulen's book, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*.

In this monumental study, Soulen approvingly quotes Jewish Orthodox theologian Michael Wyschogrod, who argues that we will not see full repentance for anti-Semitism in churches until the pastors of the churches teach their baptized Jewish members that they are called to live Jewish lives based in the Torah (I would add, obviously as interpreted by the New Testament). Without church leaders teaching the reality of the Jewish calling, Jewish Christians in the church will not take that call seriously.

I have recently been in contact with four Jewish pastors of large Christian churches who have come to the conviction that this is true. They have embraced their own Jewish identity and are now seeking to engage their Jewish Christian members to join them in creating space for Jewish identity, Jewish life patterns and celebrations while at the same time embracing the culture of Christianity for the majority of the members.

One has actually planted a Messianic Jewish congregation affiliated with his church. I have been a secondary influence, but I have to give primary credit to Coach Bill McCartney and Raleigh Washington of Promise Keepers and Road to Jerusalem. As an African-American Christian leader, Raleigh has been especially effective. He first points to his own identity as an African-American and its importance to him. Then he notes that Jewish identity in Yeshua is more important because it is mandated in Scripture for historic purposes.

It is far too early to judge this, but what might happen if it became a trend? Let us dream! What if, from such an orientation, there were more and more Jews in churches who identified as Messianic Jews and who joined together in

Messianic Jewish fellowship groups connected to the churches and also connected to the Messianic Jewish synagogues?

Could we even see their children returning to their Jewish calling, and some making aliyah (becoming Israeli citizens and residents)? Could some even train to be leaders in Messianic Jewish congregations? Such a change could strengthen the whole movement.

Let Us Not Abandon the Assimilating Jewish Christians!

I for one am not willing to abandon the assimilating Jewish Christians in the churches and see them lost to the Jewish people! Many are mature Christians. I am not willing to abandon the hope that there can be a shift in church leaders' understanding. Such efforts as Toward Jerusalem Council II, our effort to see churches officially align with the Messianic Jewish movement, and Road to Jerusalem that has similar goals (led by Coach McCartney and Raleigh Washington), could be instruments in facilitating this "mega" shift.

At any rate, a great change is needed. If so, and some of these would come to Israel, we would be much closer to that 144,000 in the land of Israel described in the Book of Revelation chapter 7. That would be a great step toward "All Israel being saved," and "Life from the dead." (Romans 11:25-28, 15).

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