

Is There an Identity Crisis Among Gentile Believers?

✖ As we walked past the Egyptian exhibit in the Museum of Art History in Vienna, I noted the great importance placed upon memorials for the dead. The wealthy took great pains to prepare proper tombs and memorials. Embalming to preserve the body was of prime importance. Why did the Egyptians do this?

It was a way of declaring significance in the face of death. Human beings want to believe they are significant in the scheme of things.

Anthropology teaches us that traditions concerning death and the dead almost universally declare life after death. These traditions affirm the significance of human life in the face of death. The reasons for belief in significance vary, but no religious system gives the quality answer that we find in the Bible, where we learn that human beings are created in the image of God, for an everlasting life of fellowship with Him and with other human beings.

This is the beginning point for the question of identity: Who am I? Do I have worth? Many people experience great doubt concerning their worth. They experienced terrible rejections in their growing up years, or tragic events that gave rise to deep questions concerning their own worth.

Identity was defined in ancient times largely by one's ties to family and tribe, and one's place in an ancestral line. The Bible does not disregard these ties in the question of identity and worth. Indeed, the prophets call Israel to faithfulness based on their worth according to their ancestry going back to Abraham. "Look to the rock from which you were hewn ... look to Abraham your father" (Isaiah 51:1, 2).

Identity Crisis

I believe that some Gentiles in the Messianic Jewish movement are having an identity crisis and are not solving the problem the right way. The Messianic Jewish congregational movement is a movement of Jews and Gentiles who have joined together in the calling and for the salvation Israel. Both enjoy and participate in Jewish life patterns. They are one in the Messiah. Most Christians are not called to become part of Messianic Jewish congregations though all are called to support the salvation of Israel. Some are called to the Jewish people as a primary life focus. Their heart is bonded in a unique way with the Jewish people.

At the same time, and with a tender heart, I observe that some Gentile believers are attached to the Messianic Jewish movement out of motives other than a heart burden for Israel and the Jewish community. Rather they are joined to it as an answer to a personal identity crisis. They read the promises in the Bible concerning Israel and her future glory. Romans chapter 9 begins with a list of the benefits of being part of Israel in answer to the question of what advantage being Jewish provides. Theirs are the covenants, the patriarchs, the giving of the Law, the Temple, the priesthood and the glory. Isaiah states that in the future, Israel will blossom and bud and fill the whole world with fruit. So a Gentile believer who does not know himself adequately in Messiah thinks that it would be better to be Jewish or an Israelite. He thinks that if he is not, he is second class. This has led to amazing diversions.

Diversions in the Messianic World

One group says that those who come to faith in Yeshua, from any nation, are physical descendants of the lost tribes (the Ephraimite Movement). They are seeking status in Israel as permanent residents without the usual benefits of the State. It is as if they are saying, "If I am a lost tribes person, then I am an equal Israelite and have equal worth." Another

group says that they may not all be physical descendants, but that there are enough who are descendants that the whole is Israel (the more moderate Ephraimite Movement).

This is a partial replacement theology (that the church has replaced Israel and is a new and true Israel). These folks still affirm the identity of Jews, whom they call the tribe of Judah.

Another group is touting one new man in Yeshua, and lives a Jewish life pattern in some ways, but it is said that they are beyond Jew and Gentile as a new type of humanity. This is seen as a great new revelation, but it is not understood that this is exactly like the third race replacement theology of the early Church. Many of these groups disparage the Church, even the Reformation churches, as pagan. This is another way of superior identity assertion. It betrays a sad lack of understanding of the theology and practice of the churches.

A Biblical Understanding of Worth and Identity

The problem in all of these movements is a failure to understand worth and identity from a Biblical perspective and to enter into it. Jews do have a worth according to God's promises to Abraham. Through the work of Yeshua, however, Gentiles who come to faith in him also become the children of Abraham. Baptism incorporates the Gentile fully to become the seed of the Messiah and hence the seed of Abraham. This happens by a creative miracle of the Holy Spirit. In addition, one can now redeem one's ancestry by forgiving what was bad and receiving with gratitude that which was good. So one can be a Norwegian seed of Abraham, as well as French, Chinese or Russian. I do not wrestle with the fact that my ancestry is both Jewish and Norwegian as if this makes me lesser and only a half Jew. I am a Jew, but I appreciate both, and both become full of meaning in the Messiah. Indeed, different Church traditions of worship and life patterns are enriching from this perspective. All of us share the rich value of being

created in the image of God and being a new creation.

One New Man

The “one new man” of this theology is the one new humanity. It is not homogenization. It is the complement of mutual blessing as in a marriage. In Messiah, with regard to worth and spiritual acceptance, there is no male or female. But male and female in the Messiah continue and produce the amazing personal enrichment of a marriage in Messiah. In the same way, Jew and Gentile are to enrich one another. Instead of seeking to prove that one had a Jewish ancestor way back when, or that one is from the lost tribes, it is much better to bring our uniqueness in the Messiah for mutual blessing. It is much better to embrace one’s ethnicity in the Messiah by dying to any idolatry of it. We all write life stories out of the background we have been given, whether an African tribesman or a Japanese warrior.

Identity issues are solved for Gentiles in realizing that they are created in the image of God, each with his own unique ethnic and cultural heritage. They are now the seed of Abraham through the Messiah. They are part of the one new man, His glorious bride. There is nothing better than this. There are different callings, but without status superiority in the body. Israel’s promises are glorious, but not more than the promises of glory for all in the bride of the Messiah. All peoples can enter into this as full participants. The gospel is preached to all nations.

In the Messiah we together form an amazing wholeness out of the variety of peoples that make up God’s multifaceted body. It is with this understanding that the call of Gentiles to serve in Messianic Jewish contexts is such a blessing. Identity is based on memory and purpose, which is future oriented. That memory includes a healthy ancestral dimension. In the Messiah all can come to their fullness of meaning and identity.

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