

Can You Call a Messianic Jew a Christian?

Friends, we have to get over prejudices. All too often we prefer things in a well-defined category that fits our personal comfort zone. This piece is about an issue which has been around for a long time and continues to lack a clearly defined category. It's not meant to offend; rather a sincere attempt to provide clarity on what can be a sensitive issue. It's also intended to challenge conventional thinking.

The Issue

How do you define a person of Jewish heritage who chooses to embrace Jesus/Yeshua as the Messiah? Are they a "Christian," or are they "Jewish?" What category do they fit into? I believe the average person (both Christian and Jewish) would most likely categorize such a person as a "Christian." However, is this really correct?

Attempting to answer the question would require a close look at Jesus/Yeshua. Such an endeavor can easily take up volumes of material. However, in an effort to keep things more palatable I'll use a 'Readers Digest' description.

The Bible tells us Jesus/Yeshua was and is a Jew. He never abandoned being a Jew. He lived a Torah-observant life. He did not criticize the teachings of the Jewish sages. He honored them by saying "they sit on the seat of Moses," (Matt. 23:2, TLV) which means he respected their authority to instruct and interpret. He also said "do what they say, not what they do" (see Matt. 23:3) This refers to certain traditions, because some were hypocrites. He also adhered to the sages' principle: 'follow the teachings, not the man.'

Authentic Messianic Faith

Many Jews who have chosen to embrace Jesus/Yeshua live an observant Jewish lifestyle. They honor the Shabbat, eat kosher food, wear Tzit Tzit, a kippa, light candles on Friday night, partake in the Feasts, go to services on Saturday (Shabbat), wear a tallit, and have a Mezuzah or Star of David around their neck.

Their observant lifestyle did not change after embracing Jesus/Yeshua as Messiah. So how does such a person get labeled as a “Christian,” if there isn’t anything “Christian” about what they do or believe?

Moreover, they are practicing what many would call “authentic Messianic faith.”

What is “authentic Messianic faith?” The first believers in Jesus/Yeshua were Jews. Judaism is a “messianic” faith. The first followers of Jesus/Yeshua were practicing Jews who believed He was the promised Messiah. Thus “authentic Messianic faith” in essence is Torah observant Judaism married to Jesus/Yeshua.

Today, there is a growing movement among Messianic Jews to embrace a Torah pursuant life and restore “authentic Messianic faith.” It’s being spearheaded by Rabbi Itzhak Shapira, a traditional Jewish rabbi who came to accept Jesus/Yeshua as Messiah. He is founder of Ahavat Ammi Ministries and has a growing following around the world.

An Erroneous Label

This piece is not meant to be critical of Christians. To think that would miss the point. In my view, a basic definition of a Christian is someone without Jewish DNA and chooses to accept Jesus as their Messiah. I am simply drawing a distinction between a Christian and a Jewish follower of Yeshua, (Jesus’ Hebrew name) suggesting the latter has not stopped being a Jew.

First-century evidence indicates Jewish leadership at Yavneh promoted separation between traditional Jews and Jews who accepted Jesus/Yeshua. Such Jews were deemed heretical. Subsequent to this Jewish leadership referred to Jews who followed Jesus/Yeshua as “Christians.” They were no longer considered “Jews.” Prior to this, followers of Jesus/Yeshua were accepted as a sect of Judaism.

In my view, calling them “Christians” was and remains an error, which perpetuates division. It also contributes to misunderstanding, and in some cases, baseless hatred. Jews who embrace Jesus/Yeshua as Messiah are not “Christians.” They were Jews prior to embracing Jesus/Yeshua, and remain Jews subsequent. Their decision to embrace Jesus/Yeshua as Messiah is highly personal, between them and the Lord. No one owns the right to slap a label on them, especially if said label is inaccurate and prejudicial. Moreover, let’s not forget Jesus/Yeshua lived a Torah-observant life.

So if a Jew who lives a Torah-pursuant Jewish lifestyle embraces Jesus/Yeshua (a Jew) as his Messiah, what sense does it make to label said person as a “Christian?” In my view, it doesn’t. They are Jewish followers of Jesus/Yeshua or Messianic Jews. They deserve to be honored and respected as Jews.

To be fair, most Messianic Jews don’t live a Torah-pursuant lifestyle. Plus, there are some that attend Christian churches, and for all intents and purposes live as Gentile Christians. In my view because their DNA is Jewish they should be considered Jews. Why? Jewish law stipulates that anyone born from a Jewish mother is considered to be a Jew, whether they practice Judaism or not. (Reform Judaism includes the father as well) If they choose to go through a formal Christian conversion that might justify calling them “Christian.”

Perspective

To put this in perspective, who were the very first followers of Jesus/Yeshua? Were they “Christians?” Heaven forbid! The very first followers were Jews. They were living a Jewish life before accepting Him as their Messiah, and they continued living a Jewish life after accepting Him as Messiah. Why?

First of all, He was a Jew who upheld Torah. He affirmed Jewish prophecy, honored the teachings of the Jewish sages, ministered to his own people and never spoke in a Christian church on Sunday. He only spoke in Jewish synagogues on Shabbat.

Christians and Jews should come to terms with the fact that Jesus/Yeshua was a Jew. Jews and Gentiles have their own unique identity and each has their own specific calling.

The identity of Jewish believers in Jesus/Yeshua has been misrepresented for too long.

If we’re going to insist on labels, we should provide a correct label to Jewish followers of Jesus/Yeshua. They are Messianic Jews, who did not stop being Jews after accepting their Messiah.

Please pass me the label-maker. {eo}

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