

"A supremely helpful analysis of Messianic Judaism . . . that will benefit people on all sides of the controversy." —John MacArthur

COME,
LET US
RE SON
TOGETHER

**THE UNITY OF JEWS
AND GENTILES IN THE CHURCH**

THIRD EDITION


BARUCH MAOZ

“This is a supremely helpful analysis of Messianic Judaism and a host of biblical questions raised by that controversial movement. To what degree is it appropriate for Jewish believers in Jesus to preserve Jewish ceremonies and rabbinical traditions in their worship? Baruch Maoz is uniquely qualified to write on the subject, and he has done so with a charitable tone and point-by-point thoroughness that will benefit people on all sides of the controversy. I greatly appreciate his relentlessly biblical approach.”

—**John MacArthur**, Pastor and Teacher, Grace Community Church,
Sun Valley, California

“Jewish believers in Jesus have long been plagued with critical questions: How are we to live our lives? Are we to worship in churches with our Gentile brothers and sisters or are we to commit ourselves to Messianic Judaism? This book is must reading for anyone who cares about the Jewish people.”

—**Stan Telchin**, Jewish Christian and Author of *Betrayed!*

“Finally, a clear, contemporary exposition on evangelizing the Jews. This long-needed book, written with mind and soul by one intimately acquainted with the subject, is packed with spiritual and practical instruction. It is a must read for all Christians and denominations involved in, or contemplating, Jewish evangelism.”

—**Joel Beeke**, President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary,
Grand Rapids

“This book is written with a passion. The author is convinced that a visible unity of Jews and Gentiles in Christ is a demonstration of the gospel’s transforming power. He longs for the day when God will sum up everything in Christ—everything in heaven and earth (Eph. 1:10)—and calls upon his readers to live for that day.”

—**Richard Gaffin**, Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology,
Emeritus, Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia

“An excellent treatise on Jewish evangelism from a reformed perspective as well as an effective and appropriate critique into the current messianic movement.”

—**Harry L. Reeder III**, Senior Pastor, Briarwood Presbyterian Church

COME,
LET US
RE  SON
TOGETHER

COME,
LET US
RE SON
TOGETHER

THE UNITY OF JEWS
AND GENTILES IN THE CHURCH

THIRD EDITION

BARUCH MAOZ


P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

Third edition 2012 P&R Publishing
© 2003, 2008, 2012 by Baruch Maoz

First edition published in 2003 by Christian Focus Publications, Ltd., under the title
Judaism Is Not Jewish: A Friendly Critique of the Messianic Movement

Second edition published in 2009 by Audubon Press under the title *Come, Let Us Reason Together: The Unity of Jews and Gentiles in the Church*

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—except for brief quotations for the purpose of review or comment, without the prior permission of the publisher, P&R Publishing Company, P.O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, New Jersey 08865-0817.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®. Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NKJV) are from The Holy Bible, New King James Version. Copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982, Thomas Nelson, Inc.

Scripture quotations marked (KJV) are from the King James Bible, Pure Cambridge Edition.

Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

ISBN: 978-1-59638-406-4 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-59638-558-0 (ePub)

ISBN: 978-1-59638-557-3 (Mobi)

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ma'oz, Barukh.

Come, let us reason together : the unity of Jews and Gentiles in the church / Baruch Maoz. -- 3rd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and indexes.

ISBN 978-1-59638-406-4 (pbk.)

1. Jewish Christians. 2. Messianic Judaism. I. Title.

BR158.M37 2012

266.0088'296--dc23

2012024732

To the glory of God,
to the beloved members of Grace and Truth Christian Congregation,
whom I was privileged to serve for almost 34 years,
and to Paul Liberman,
a Messianic leader who disagrees with most of what I have said in
this book
and from whom I have learned a great deal

Contents

Foreword	9
Preface	17
Introduction	19
Biblical Assumptions	27

PART 1: A THEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

1. Should We Preach the Gospel to the Jewish People?	39
2. The Mosaic Covenant	71
3. Rabbinic Customs	115
4. The Biblical Argument	147
5. Making Churches Comfortable for Jewish Christians	167

PART 2: A PRACTICAL ASSESSMENT

6. Standards	175
--------------	-----

Afterword	195
-----------	-----

Appendix A: A Letter from a Gentile	197
-------------------------------------	-----

Appendix B: A Short History of the Messianic Movement	201
---	-----

CONTENTS

Appendix C: Messianic Judaism or Judaizing Christianity	207
Appendix D: Justification in Judaism	223
Bibliography	235
Index of Scripture	239
Index of Subjects and Names	249

Foreword

Trusting My Jewish Savior

STAN TELCHIN



SOME MONTHS AGO, I was asked to be a principal speaker at an International Conference on Jewish evangelism. It was only after I had agreed to do so that I was assigned my very challenging topic: “Trusting My Jewish Savior.”

“Trusting my Jewish Savior”? That was a subject I’d never really thought about. Certainly, it was one I had never spoken about. But that was the assignment given and that was the assignment accepted.

I want to share with you some of the things I learned as I prepared that message. My purpose in doing so is threefold: First: I want you to learn some important truths about me. Second: I want to encourage you to consider these truths because they may apply to your life. Third, my overwhelming objective is to help you become even more effective in your outreach to Jewish people.

As I first thought about the subject “Trusting my Jewish Savior” I realized that, like you, I have a whole list of things to trust him for: my salvation, my life, my family, my work, my health, my relationships, my ministry, my finances. Later, as I continued to think about this assignment, I realized that there is yet another fundamental and extremely important matter for which I am trusting him. I am trusting him for my identity.

Think about that word “identity” for just a moment. If you had to define it, what would you say? Do this: take a pen or pencil and write down how you would define your identity. Here’s how I used to define it: I am a first generation Jewish American. Please note the order of what I have just said. I am not an American Jew. I am a Jewish American.

Why the emphasis? Because as soon as I was able to understand, I was taught that I am a Jew before I am anything else. Continually in the late ’20s and early ’30s, as I grew up in a ghetto on the East Side of New York, I was reminded that I was a Jew! Anti-Semitism was a very real part of American life in those years. Indeed, if anyone asked me my nationality, I knew they weren’t asking if I was an American; they wanted to find out if I was Jewish. I would boldly say, “I am a Jew!”

As I grew up, I did the things that most good Jewish boys did. I went to Talmud Torah; I became Bar Mitzvah at age 13. That’s also the age I joined and became active in a Zionist youth group. I celebrated all of the Jewish holidays with my family. Later, after serving for three years during World War II, I attended George Washington University in Washington, DC, and was very involved with Hillel, the Jewish centre on campus. During my last two years in college, I was on the air with a weekly radio program called “The Jewish Life Hour.”

Years later I took a job on the staff of the United Jewish Appeal, which led to a job with the State of Israel Bond Office. That, in turn, led to a job with a public relations firm that handled Jewish organizations—among whom were Brandeis University and Bnei Brit. In 1955 I went into business for myself, and about eighty-five percent of my clients were Jewish.

In time, we moved into a Golden Ghetto, joined the best synagogue in town, contributed generously to the United Jewish Appeal, belonged to a Jewish country club, gave money to Jewish causes, supported the Hebrew Home for the Aged, and so on. With all that service and giving, came honors. I was a trustee of this Jewish organization, a board member of several others, Man of the Year for still another. It seemed as if the more money I gave, the more honors I received. I understood all of that. But I also understood that I *am* a Jew, and “we Jews have to take care of our own.”

What I want you to see is that I was totally immersed in the Jewish community and in Jewish life. No matter what else I was, my identity was being Jewish.

Those of you who have read my books *Betrayed* and *Abandoned* know of the crisis that came into our home early in 1975, when my daughter called from college to tell me that she believed that Jesus is our Messiah. You may remember my reaction. I felt betrayed. I felt that my daughter had just left “us,” the Jewish people, and had joined “them,” the Christians. The very last thing in the world that I wanted her to believe was that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah. “If a Jew believes in Jesus,” I thought, “he loses his identity. He ceases to be a Jew and becomes a ‘Christian.’ Who would ever want to do that? Who would ever want to give up his identity as a Jew?” In order to win my daughter back, I set out to disprove the Messiahship of Jesus.

As I searched the Scriptures to prove who he was not, I discovered who he is! In spite of myself, I soon began to believe! No matter how hard I tried to tell myself that believing in Jesus was absolutely impossible for me, no matter how often I reminded myself about the Crusades, the Inquisition, the pogroms and the Holocaust, as well as of the hatred I had experienced as a child, still, I kept hearing inside of me, “Yes, but it’s true! Jesus is the Messiah!” I would argue with myself, proclaiming, “My identity is at stake in this decision! In view of all that I have experienced during my lifetime—in view of all the things I know about how we Jews have suffered at the hands of Christians over the centuries—how can I possibly consider leaving *us* and becoming part of *them*?” The struggle went on for months.

During these months, I continued to search the Scriptures. The time came when I could no longer deny Jesus’ identity. Then new concerns arose. How will my wife Ethel and my children react if I accept Jesus as Lord? How will the rest of my family react? How will my neighbors react? How will my clients react? How will the United Jewish Appeal react? How will the rabbis and members of my synagogue react? The overwhelming question I struggled with was this: if I accept Jesus as my Messiah and Lord, what will happen to my identity as a Jew?

Despite these unanswered questions, my study of Scripture produced in me an overwhelming conviction that Jesus is indeed our Messiah, and on July 3, 1975, I confessed him as Lord of my life. I did so while recognizing that the Jewish community would consider me a traitor. I did so while recognizing that many of my neighbors, clients, and friends would turn their backs on me. I did so while recognizing

that the Jewish organizations for which I had worked would no longer welcome me.

For the first two years after my wife and I received Jesus as Lord of our lives, we attended a messianic congregation every Friday night. I worked hard to help that congregation. I thought it was a way for me to retain my identity as a Jew and be a believer at the same time.

I remember in those early years the serious conversations held with countless Jewish believers from all over the country about how we are to live our lives. We were asked some of the following questions: "How are we Jews to function in what is primarily a Gentile world?" "Do we remain separate from Gentile believers, or do we worship with them?" "If we are to worship with them, will we have to join churches?" "Won't this lead to assimilation?" "Mustn't assimilation be avoided at all costs?" "As an alternative, should we strive to create a synagogue for our worship?" "If so, which kind: Orthodox, Conservative, or Reformed?" "If we establish synagogues, what will happen to our Gentile brothers and sisters who want to worship with us? Won't this make them feel like second-class citizens?" "If that happens, won't we be violating Jesus' prayer that we be one?" "How will the non-believing Jewish community react to messianic synagogues?" "Will such synagogues attract other Jews or repel them?" Most importantly, "how are we to reconcile messianic synagogues with the Word of God?"

As we talked about these things, dire predictions were made. Again and again I heard people threaten, "If we don't keep our families in a messianic congregation, our grandchildren will not be Jewish." One extreme statement was, "If we don't keep the law, we could wind up least in the family of God." Round and round the discussions went for more than two years. Then came the pronouncements: We will identify ourselves as the Fourth Branch of Judaism: Messianic Judaism. We will establish messianic synagogues. We will speak of our leaders as rabbis. We will insist that we are not Christians, rather we are Messianic Jews!

Though I met wonderful people in the movement, who seemed fulfilled by its distinctives, I soon realized that most of them had not been raised as Jews or, indeed, were not Jewish at all. They were making a very serious mistake by equating the totality of Jewish life with synagogue life. As I realized these things, I also realized that I was losing my joy.

Why? There were many reasons that we need not discuss here. Suffice it to say that I was being encouraged to focus more on my "Jewish-

ness” than on my new life as a follower of Messiah Jesus. That is when I felt the Lord guiding me to leave the movement. Afterward I thought, “Well, Telchin, now you have really done it. You took your feet out of the traditional Jewish community and put them into the Messianic Congregation. Now you have taken your feet out of the Messianic Congregation, so where will you put your feet now? How will you retain your identity as a Jew and as a believer?”

Sobering questions! The only answer I could come up with was that I had to set my feet on the Rock. I had to put my trust in the Word of God and in Jesus, my Messiah, Savior, and Lord. As I continued to study the Scriptures, weeks stretched into months and months into years. I came to understand a number of things that have brought me much peace. Let me share some of these with you.

I am a Jew. I was born a Jew. I have led a Jewish life, and I will die a Jew. No one made me a Jew—no rabbi, no teacher, no organization. My Jewishness was not conferred upon me by public opinion or by government edict. No one has the right or the power to take my Jewish identity from me, no matter how much they would like to do so. Even if it were possible for me to reject my Jewish identity and heritage, I would never do so. As a matter of fact, I am so comfortable and so secure in my Jewish identity that I am not threatened by the fears and anxieties of some who would question it.

Hear me: My Jewish identity is not based upon external forms or actions. My Jewish identity is not based upon whether or not I attend a synagogue. My Jewish identity is an inner reality. It is a God-given reality. Accordingly, I am not to become embroiled in the futile tasks of trying to verify or justify my Jewish identity to anyone. I don’t have to prove my Jewishness—not to other Jewish believers, not to the Jewish community, not to the United Jewish Appeal, not to the State of Israel, and not to the Church.

Still more important, I learned that my Jewishness is not the real issue. I can’t imagine anyone rushing into the arms of the Lord because of my Jewishness! It is my relationship with God that will provoke them to jealousy. If Jesus truly is my Savior and the Lord of my life, my identity needs to be in him.

As I continued to study the Scriptures, I found more and more confirmation of this truth. My study of the epistles brought me great

peace. They focused my attention upon the Word's promises of God. They taught me to feast on the Word of God. They also told me to meditate on his Word. One portion of Scripture on which I meditated was the apostle Paul's statement in Romans 2:25. He wrote, "Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised" (NIV). As I thought about that truth, I substituted the word "Jewish" for the word "circumcision" and applied it to myself. Being Jewish has value if I observe the law, but if I break the law, I have become as though I was not Jewish. I was truly stunned as I struggled with that truth.

As I read Galatians 1:10, I was challenged in another way. Paul wrote, "Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God?" (NIV). As I meditated on this verse, I realized with the apostle that if I am trying to please men, I will not be a faithful servant of the Messiah.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul said something else that was critically important to me: In 2:14-16, writing of the fears and concerns which existed among Jewish and Gentile believers of that time, Paul wrote:

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. (NIV)

When Paul wrote these words, he was addressing a misunderstanding of the law. Today, for many Jewish believers, the issue is not the law at all. It is our flesh. Our concern is more about ourselves and the Jewish community than about God.

Paul stressed,

There is one body and one Spirit . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Eph. 4:4-6 NIV)

He challenged us not to be infants, tossed back and forth by waves and blown here and there by the teachings and concerns of men. Instead,

he urged us to speak the truth in love and to grow up into him who is our head. In 2 Corinthians 5:16 Paul declared: "So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view" (NIV). Oh, how that verse impacted me. I was guilty of regarding almost all men from a worldly point of view. Then Paul explained that if anyone is in the Messiah he is a new creation; the old has gone—the new has come! "Old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (2 Cor. 5:17 NKJV).

We Jews and Gentiles who are in the Messiah are all new creations. We Jews and Gentiles who believe are equally new creations! In God's sight there is no difference between us. There is to be no difference in our sight. We were saved in the same way, we have the same mission to accomplish, we have the same responsibility while we are on earth, and we will all receive the same reward.

As a result of study and prayer, I came to understand that celebrating my Jewishness is not what God wants of me. Nowhere in his Word does he tell me to do this. But he does want me to be transformed into the image of his Son, who always did what his Father told him to do. I am to put off my old earthly concern for the approval of men as I rejoice in the approval of God. I am to put on the grace and peace that God himself has provided. Every day of my life, I am to follow after that peace which passes understanding. I am to continually seek the wisdom that comes from above. I am to avoid wrath and anger and striving as God's love nature becomes manifest in me. I don't have to dance to the drumbeats of custom or of tradition, of old hatreds or of fear.

My God reigns! In him I live and move and have my being. I am complete in him. There is nothing more to add, no *-ic* and no *-ism*! Nothing can be taken from me either. I am a child of the King. I am sealed in his love. He knows every hair on my head and every thought in my heart. He has forgiven me of all my hard-heartedness and sin. He has called me to be his ambassador. He has called me to proclaim his nature and his love. He wants me to walk in love and in unity. He wants me to live a life of integrity. He wants me to speak the truth in love. He wants me to walk in agreement with him and with others who are in agreement with him. He has shown me that I am not accountable or responsible for what other people think or do. I am only accountable for all that I think and do.

For fourteen years, he called me to be a pastor. For the past six years, I have served as an evangelist to the Jew first, but also to the Gentile.

He has equipped me to share the miracle of his love with all who have ears to hear. I rejoice over all of these things. I rejoice too, that when my earthly days are done, I will spend eternity with him and with all my brothers and sisters—Jews and Gentiles alike.

In view of these scriptural truths, in view of all that God has done in my life, how could I not let go of my fleshly cares, fears, and concerns about my identity as a Jew? How could my spirit not soar in appreciation of his grace? How could I not trust my Jewish Savior totally?

Now we come to the application of this message to your life. In all that I have said about myself, I have had you in mind. If you are a Jewish believer I'm sure that, at one time or another, you have wrestled with Jewish identity issues as I did. It may be that you still struggle with them. If that is where you are today, then God has guided me to prepare this message specifically for you.

My message also has value for you if you are not Jewish. You may be struggling with different kinds of identity issues or you may know people who are. Be encouraged: just as God waited years for me to apply the scriptural truths I have shared, so too he is waiting for each believer to apply the same truths to his or her life. Each of us must come to realize that we can trust our Jewish Savior totally in matters of our identity.

Preface

SAYING “THANK YOU” is a moral privilege. I owe thanks to many for helping me with this book. My first thanks go to the countless messianic Jews from whose views, challenges, and practices I have learned. Special thanks are due to those whose views I controvert and who, by their sincere enthusiasm, reminded me that God is to be served wholeheartedly. Some are mentioned in this book, but I would especially like to thank Paul Liberman, an ideological foe and a personal friend. It was a joy to work alongside him for the cause we both cherish. His warmth of personality, generous spirit, practical wisdom, and high standards of morality will always be with me. Thank you for allowing me to dedicate this book to you.

Thanks are more than due to my loving and patient family and to the congregation of Grace and Truth Christian Congregation in Rishon LeTzion, who have borne with me so graciously.

My prayer is that this book will contribute in some small way to the glory of God and to the salvation of my beloved people.

Introduction

Behold Your God

ISRAEL IN THE LIGHT OF BIBLICAL PROPHECY

“Comfort, O comfort My people,” says your God.
“Speak kindly to Jerusalem;
And call out to her, that her warfare has ended,
That her iniquity has been removed,
That she has received of the LORD’s hand
Double for all her sins.”

A voice is calling,
“Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness;
Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.
“Let every valley be lifted up,
And every mountain and hill be made low;
And let the rough ground become a plain,
And the rugged terrain a broad valley;
Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed,
And all flesh will see it together;
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”
A voice says, “Call out.”

Then he answered, "What shall I call out?"
All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
When the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
Surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the word of our God stands forever.

Get yourself up on a high mountain,
O Zion, bearer of good news,
Lift up your voice mightily,
O Jerusalem, bearer of good news;
Lift it up, Do not fear.
Say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"
Behold, the Lord God will come with might,
With His arm ruling for Him.
Behold, His reward is with Him
And His recompense before Him.
Like a shepherd He will tend His flock,
In His arm He will gather the lambs
And carry them in His bosom;
He will gently lead the nursing ewes. (Isa. 40: 1-11)

Isaiah devoted the greater part of the 39 preceding chapters to warning the people of impending doom because of their sin. From time to time, a shaft of promised blessing lightened the burden of his message, but, on the whole, it had been one of divine anger and of its awful consequences. In spite of God's kindness, Israel sinned consistently. Isaiah tells us that God is offended. Judgment has been decreed and, unless the people repent, nothing can avert it. Only a remnant will remain. The country will be destroyed, the people exiled, and the nations will witness the punishment of God's elect nation. God is a holy God who should never be taken lightly.

Then, transported by the Spirit of God to a later date, after judgment was consummated, Isaiah devotes the remainder of his message to comfort. It is our happy lot to study the opening statements of this Book of Consolations. As should always be the case, we will first explore its content and then apply that content to ourselves.

THE GRACE OF GOD

“Comfort, O Comfort My people,” says your God. (v. 1)

Whom is the prophet addressing? No one in particular. Everyone in general. “Whoever catches the message that God would have his people comforted should spread the good news.”¹

“Speak kindly to Jerusalem; and call out to her that her warfare has ended, that her iniquity has been removed, that she has received of the LORD’s hand double for all her sins” (v. 2). Addressing the people as if judgment had been accomplished and after they experienced the brunt of God’s wrath, Isaiah is instructed to assure the people that their unfaithfulness cannot annul the faithfulness of God. In spite of their sin, they are still his people and he their God. He has not forsaken them nor become indifferent to their fate.

Israel, called to a life of obedience, was the object of grace. By grace God called them into existence. By grace he formed Moses, led the people out of Egypt, and gave them his law. The same grace continued when they rebelled against him in the wilderness. In the land, they sinned against him time and again, yet God sent prophets to warn them. Some of the prophets they stoned, others they ignored. None were heeded. The people had incurred God’s righteous anger, but, by grace, he had not forsaken them. God is faithful though every man a liar. “Comfort, O comfort My people,’ says your God.”

How is Israel to be comforted? The prophet is told: “Speak to her.” Later on we read, “Call out!” The primary means the prophet was instructed to employ was speech. God’s word brings life and hope. “Get yourself up on a high mountain, O Zion, bearer of good news, lift up your voice mightily, O Jerusalem, bearer of good news; lift it up, do not fear” (v. 9). The message of good news is to be declared to the people. The remainder of this passage deals with the content of the message.

What is the prophet to say? What could possibly comfort Israel in exile, when their land had been destroyed, their cities demolished, and

1. Herbert C. Leupold, *Exposition of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1978), •••page number?•••.

they exiled from their homes? “Speak kindly to Jerusalem; and call out to her, that her warfare has ended, that her iniquity has been removed, that she has received of the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.” The good news is this: the state of the people was the just reward of their sin, but sin is not allowed to determine the course of history. God rules, and he will save Israel.

The people rebelled against God. They transformed their society into a money-grabbing, heartless society in which the strong devoured the weak. They worshiped God as if all he had the right to expect was the blood of bulls and goats, religious rituals, and a habitual presence in his temple; so long as they maintained outward religiosity he should be satisfied.

God is not to be tampered with. The people’s punishment would come. He would not rest until they bore the full weight of that punishment. Once their *warfare* (a term which indicates a predetermined measure of hardship) was ended, the God who punished them would also terminate their punishment. He will not be angry forever.

Suffering at the hand of God, Jerusalem will have had her sins removed. She will have “received of the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.” This is not the voice of legal justice, a formula for mathematical morality. No one in his right mind imagines that God would impose a punishment greater than Israel deserves. This is the voice of merciful love, now declaring, “I am more than satisfied. I require nothing more of you with regard to your sin.” The term “remove” in the original indicates full payment of all that is due (Lev. 26:43). God’s justice is real and exacting. None should think otherwise. His grace is no less real.

THE GLORY OF GOD

“A voice is calling, ‘Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; make smooth in the desert a highway for our God’” (Isa. 40:3). God will return to his people. There is no indication of repentance or of worthiness on the part of the nation; Israel is passive. God alone is active here. His grace is sovereign, unilateral, unconditional. It is divine grace and therefore reflects all the attributes of his godhood.

God will return to his people. Nothing can stand in his way. Mountains will be brought low, valleys filled. Nothing can separate God's chosen people from his love. He will come in the power of his majestic grace. He will return to the people with the fullness of his love. "Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; make smooth in the desert a highway for our God." Every obstacle will be swept away. "Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all flesh will see it together" (v. 5).

There are many ways God could choose to be glorified. He has chosen one—he will be glorified by the mercy he extends to sinful Israel. Having laid upon them the full burden of their punishment, he will love them freely. The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

To what end has God determined to work this way in the history of Israel? Isaiah replies, "Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all flesh will see it together." All God does is for his glory. Mankind will come to know him as a God whose holiness is not to be compromised or ignored. Sin will be punished. But God's grace is not to be forgotten. He delights to choose the "not many wise . . . not many noble" (1 Cor. 1:26). He delights to show his love to men in spite of their sin. God framed Israel's history to reveal himself to the world. That mission will be accomplished, "for the mouth of the LORD has spoken" (Isa. 40:5).

THE TRUSTWORTHINESS OF GOD

Once again, "a voice says, 'Call out.' Then he [the prophet] answered, 'What shall I call out?'" (Isa. 40:6). The answer comes: Call out that "all flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field" (v. 6). The reference here is not to the frailty of human existence but to the weightlessness of human effort in contrast to God. "The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it" (v. 7). Nothing can withstand God; no empire however great, no nation however determined. "Surely the people are grass" (v. 7).

God's purposes cannot be frustrated. His will shall be done. "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever" (v. 8). Isaiah does not call upon the people to trust in a hopeful intention on his part, or in his contingent goodwill. They are called upon to trust him whose word can never fail and who will accomplish his will come what may.

COMFORT FROM GOD

God is so mighty that his message of comfort is to be declared with a confidence worthy of him. “Get yourself up on a high mountain” where you are clearly seen and heard, “O Jerusalem, bearer of good news” (v. 9). Have you noticed? Jerusalem, the recipient of this message, is now to declare it. Is this an intimation of the remnant?

“Lift up your voice mightily . . . lift it up, do not fear” (v. 9).

[These] words constitute a true picture of the manner in which the word of God is to be proclaimed to the world. The messenger is to be bold; he is to raise his voice that all may hear. The Church is not to keep this message to herself but is to present it to Judah’s cities with a holy boldness. She is not to pose as a seeker after truth, unsure of her message, but to declare in clear, firm, and positive voice that her message is true. She must be vigorously and militantly evangelistic. Hesitation, timorousness, and trembling are out of place. There is no need to fear as though the word of God would not be fulfilled, or as though the message would prove to be untrue and embarrassment would result.²

What is to be proclaimed by Jerusalem and to whom? We are dealing with Israel and its history in the hand of God. Those addressed are described in verse nine of this passage as “the cities of Judah.” Israel remains the object of Isaiah’s message, although the message is now being borne by a group described as “Zion” and “Jerusalem.”

The message is simple: “Say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’” (v. 9). Look at him! Take notice of him. Note what he has done in your history. He deserted you when you sinned as he said he would. Now he is returning in mercy as he promised. “Behold, the Lord God will come with might, with His arm ruling for Him,” like a mighty king whom none can withstand. “Behold, His reward is with Him and His recompense before Him” (v. 10).

All will receive from his hand what they deserve. Opponents who do not believe the good news shall be destroyed from the presence of his glory. Those who believe shall experience his grace. “Like a

2. Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972; repr. 2001), 37–38.

shepherd He will tend His flock.” The picture is one of amazing tenderness. Mighty—yes. Overwhelming—well, yes. But overwhelming as only sovereign love can overwhelm. “Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, in His arm He will gather the lambs and carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes” (v. 11).

Have you ever seen a shepherd bend down, swoop a lamb into his arm, and lovingly carry it to pasture? At first the lamb is terrified. It is suddenly swept off its feet, away from the familiar order of things and into the arms of a tall, strong creature that controls the herd. A short while later the lamb settles quietly in its benefactor’s arms, enjoying his embrace and the warmth of his affection. Such will be the fate of Israel. God will swoop down with the irresistibility of his love and make them his own.

CONCLUSIONS

Such is the message of Isaiah 40:1–11. What has this to do with us? A great deal. We have “caught” the message. We know the grace of God in a way that is possible only in Christ. We have learned from the history of Israel. We have learned preeminently from that part of Israel’s history that has to do with the coming of Messiah, his life, atoning death, and justifying resurrection.

We also know that God is not to be tampered with. His hatred of sin is awful, altogether just. His love is amazing and can never be suppressed. His power is beyond resistance. He brings down mountains and lifts valleys, if necessary, to fulfill his will. His will includes the salvation of Israel. Although they have sinned, they are, irrevocably, his people and he, irrevocably, is their God.

We have a message to proclaim and, as the old poem says, we “must not stay to play with shadows or pluck earthly flowers till [we our] work have done and rendered up account.” The end of our endeavors is secure. “The glory of the LORD *will* be revealed, and all flesh *will* see it together.” We refuse fear and temptation. We are determined to love God more than we love our lives. We shall work together for the glory of God in the salvation of Israel.

Our primary task is and ever shall be to *cry out*, call, proclaim. Preaching the good news is our ultimate duty. Social and economic aid

is often called for. Political encouragement may sometimes be necessary. But our primary task is to lift up our voice mightily, addressing Jerusalem in the name of God.

We shall focus on nothing but the majesty of God's grace. "Behold your God" is the crux of it all. His mercy and faithful love are its corollaries. May we be faithful to our task. May we live, declare and, if need be, die in hope and expectation of the salvation of Israel.

Biblical Assumptions

IN THE FOLLOWING PAGES we will discuss the Messianic Movement. We will weigh the Movement's assumptions, claims, theory, and practices in the light of biblical truth. I engage in this discussion as a friend, acknowledging that many in the Messianic Movement are motivated by a longing to know God and serve him, to be more effective in addressing our nation with the gospel. These longings echo in my heart. Yet we disagree on the methods employed and the doctrinal bases to be laid. Since this discussion will be controversial, we must lay a number of agreed foundations.

Surely, all who fear God and believe that Jesus is the Savior of the world agree that everything done in the service of the gospel should be grounded in God's word (Lev. 11:44; 19; 20:2, 26) and directed at his glory (1 Cor. 10:31). The motive, the logic, the mode, and the goal of all we do should be the product of God's commanded will. Human reason, human needs, and human preferences should all be subservient to the divine "thus says the Lord" which commands our obedience and governs our every act. In matters of faith and obedience, nothing but God's word can bring light.

We are not free to do whatever we deem useful or effective in the service of God (1 Sam. 13:8-14; 15:2-3, 9, 13-23). We are not smart enough to identify what is useful or effective in ultimate terms, and "ultimate" is all that really matters. Appearances often deceive (1 Sam. 16:7). Short term advantages have often turned out to be long term mistakes. What we consider to be the best sometimes turn out to be the worst of all possibilities. We need the Scripture to guide us.

GOD'S WAY

God's work is to be done in God's way. There is no room for human ingenuity, except in the careful application of the word of God in a manner that is true to its meaning. Nor is there need to innovate—are we wiser than God? Have we a better perception of the challenges, pitfalls, and opportunities? We are but dust. Our Lord is the eternally wise one. Every act we undertake should be an act of worship, an expression of loving obedience rather than arrogant human wisdom. Obedience is a response to command, and God's commandments are to be found in Scripture.

GOD'S GLORY

The gospel is thought of nowadays as a means to meet human needs. Man needs forgiveness, salvation, comfort in life, a sense of worth, a loving community, and so on. The gospel is presented as the panacea for human ills, the solution of all man's problems. This is not the biblical perspective, where the focus is on glorifying God (Isa. 40:2; Eph. 1:6). Man comes afterward. I am confident that my readers agree.

That is the biblical perspective for our discussion of the pros and cons of Messianic Judaism. We need to think and speak clearly, but in honest love. We should not cloak our thoughts with Machiavellian ambiguity. We need to speak the truth in love and, for love's sake, speak the truth.

We must dare disagree with each other graciously, listen to each other kindly, argue our cases clearly, and have the courage to examine our respective positions and correct them if necessary. Barrett and Hengel speak of

the importance in theology of saying exactly what you mean and not using compromise formulas that can be interpreted in more ways than one or attempting to let everyone have at least a bit of his own way. To become as a Jew to the Jews is good as a matter of social courtesy; as a way of salvation, such occasional obedience would be worse than no obedience at all.¹

Do we agree on this as well?

1. C. K. Barrett and Martin Hengel, *Conflicts and Challenges in Early Christianity*, ed. Donald Hagner (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 74.

GOD'S STANDARDS

In an effort to meet this biblical standard, we measure issues by the word of God. Other considerations might be admitted, but must never be allowed to determine our response to questions that arise. God has given us his word. The closer we adhere to that word, the less likely are we to stray. Most of my readers will agree that no consideration may impinge upon the authority of the word of God. We question that modern theory of missions that insists that the gospel is best promoted by a focus on perceived human needs. The assumptions underlying such a theory are sociological, not biblical. They prefer human needs, human wishes, human cultural practices, and human preferences to sacrificial obedience to God, seeking his glory and recognizing his right to rule over all.

Such an approach lacks the biblical undergirdings of faith in an almighty God who bends the hearts of men and women according to his will, in spite of their perceived needs and contrary to them.

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26–27 NIV)

It lacks a biblical recognition of the depth of sin and its power over man, and of the nature of the powerful, saving work of the Holy Spirit in persuading sinners, granting them faith and repentance through regeneration, and uniting them with the Savior in his death and resurrection. “No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit” (John 3:5–6 NIV).

If God can make the very stones cry out for Jesus, can't he break through every barrier that hinders the spread of the gospel? Is he not able to lay aside every objection and overcome man's sinful resistance toward the truth? After all, conversion is something God does for man (we are born “again” or “from above” [John 3:3 NIV], “not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God” [John 1:13 NIV]).

Salvation is an act of God, not a human achievement (Ps. 3:8; Jonah 2:9). None but God can impart it, and we can do nothing to

render God's action more effective. The very best we can do is falteringly obey. We should, therefore, preach God's gospel in God's way, and trust him to do his divine work in spite of our weakness. Any other kind of faith in Jesus is not the faith that saves or sanctifies. Maybe that is why so many who profess to be saved today display little evidence of being sanctified.

There is reason to fear that a significant proportion of Jews who profess faith in Jesus do not perceive him to be all that the Bible teaches. This might be astonishing to some, but I am honestly concerned that there might be some among us—God forbid, many—who are persuaded that their sins have been forgiven through Messiah, but who have never repented, never cast themselves on the mercy of God who forgives sinners by his undeserved grace and transforms them by his irresistible power. They remain in their sins.

This is a terrifying thought!

In the hands of some evangelists, the gospel has become no more than the best religious option. It is disconcertingly possible that some who profess to believe in Jesus have been impacted by a gospel shaped to meet man's perceived needs, a form of faith that has little to do with a biblical fear of God—the foundation of true wisdom (Prov. 1:7). They do not submit to God's will (Ex. 19:5; Deut. 13:4; 1 Sam. 15:22, John 14:15; 15:10, 14) and conduct no ongoing struggle against sin, which aims to obscure the glory of God and remove him from his throne.

I do not like to argue with my brethren, but the above concern leaves me little choice. I must enter the fray and challenge assumptions that have become common among a growing number of those engaged in the evangelization of the Jewish people.

I believe it is wrong on the part of my fellow Jewish believers in Jesus to define Jewishness in terms of the Mosaic Law or of rabbinicism. Rabbinic Judaism is not Jewish.

I believe that it is equally wrong to import into our worship and practice customs that are the product of rabbinic religious culture. Rabbinic Judaism should be challenged rather than embraced. It is high time that rabbinic usurpation of Jewish national identity be brought to an end and that Jesus be crowned King of the Jews. Nothing less is my goal and heart's cry. I invite you to join me in an effort to love God better and serve him more faithfully.

WHO AM I?

One issue I wish to lay to rest at the beginning of this discussion is my attitude to things Jewish.

I am Jewish. I was born in the Jewish community of Boston, Massachusetts, to which my family immigrated after fleeing the pogroms in Russia. My maternal grandfather's name was Potashnick, and he was a well-known cantor in the Jewish community of my hometown.

My parents met and married in Boston, and my father worshiped in the conservative synagogue of the city of his choice until the day he died. After my parents were separated, my mother immigrated to Israel in 1953 with my younger brother and me. I was about ten years old. I grew up in Israel, served in the army, met the delight of my earthly life, and married her. (In fact, ours was the first Jewish Christian wedding held in modern Israel, attended by practically the whole evangelical community.) Our three daughters have served in the Israeli army, from which I was honorably released in 1985.

I love being Jewish. My family still greets the Sabbath each Friday night with a traditional Sabbath meal, and we celebrate all the biblical and traditional feasts with gusto. If you think this constitutes a contradiction to the thesis of this book, read on. I sincerely believe that being Jewish is a calling from God (1 Cor. 7:24), and I embrace it with gratitude. I also believe that the continued existence of an identifiable Jewish entity within the body of Messiah is a testimony to God's faithfulness, and that it will be a means in God's hands for Israel's conversion (Isa. 29:13–24), for which I have longed, prayed, and labored for more than forty years.

As the above text from Isaiah says, Israel's conversion is linked to a time when the nation will take note of a body of people "in his midst," which is recognizably both Jewish and the work of God's hands. E. J. Young puts it this way: "among the physical children of Jacob there will be found his true children, who are the work of God's hands."² Then, says the Lord, "Those who are wayward in spirit will gain understanding; those who complain will accept instruction" (Isa. 29:24 NIV). I believe that the salvation of Israel

2. Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1969; repr. 2001), 332.

is a promised future act of God's grace toward his covenant people (Rom. 11:26–27), and that it will be a means of blessing to the world that Paul compares with “life from the dead” (Rom. 11:15 NIV).

I have no doubt as to the right, need, or legitimacy of a Jewish Christian entity within the body of Messiah and as an integral part of our nation. I have been privileged to serve a congregation of believers in Israel, which has long been in the forefront of evangelism, social responsibility, and the absorption of immigrants in the country. A high percentage of the congregation I serve is Jewish and, since so many of the people had been stripped of their national culture by the communist regime that ruled the USSR, we taught them the cultural practicalities of Jewishness. I do not deny the legitimacy of a distinctly Jewish-Christian entity. It is my intention to think with you about the *form* that many of my brethren have chosen to accord that entity, and with the biblical arguments they raise to defend that form.

I love being a child of God's grace even more than I love being Jewish. The thought that all my sins have been forgiven because the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me never ceases to thrill me. To think that, in spite of my failures, God will glorify himself in me, bring me into his presence, and transform me into the image of his Son is something that I find difficult to believe although the Bible gives me solid reason to do so, and the Spirit witnesses with my spirit that I am a child of God. There is nothing in the world more important to me than to please God, love him more purely, and carry out his will more faithfully. There are also few things in the world I desire more than that others—especially my beloved people, Israel—would love the God of our fathers, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and join us, seeking to love and serve him with all their hearts, souls, minds, and strength.

There is absolutely no conflict between the Jewish and the Christian aspects of my identity. I dare say this in spite of the shameful history of relations between the Jewish people and many who bore the name of my Savior. Anti-Semitism is as contrary to the teaching of the Bible as darkness is contrary to light. But, if the irrational ever occurred again (which is more than a possibility in this sin-crazed world) and I had to choose between Jewishness and my Savior, I would prefer Jesus to Jewishness any day. In choosing Jesus I would be choosing God himself. Only he can

save. Only he is worthy of total devotion. Jewishness without the Savior is like heaven without God.

True Jewishness is wrapped up in Jesus. He fulfills the promises to our fathers, accomplishes the covenant God made with the patriarchs and the covenant he made with their sons. What now passes for Jewishness is not Jewish; it is a 2000-year aberration that demands rectification.

I agree with many of the motives behind the movement I criticize. But the Messianic Jewish Movement has erred in important areas of truth. The result of such errors is a misinformed spirituality that needs to be corrected by the word of God. I am convinced that the Messianic Movement has sparked a trend that leads increasingly away from biblical truth. The number of Messianic converts to rabbinic Judaism and the increasingly numerous expressions of discomfort with the doctrines of the Trinity and of the deity of Messiah are but the inevitable, logical conclusions of Messianic Jewish teachings.

DEFINITIONS

The term “Messianic Jew” is used in this book rather than the terms “Jewish” or “Hebrew Christian.” Jewish and Hebrew Christians define themselves as Jews who believe in Jesus and who reject Judaism’s claim to determine what is Jewish. They adhere in varying degrees to national customs formulated by Old Testament and rabbinic injunctions, but do so as a matter of national custom, not of religious obligation. They believe Judaism is a departure from biblical norms, a religion that requires a rejection of Jesus and of the faith he taught.

Hebrew and Jewish Christians believe that the unity of the body of Messiah should be expressed by mixed congregations of Jews and Gentiles living according to their respective customs at home and worshipping together in a manner that does not exalt one culture over another. They believe that Jewish people in the Messiah are free from the Mosaic Law, while they are also free to keep aspects of the law that do not obscure the gospel. I will argue here that Jewish *and* Gentile Christians are bound by the moral law of God. Jewish and Hebrew Christians acknowledge that the gospel should be couched in terms that are relevant to the people addressed, but insist that such contextualization should not affect the essence of the gospel.

Messianic Jews, on the other hand, call for implementing a platform of what is commonly described as “Messianic Judaism.” In its most consistent forms, Messianic Judaism insists upon establishing messianic synagogues where congregants are instructed by “rabbis,” traditional synagogue attire is encouraged, the Torah scroll is accorded prominence, and adherence to rabbinic custom is taught as a matter of religious duty.

We have no argument with those who insist on the continuance of Jewish identity in Christ. Nor have we an argument with those who view Jewish custom as the language of their lives and therefore the terms in which they express their faith in Christ, so long as that language is informed and modified by biblical injunctions.

The rationale of the Messianic Movement is, above all, its insistence upon the need for the existence of recognizably Jewish believers in Jesus, who adhere to Jewish religious practice as an expression of unity with our people. The goal is to create within the Jewish people an entity that is both recognizably Jewish and true to the gospel. Such an entity would be uniquely capable of presenting the gospel to our nation. To achieve this goal, the Messianic Movement seeks to create a distinct Jewish messianic entity within the church or, as some would prefer to put it, a messianic entity within Judaism, by way of messianic congregations.

In the first part of this book, we will examine the doctrinal grounds for that effort. In the second part, we will examine its practical consequences.

Some in the movement have argued that the adoption of a “Torah lifestyle” is the duty of all Jewish believers in Jesus. A smaller number insist that such a lifestyle is spiritually advantageous to Gentiles as well as to Jews. Originally, the Messianic Movement insisted upon the right and duty of Jews to believe in Jesus. Jews should believe in Jesus *as Jews*, that is to say, as members of the covenant people. All Messianic Jews, and Hebrew and Jewish Christians share this conviction. The difference between them lies in the methods used and in the underlying presuppositions that guide those methods.

Inevitably, this book deals with generalizations. There are always exceptions. I know of those and welcome them. Nevertheless, my generalizations are pertinent to the majority of those who adhere to the Messianic Movement and to the direction in which the views of the Movement inexorably lead. This may be demonstrated by a visit to an average messianic congregation anywhere in the world—except Israel. In Israel

most congregations are, in fact, Jewish Christian although designated messianic. Rabbinic lore plays a minor role in their lives and, on the whole, is limited to the celebration of the Jewish feasts in a moderately traditional Jewish manner. The only religious significance attached to the feasts is the measure they portray the person and work of Jesus.

So, while Israeli congregations insist on being described as “messianic” when speaking in English, most of them are poles apart from the practices and assumptions that underlie those of messianic congregations in the Diaspora.

The Hebrew term “Meshichi” indicates all who, in English, would be described as evangelical Christians, including Plymouth Brethren, Lutherans, Baptists, Anglicans, Pentecostals, Charismatics, and others, Jewish or Gentile. Messianic Jews mistakenly insist that the Hebrew term should be translated “Messianist,” or something of the kind. In terms of the semantic meaning of the Hebrew they are right, but in terms of the word’s common meaning they are mistaken. Meshichi means, pure and simple, evangelical Christian. Notsri, on the other hand, means simply Christian—of any stripe.

The term “Messianic Movement” as used in this book does not relate to most Israeli congregations. However, there is a recent tendency among some congregations in the country to emphasize their Jewishness in terms of the American-born Messianic Movement. Where that is true, our conclusions are relevant.

PART 1



A Theological Assessment

1

Should We Preach the Gospel to the Jewish People?

THE JEWISH PEOPLE need to hear the gospel. It is embarrassing to have to insist on this. It is even more embarrassing to hear it questioned. The apostles repeatedly addressed the people of Israel with the gospel, calling them to turn from their sins (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 8:22) and from their unbiblical religiosity (Acts 3:13–14; 5:28–29; 7:42; 10:28), and to submit to the Messiah God sent for the nation according to his promises. Jews are sinners too. Like Gentiles, we need forgiveness because, like Gentiles, we will perish in our sins unless granted salvation by virtue of the sacrifice of Messiah.

There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. (Rom. 3:22–24 NIV)

The apostles did not preach one gospel to the Jews and another to the Gentiles. They preached to those in Damascus, in Jerusalem and throughout Judea, the same gospel later preached to the Gentiles; namely, “that they should repent and turn to God” (Acts 26:20 NIV). This was the gospel, Paul told the Colossians, which “has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven” (Col. 1:23 NIV).

As the Scripture says, “Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same

Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” (Rom. 10:11–13 NIV)

Do Jews need to turn to God? We most certainly do. Is Israel not the people who always served their Maker? We most certainly are not, as a survey of the Old Testament will show. Jews need Jesus because we are sinners as much as any. We need to be forgiven. Our sins need atoning. We need to be converted (the old word for “turned”) from sin to God. We need a Savior. We cannot save ourselves, and no one else can do it for us. Jesus is the promised Savior.

Nothing less than the outline above is the gospel. Nothing less should be preached to Jews or to any sinners. *How* it is to be preached is another matter, but the one gospel addresses Jew and Gentile alike. There is no difference, for “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23 NIV).

The gospel is not “Come to Jesus and be happy.” It is not “accept Jesus” or “believe that he is the Messiah so you will find purpose in life.” It is, pure and simple, repent, acknowledge your rebellion against God and your inability to make amends to a holy Maker. Despair of yourself and turn to him in shame and in longing, aware of your need. Cast yourself on his grace and beg him for forgiveness. Trust in his love but do not take it for granted. Rely on him because he promises to save all who call upon him sincerely.

Nor is the gospel a matter of “come to fulfill your Jewishness.” Instead it is, recognize your sinfulness, both as a human being and as a child of the covenant God made with your forefathers (Eph. 2:3). Admit your inability to do anything about that sinfulness. Acknowledge the fact that you are lost, without God and without hope in the world, even as are others (Eph. 2:12), unless God shows you mercy in Christ.

Jews need that gospel. We need it as much as the Gentiles.

HOW SHOULD WE PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE JEWISH PEOPLE?

Should the gospel be preached in a special way to Jews? To some extent, yes—on condition that the mode is not allowed to modify the content or become paramount to it.

The apostles accommodated the mode of their message to their hearers. Simon Peter did so in Jerusalem when he appealed to the covenant, the prophets, and the promises (Acts 3:12–26). Paul preached in Athens (Acts 17:16–34) in a way he did not preach in the synagogues of Southern Galatia (Acts 13:16–41), Asia, or Europe. He used terms that indicated the relevance of the gospel to his hearers and that could be understood by them. We should not preach the gospel to the Hutus in the same way we preach it to the Hungarians, or to modern Mr. Sophisticate in the way we preach it to the streetwise children of Brazil. But it must always be the same gospel, couched in different terms and approached from different angles.

There is need to contextualize the way we present the gospel. Paul always sought common ground between his message and his audience. Did the Athenians believe in an unknown God (Acts 17:23)? He would speak to them of that God. Did they acknowledge a providential relationship between life and the Maker of all? Paul appealed to that knowledge (Acts 17:24–25). Did his hearers identify with the history of Israel (Acts 13:16–41)? Paul, like Peter (Acts 2:16–36) and Stephen before him (Acts 7), would establish his witness on that common denominator.

The terms in which the apostles couched their message were readily understood by their hearers. These served as starting points. Once the gospel was believed, each culture was subjected to a gradual transformation in which some elements remained intact. The core of each culture was transformed. What remained had to do with externals: customs, foods, language, and the like. The apostles did not accommodate the content of their message to the context into which they spoke, only its form; they challenged the context into which they spoke, doing so in terms likely to be understood. He spoke, for example, to the Athenians without accommodating their idolatrous concepts or conceding the reality of the resurrection. On these points he challenged his hearers, whatever the consequences.

Where core values and conceptual frameworks conflict with the gospel (the use of visible images in worship, for example, the awe in which holy places were approached, the attribution of deity to material objects, the separation of Jews from Gentiles, or the religious validity of circumcision), they were blown to the wind, much like the sorcery books that were burned by the believers in Ephesus. The apostles did not stick

out like a sore thumb in the cultures they addressed. Paul accommodated himself to his audience (1 Cor. 9:20), so long as doing so did not threaten the fabric of the gospel (Gal. 2:5).

We should preach to the Jews primarily from the Old Testament. We should appeal to them through the promises made to the fathers. We should present Jesus to the Jews as the fulfillment of Old Testament promise, hope, ritual, symbol, and history. But this must not imply that we must embrace Jewish religious custom and conceptual frameworks, or that we should fashion our worship in primarily Jewish cultural terms.

On the other hand, there is a difference between evangelism and congregational life, as there is between religious authority as represented by rabbinicism and cultural mores represented by Jewish consensual custom. Paul and the twelve did not embrace the cultures they visited. They did not identify with those cultures, rejected most of their core values, and did not develop a theology that justified them. They moved comfortably from one culture to another without hesitation (1 Cor. 9:19–23) precisely because they were not bound to any of them. They were Jews to the Jews, Gentiles to the Gentiles, as under the law to those who were under the law and as without law to those who had no knowledge of the Mosaic Law. They did not accord any of those cultures religious validity.

“Ah. But the Jews are special!” I can hear you say and, to some extent, I agree (after all, I’m Jewish too). But does this mean that the restraint described above is lifted? Does it mean that we preach a different gospel to the Jewish people? Absolutely not! The gospel—the same gospel—is “to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile” (Rom. 2:10 κγν). Peter preached to Cornelius (Acts 10), exactly what he preached to his fellow Jews in Jerusalem, and both groups were accepted on the same grounds (Acts 11:17–18). This must be clear, otherwise we will be liable to corrupt the gospel by modifications intended to further its cause.

A Jew to the Jews

One of the failings of the Messianic Movement can be seen in relation to their attitude to Jewish custom. Adherents of the movement frequently explain that their motive for adopting Jewish custom is evangelistic. But the arguments presented far exceed evangelistic consider-

ations. For example, Messianic Jews argue that Jews in Messiah must, as a matter of faithfulness to God, remain Jews and that the means to do so is by adherence to rabbinic custom. What does that adherence require? Is it a matter of religious obligation, or are we merely exercising our freedom when we maintain the cultural symbols by which our people identify themselves? Paul vociferously opposed tendencies to impose any customs on religious grounds.

In modern times Jewish Christians worshiping in churches are under tremendous pressure to leave their churches and join the Messianic Movement. When they refuse to do so they are described as turncoats and traitors. Gentile Christians are encouraged to believe that joining a messianic congregation accords one spiritual advantage—at least, they are “closer to New Testament Christianity.”

Barrett and Hengel write that the conflict between an emerging “normative [that is to say *rabbinic*] Judaism” and the Messianic Movement represented by the followers of Jesus, centered on “the relation between messianic redemption and the traditional validity of the temple and the Torah,” with the latter two more or less comprising “the heart of the Jewish Faith. Faith (*emuna*) and obedience were no longer directed primarily to the law, which was delivered to Israel on Sinai, but to a messianic person . . . it is no longer Moses and the law that mediates between God and humanity, but the Messiah, Jesus, the bringer of the new covenant (cf. Jer. 31).”¹

As aptly summarized by their editor in his concluding remarks, “the basic issue between Judaism and Christianity is Christ and Torah, indeed, Christ or Torah.”² Barrett and Hengel remind us that the High Priest ordered the stoning of James, the brother of the Lord and, by all accounts, a Torah-observant leader.³ He sought the execution of other Jewish Christians “as offenders of the law.”⁴ In other words, Judaism understood faith in Jesus to be a contradiction of continued obedience to the Torah, even when such a faith was accompanied by dutiful practice of the Torah. How, then, can modern Messianic Jews think otherwise?

1. C. K. Barrett and Martin Hengel, *Conflicts and Challenges in Early Christianity*, ed. Donald Hagner (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 10–11.

2. *Ibid.*, 82.

3. *Ibid.*, 11.

4. Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 20.9.1.

Their practice is contradicted by their faith in Jesus, and the rabbis are quicker to recognize this than others. Rabbinicism recognizes an inherent contradiction between practicing the Torah and faith in Jesus. The adherents of Messianic Judaism are blind to this contradiction. They are so focused on being recognized as Jewish that they fail to reflect sufficiently on the greatness and finality of the person and work of Jesus. But the rabbis are consistent with their faith and ours when they refuse to recognize Messianic Jews as practicing a legitimate form of Judaism, and find it difficult to believe the sincerity of Messianic Jews who affirm both a faith in Jesus as Savior and faith in the law as an expression of spiritual vitality.

If acceptance by the Jewish people is the major objective, Messianic Jews will have to increasingly erode their biblical convictions with regard to Jesus and his atoning sacrifice, until they ultimately turn their backs to him and embrace a wholly rabbinic Judaism.

It is a matter of grave concern to note that such tendencies are evident among some Messianic Jewish groups. Few messianic congregations ever hear a sermon on the Trinity. Mark Kinzer has recently called for a moratorium on preaching the gospel to Israel, intimating that sincere Jews may be assured of eternal life in spite of their rejection of Jesus. This erosion will become a landslide unless we have the courage to take a stand for our people and for our mistaken brethren. "The Son of God makes compromise impossible and he himself constitutes the alternative to compromise. One does not ask, 'Can we give a little here and gain a little there?' One asks, 'What does it mean to have Christ the Son of God as Lord and Redeemer?' When the question is so put, there is no doubt what the answer will be."⁵ Jesus is our all in all. He is not required to "give" one whit. If at all, it is our Jewishness that must "give."

THE ARGUMENT FROM GALATIANS: RIGHTEOUS PEOPLE LIVE BY FAITH

Introduction

Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians addressing just such a predicament. Some were insisting that believers are obliged to the Mosaic Law.

5. Barrett and Hengel, *Conflicts and Challenges in Early Christianity*, 69.

Some scholars claim that the issue was not whether Jewish believers are free from the law, but whether Gentile Christians should be required to keep it, or whether obedience to the law was necessary for salvation. There are three ripostes to this claim.

Paul's position is based on universal principles related to the gospel itself, not with matters concerning Gentiles or Jews. Paul takes Peter and himself as illustrations of and evidence to his point of view—and Paul and Peter were undeniably Jewish.

The issue was not the way of salvation because the issue at stake was not how to be saved but how those who are saved by Christ should conduct themselves. His view of an ongoing Christian life is based on how one enters such a life. The group that arrived in Antioch from Jerusalem and taught the necessity of keeping the Mosaic Law addressed Christians (Acts 15:1) precisely because they were Christians. The question was how to be *completed* (Gal. 3:3), how the saved may enter fullness, not the grounds of salvation. The pro-circumcision party sought to convince the Galatians to accept the yoke of the Mosaic Law in consequence of their faith in Jesus. Whether they were Jewish or Gentile, Paul insisted that for them to accept the yoke of the law was to embrace “another gospel” (Gal. 1:6 KJV); to preach such a gospel was to incur the anger of God and to be in danger of condemnation (Gal. 1:6–9).

Historical Background

Paul refers to his “previous way of life in Judaism” (Gal. 1:13 NIV), to his former advancement “in Judaism” and to his former great zeal “for the traditions of my fathers” (v. 14 NIV). Note that he speaks of these in the past tense, juxtaposing his former commitments with present ones by use of the word *but* in verse 15: “But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me . . .” (vv. 15–16 NIV). Former commitments had come to an end when God chose “to reveal his Son” in Paul. From that moment on they belonged to his “previous way of life.” Judaism was replaced by Jesus. Paul did not return to Jerusalem, to relearn the traditions in light of what he had discovered; he went to Arabia and visited Jerusalem only three years after he had come to a mature understanding of the faith of Jesus. There his message received apostolic approval (vv. 17–24).

Years later, when Peter, Barnabas, and Paul were in Antioch, the city was visited by a group apparently sent by James (Gal. 2:11). Their mandate is not stated, but they apparently exceeded it. Their presence intimidated Peter and Barnabas. Prior to the group's arrival, the two had open table fellowship with Gentile believers, an indication that they understood there was in Christ no difference between Jews and Gentiles. When the group arrived, the two withdrew and began to observe Jewish religious custom. Paul took them to task over this because, as he put it, "they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:14 KJV). In other words, drawing a distinction between Jews and Gentiles in Christ is tantamount to "walking" contrary to "the truth of the gospel"!

Paul embarrassed Peter and Barnabas by publicly stating that before the group arrived from Jerusalem, when they—or at least Peter—had led lives more consistent with the gospel, they lived like Gentiles (v. 14). Until the emissaries arrived from Jerusalem, Peter lived like a Gentile (so much for the argument that the apostles led a Jewish lifestyle!). Distinguishing himself from the Gentile believers when the group arrived was what Paul described as "hypocrisy" (v. 13 NIV).

Paul then turned to a theological argument. "We," meaning he, Peter, and Barnabas, "who are Jews by birth" (v. 15 NIV), no longer look to the law for justification. Instead, they "have put our faith in Messiah Jesus" (v. 16 NIV).⁶ That is the foundation of his case concerning a believer's relationship to the law.

Rebuilding What We Have Destroyed

At this point some might exclaim, "That is just the point! Paul is not arguing against the keeping of the Mosaic Law as such, only against those who insist on doing so for justification." Not quite. Whatever the group from Jerusalem might have said to the Galatians, they did not challenge them about the way one is initially justified (saved), but about how believers should conduct themselves following their salvation. Remember that the Galatians had heard the gospel and were already Christians. The issue of justification, as the initial experience

6. Out of deference to my Messianic readers, I have consistently preferred to use the term "Messiah" rather than the non-Hebraic "Christ," even when quoting Scripture. Readers will, of course, know that most translations of the New Testament prefer the anglicized Greek "Christ."

of saving grace, could not have been in question because the Galatians were already justified.

The biblical view of salvation considers the new birth, faith, justification, and sanctification as aspects of a whole. One cannot be born again without being justified, and one cannot be justified without being sanctified (Rom. 8:28–30). Our sanctification is secured by the blood of Christ, but it becomes gradually evident as one grows in Messiah. The extent to which our sanctification is visible serves as a test of our justification. All the justified are “saints,” “sanctified in Messiah Jesus” (1 Cor. 1:2).

Returning to Galatians 2:17–21, what does Paul say? In verse 18 he talks about rebuilding “what I destroyed” (NIV). What does he mean? What had Paul destroyed, and what does he now so firmly refuse to rebuild? He is simply saying that if he returned to keeping the law as a means for spiritual achievement (of whatever nature because no qualifying nature is designated) after having stopped doing so to be justified, he would be reestablishing the law. He had turned from the law to Messiah. He must not reestablish what he had previously set aside. He must not rely for sanctification on what had proven insufficient for justification.

Through the law Paul became dead to the law (Gal. 2:19) because the law had pronounced a death sentence on the apostle. He had been “crucified with Messiah” (v. 20 NIV). He “died to the law” in the death of Messiah and rose to a new life in which he now lived “by faith in the Son of God, who loved [him] and gave himself for [him]” (v. 19–20 NIV). To live otherwise, Paul starkly insists, is to “set aside the grace of God” (v. 21 NIV) because it implies—no less!—that Messiah’s death was unnecessary! This is a horrible thought, unacceptable to any who love God. Paul taught that the glorious sacrifice of the Son of God was not only for our initial justification, but it secured a whole salvation, including sanctification and glorification in the presence of God for eternity. To reestablish the Mosaic Law as a means to spiritual advantage through keeping the law is no less than to “set aside the grace of God” (v. 21 NIV).

Paul’s opening words in chapter three are strong. Convinced that such a view of the Mosaic Law constitutes “another gospel” that threatens the glory of Messiah as well as the salvation of believers, he calls the Galatians “foolish” for thinking in such terms, and claims they have been “bewitched” (Gal. 3:1 NIV). What kind of inconsistency is this, he asks, demanding they respond. “Did you receive the Spirit by observing

the law?” (v. 2). Obviously not. “Or by believing what you heard?” (v. 2). Obviously yes. Well, then, “Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?” (v. 3). Why should you think that you could be sanctified by any means other than that by which you were forgiven? Why should you think that justification is granted on the basis of faith, but that sanctification—the necessary product of salvation—is achieved by the keeping of the law? “Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?” (v. 5). The answer is clear.

Abraham

Abraham illustrates Paul’s point. Abraham “believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” (Gal. 3:6). So law-keepers are not considered Abraham’s sons, but “those who believe” (vv. 7, 9 NIV), while those who rely on the law are under a curse because they cannot “abide by all things written in the Book of the law” (v. 10). Perfect obedience is beyond reach (v. 11).

Messiah came to deliver us from the curse that the law imposes because no one can perform “all things written in the Book of the law.” He did so by becoming a curse for us. Righteous people live by faith, not by keeping the law (v. 11). Indeed, there is a fundamental contradiction between law-keeping and believing (v. 12). Faith, not works, is the essence of true spirituality. Of course, such a faith inevitably expresses itself in works, but those works are never viewed as according spiritual advantage. They are the product of the Spirit’s work in our hearts.

Faith, not the law, is necessary. Abraham was not required to keep a law—any law—but to have faith. The Mosaic Law, which was “introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established,” because to do so would be tantamount to doing away with the promise (v. 17 NIV). The Mosaic Law is not essential to godliness; faith is. That is why the inheritance depends on faith and not on the law (v. 18). The law does not oppose the promises of God, but it cannot accord its adherents a part in those promises. Scripture declares all men to be prisoners of sin, incapable of obtaining the promise through law-keeping, so that “the promise by faith in Jesus the Messiah might be given to those who believe” (v. 22) rather than those who exert themselves.

The Mosaic Law kept us “in custody”; we were “shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed” (v. 23), but “now that faith has come, we” (Jewish Christians like Paul, Peter, and Barnabas are explicitly included in Paul’s “we” and “us”) “are no longer under the supervision of the law” (v. 25 NIV). Paul, the Jew, is making this argument. All who have faith in Jesus are the sons of God apart from keeping the Mosaic Law. There is in this regard no difference between Jew and Gentile because in Christ “there is neither Jew nor Greek [Gentile], slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one” (v. 28 NIV). Jews and Gentiles do not differ in their duties to God. One might prefer grilled meat to gefilte fish, and kleizmer music to Karl Offenbach; one might prefer to live in Israel and another in Italy, but with regard to their duties before God there is no difference, and none should be introduced if we wish to walk according to the truth of the gospel.

The Tutor

Paul illustrates his point from the traditions of the Greek-impacted culture of Galatia, according to which children had no rights until they came of age. In terms of civic privileges, they were equal to slaves (Gal. 4:1) and subject to tutors until the time set by their fathers. “So also, when we were children,” (Paul again includes Peter, Barnabas, and himself) “we were in slavery. . . . But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son . . . that we might receive the full rights of sons” (vv. 3–5 NIV), and the gift of the Holy Spirit (vv. 6–7), who assures us of our sonship and of our relationship with God. So then, Paul asks the Galatians, how is it “that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years!” (vv. 9–10 NIV). Paul describes the laws as “weak and miserable principles”—not quite the way some might prefer to describe them.

“I plead with you, brothers,” says Paul. You can ignore the evidence and assume he is writing to a purely Gentile audience if you wish, but take note of what he says. Seeking to persuade his listeners to leave off keeping the Mosaic Law he says, “I plead with you, brothers, become like me, for I became like you” (v. 12 NIV). In other words, learn from my example how to view the law.

In their effort to prove that Paul kept the law, Messianic Jews tend to forget the full text of 1 Cor. 9:20–21. Let’s look at that text for a moment;

it will help us understand the letter to the Galatians. Paul chose to adopt Jewish custom when it served a gospel purpose among his fellow Jews. But, like Peter, he also freely lived as without law, that is to say, as not under the Torah. Since most of his labors for the gospel were in Gentile contexts, it is fair to say that, for most of the time, he lived “like a Gentile” (Gal. 2:14 NIV). First Corinthians 9:20 cannot be construed as biblical justification for the Messianic Movement’s efforts to create Messianic Judaism.

Become Like Me

That is what Paul means when he says to the Galatians: “I plead with you, brothers, become like me” (Gal. 4:12 NIV). Although free from the law, in certain situations I am willing to abide by its requirements. I do not do so as a matter of religious duty but of evangelistic expedience. Paul then expresses his deep concern for the Galatians because they were being persuaded to keep the law as a religious duty. “My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!” (vv. 19–20 NIV). Paul is calling on the Galatians to learn from his example and recognize that they are free from obligation to the Mosaic Law. The very thought that they might not recognize this evokes his concern. He speaks to them lovingly, earnestly, pleading for the good of their souls.

An Illustration from Abraham’s Two Sons

Paul then turns to another biblical illustration. Abraham had two sons, one of which was the child of promise, his legitimate heir and the gift of God’s grace. The other was illegitimate, born to a female slave, the product of his wife’s faithless manipulations and of his own lack of faith. Both were sons of Abraham. Could they not learn to live together and share the promise? “What does the scripture say? ‘Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman’s son’” (Gal. 4:30 NIV). There is no room for faith and grace to live in harmony with law and law-keeping: “Get rid of the slave woman and her son. . . . It is for freedom that Christ set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 4:30–5:1 NIV).

This is a serious matter, insists the apostle. It threatens the very heart of the gospel because the introduction of a works principle will inevitably corrupt one's understanding of grace—regardless if the issue is salvation obtained, maintained, or enhanced. Such corruption might be a slow, imperceptible process, but it inevitably occurs. Where works of any kind are deemed contributory to one's standing with God, works always—but always!—displace grace. “Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Messiah will be of no value to you at all” (Gal. 5:2 NIV).

Brethren, hear Paul's warning. It is the very voice of God.

Paul repeats it in verse 3, “Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is [thereby] obligated to obey the whole law” (NIV). One cannot accept the law piecemeal. Take it or leave it, but don't think you can use it for sanctification and not for justification, that you can keep kosher and celebrate the feasts as a religious duty while excusing yourself on other issues such as mixed cloths, the wearing of fringes, and the practice of ritual purity. There is an unbreakable link between all such uses of the Mosaic Law, just as there is between all aspects of the law.

Faith and Grace

That is why Paul goes on to say, “You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Messiah; you have fallen away from grace” (Gal. 5:4 NIV)! Why should Paul make such a stark, seemingly unkind statement? Why should he talk to believers about justification? These people belonged to the church in Galatia. They had already been justified. He describes them in chapter 4:6–8 as those who now have the rights of sons. “God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father’” (Gal. 4:6 NIV). Formerly they did not know God, but now they know him, rather, are known by him. Yet, in spite of all this, Paul writes to them about justification!

That is just the point, as I tried to show earlier. The willingness evidenced by some in Galatia to accept the yoke of the Mosaic Law indicated that they had been “alienated,” “fallen away from grace” (Gal. 5:4 NIV). Instead of trusting God for sanctifying grace, they were trying to achieve it by keeping the law. In their efforts to achieve a greater spirituality through keeping the Mosaic Law, the Galatians had undergone the

corruptive process I claim is inevitable. Let me repeat: One can't accept the law piecemeal. Take it or leave it, but don't think you can use it for sanctification and not for justification, that you can keep kosher and celebrate the feasts as a religious duty while excusing yourself on other issues such as mixed cloths, the wearing of fringes, and the practice of ritual purity. There is an unbreakable link between all such uses of the Mosaic Law, just as there is between all aspects of the law.

The Galatians' views of grace and of the gospel had been corrupted by their attribution of spiritual advantage to keeping the law.

In contrast with those who seek spiritual growth by keeping the Mosaic Law, says Paul, "by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope" (v. 5 NIV). Paul speaks of his ultimate sanctification and that of his fellow believers ("we") in terms of a "righteousness" (another word for *justification*), which they "await through the Spirit." Why "await"? Well, how else are they to obtain it? Ultimate justification is a matter for the future because it includes our ultimate salvation, when we enter the presence of God and are sanctified by being transformed into his glorious image. That waiting was eager, active, confident: the Galatians had been justified, they were being justified, and they will undoubtedly yet be fully justified in the Last Day. What will be is now present, but the present is only a hint of the glory that is to be.

Paul goes on in verses 6–15 to warn the Galatians (be they Jewish or Gentile). They had begun to run well. Who had interrupted their race and kept them from obeying the truth (v. 7)? He is referring to those who insisted the Galatians were obliged to keep the Mosaic Law. By so doing they were obstructing the Galatians' race in the running-track of truth. In verse 10 Paul says that such a view of the law throws the believer into confusion. In verse 11 he makes it clear that no one can claim he taught the Gentiles to be circumcised (he would hardly need to teach that to Jews, they were all circumcised anyhow).

The Real Offense

A believer's attitude to the Mosaic Law is no small issue. Paul had indicated that how one views the law affects how one understands and experiences the gospel. Now he warns that "a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough" (v. 9 NIV)—a minor error has inevitably extensive consequences. He enlarges on this in verses 11–12. Paul first insists that

he did not teach anyone to be circumcised. He did not call upon Gentiles to become Jewish. Had he done so he would not have been persecuted by his fellow Jews, because the “offense of the cross” would have been removed—after all, he would be calling Gentiles to convert to Judaism!

That is important. Paul is telling us that long before the church adopted an anti-Semitic stance—before the Crusades, forced conversions, and the Holocaust, the message of the gospel was an offense to the Jewish people. The real offense of the gospel in the eyes of a Jewish person has nothing to do with Christianity’s moral failure in relation to the Jewish people. It has to do with the gospel itself, with what the gospel must always remain. Paul refused to remove the offense of the gospel by preaching it in a way that would satisfy Jews because to do so would involve an alteration of the essence of the gospel.

Why?

Because the real offense of the gospel is its insistence that man can do nothing to save himself or earn a standing with God; that he is wholly dependent on God for every aspect of his salvation, including sanctification. That is what the defenders of the Mosaic Law did not understand. The gospel is the opposite of Judaism; it is what Jews and Gentiles do not like. Having begun preaching forgiveness by grace through the regenerating work of the Spirit, the proponents of the Mosaic Law were now teaching advancement in spiritual matters by law-keeping. Such a view subverted the gospel because it attributed something to man. Paul was vehement in his opposition to it: “As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!” (v. 12 NIV).

Law in the Christian Life

To say that believers are no longer subject to the Mosaic Law is not to say that they are free to live as they please. The essence of the law—its moral aspects—remains intact and finds fulfillment in the process of salvation by grace through faith rather than in sanctification by works. As the ancients put it, the moral aspects of the law now serve as an authoritative guide for Christian living, while the whole remains a revelation of God and teaches us about him. The freedom purchased for us by the blood of Messiah inevitably leads to “faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6). “The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (v. 14 NIV). So life

by the Spirit does not lead to gratifying the flesh but to a life of “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (vv. 22–23 NIV).

A life led by the Spirit rather than by the Mosaic Law will lead to the gradual crucifixion of the sinful nature, its passions and desires (vv. 24–25). That is what it means to belong to Messiah (v. 24). Those who are led by the Spirit are not under law (v. 18), yet fulfill the righteousness of the law by the power of the Spirit (compare Rom 8:1–3). On the other hand, those who live by the flesh in an effort to keep the law will be subject to all the sinful motivations described in verses 19–21. They “will not inherit the kingdom of God” (v. 21 NIV).

Following practical guidance at the beginning of chapter 6, Paul returns to his subject:

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. (Gal. 6:7–8)

Paul is again contrasting efforts to keep the Mosaic Law with faith expressing itself through love and relying on the merits of Messiah.

Barrett summarizes the issues as follows: “Paul is arguing not merely that Gentiles are not to be obliged to observe the rules of purity; it is wrong for Jews, who also are justified by faith and not by works, to insist that such rules should be observed in order that they may be able to join in a meal.”⁷ In other words, Paul is discussing the nature of Christian fellowship, the unity of Christians’ obligation to God and to one another, and the freedom of all who own the name of Jesus as Messiah and Savior from the Torah and from rabbinic dictates. Paul preached a “radical gospel of radically unconditional grace.”⁸ That is the gospel we should believe. That gospel is the ground of relations between man and God, and between one man to another, regardless of national, social, or religious background.

Paul’s statements in his letter to the Galatians are clear. We should heed the message.

7. Barrett and Hengel, *Conflicts and Challenges in Early Christianity*, 64.

8. *Ibid.*, 72.

YES, BUT HOW ABOUT THE EVANGELISTIC OPPORTUNITY?

Where Our Focus Should Be

We should be engaged in preaching the gospel to the Jewish people, rather than in seeking their acceptance by insisting we are Jewish in spite of our faith in Jesus. I am aware that present-day Jews object to the gospel on the grounds that their Jewishness excuses them from the gospel's claims. I also recognize that the gospel is perceived to be a threat to our continued national identity, and that this constitutes a real obstacle for Jews. But we must not allow ourselves to be deflected from the duty to preach the gospel. God is able to turn the hardest of hearts and rob the most obstinate of the ploys man might use to protect himself from the claims of the gospel. Our focus should be the same as the Bible's: the authority of the word of God, the horror and bondage of sin; man's inability to please God; his need of an atoning sacrifice; the saving work of the Messiah; the transforming power of the Holy Spirit and the life forgiven people should lead and are enabled to lead for the glory of God.

Instead of busying ourselves with Jewishness, we should glory in the marvelous body of Messiah in which Jews and Gentiles are equal—in the hope of eternal life in the presence of God and in the sustaining grace of a God who will not fail his weak and erring children. Those are the issues with which the Bible is occupied. The most effective way to evangelize is to maintain a biblical emphasis, to focus on the core of the biblical message. God saves, not our persuasive arguments.

It is time to get out of our trenches and go on the offensive. We need not defend our Jewishness; we need to proclaim Jesus, the True Jew. When we regain the confidence of our biblical convictions and begin to live courageously as disciples of Jesus, we will be more likely to command the respect of our people than by subjecting ourselves to the obedience of a false religion engendered by the Pharisees. Evangelism is best served by a clear message, not by one obscured by the trappings of a Christ-denying Judaism.

The Power of Jesus

Jesus said, "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it" (Matt. 16:18). The picture is wonderfully vivid: the hordes

of Hades have fled for refuge to the darkness of the pit and barred the gates. They are now shivering, supporting those gates with their shoulders and hoping for the best because the army of King Jesus has arrived and is battering at the gates with the mighty word of the gospel. Will the gates hold? Will Satan's host be secure? Will even one of those appointed to salvation, taken captive by Satan to do his will, remain in the hands of the enemy?

We need not wait until the end of the commercials. The climax of history is spelled out in Scripture. Hell's gates will collapse under the blows of God-centered evangelism. Hell will be vanquished. Not one of those given to the Son by the Father will be lost. All will be introduced into the presence of God with exceeding joy to obtain eternal life.

I have sworn by Myself,
The word has gone forth from My mouth in righteousness
And will not turn back,
That to Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear allegiance.
They will say of Me, "Only in the LORD are righteousness and strength."
(Isa. 45:23-24)

Hallelujah!

The Scriptures are full of such statements. Modern day evangelical pessimism has no basis in Scripture. The message of the Bible is optimistic. The book of Revelation assures us that Jehovah will make everything new, that he will dwell with men. The slain lamb is the mighty "Lion of the tribe of Judah" (Rev. 5:5 NIV), and he shall reign. The redeemed will be "his people, and God himself will be . . . their God" (Rev. 21:3 NIV). He will "wipe away every tear from their eyes . . . there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain," for the old order of things will have passed away and God will make all things new (Rev. 21:4-5). The redeemed of the Lord will number ten thousand thousands, and their song of worship will be like the sound of mighty thunder, rolling over eternity to the praise and glory of him who reigns in mercy and love, whose wonder and beauty more than fills the universe.

God is sure to conquer and will do so by the gospel, without our silly improvements. He made the world by no more than a word. He spoke and it was done. God the Son upholds the universe by a mere word (Heb. 1:3). Nature functions at his command:

He sends forth His command to the earth;
 His word runs very swiftly.
 He gives snow like wool;
 He scatters the frost like ashes.
 He casts forth His ice as fragments;
 Who can stand before His cold?
 He sends forth His word and melts them;
 He causes His wind to blow and the waters to flow. (Ps. 147:15–18)

Praise the LORD from the earth,
 Sea monsters and all deeps;
 Fire and hail, snow and clouds;
 Stormy wind, fulfilling His word;
 Mountains and all hills;
 Fruit trees and all cedars;
 Beasts and all cattle;
 Creeping things and winged fowl;
 Kings of the earth and all peoples;
 Princes and all judges of the earth;
 Both young men and virgins;
 Old men and children. (Ps. 148:7–12)

God also saves by his word:

Fools, because of their rebellious way,
 And because of their iniquities, were afflicted.
 Their soul abhorred all kinds of food,
 And they drew near to the gates of death.
 Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble;
 He saved them out of their distresses.
 He sent His word and healed them,
 And delivered them from their destructions.
 Let them give thanks to the LORD for His lovingkindness,
 And for His wonders to the sons of men!
 Let them also offer sacrifices of thanksgiving,
 And tell of His works with joyful singing. (Ps. 107:17–22)

Jesus stood before a grave in the heat of a Middle Eastern spring and commanded a body, dead four days, “Lazarus, come out!” At the sound

of the Savior's word, the corpse stirred, rose from the dead, and came out. Such is the message we preach. Its words are mighty to demolish strongholds, arguments, and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, taking captive every thought and making it obedient to Christ (2 Cor. 10:4–5). God is active in his word, which is the sharp, terrible, irresistible sword of the Spirit. The gospel is a message that has a life of its own because it is God's word (Heb. 4:12), it is “the power of God for salvation” (Rom. 1:16).

God will triumph in the world through the preaching of the gospel. That is the means by which he lays hold of men and women, Jews and Gentiles, young and old, releases them from bondage to Satan, unites them and transforms them into a redeemed and sanctified people. The kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of God and of his Christ (Rev. 11:15). He shall reign and every knee shall bow before him to the glory of God the Father. All will own him as Lord. This will happen through the blessing of God on the preaching of the gospel. Preaching—faithful preaching—is so crucial.

It is God who converts the sinner, not we. That is why Paul avoided displays of professional eloquence and human wisdom. He preferred “a demonstration of the Spirit's power” (1 Cor. 2:4 NIV), so that conversions were not the spurious products of human effort but the enduring fruit of God's work in the hearts and minds of his hearers (v. 5). That is the logic behind Paul's thanking God for the Thessalonians' conversion and for the spiritual and moral consequences that inevitably followed (1 Thess. 1:2–3), rather than praising them for the wisdom they displayed in making the right religious choice. It is on those grounds that Paul could say to the Thessalonian Christians,

But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Thess. 2:13–14)

The Power of the Spirit

Peter reiterates this very conviction when he speaks of his readers as having been “born again to a living hope through the resurrection of

Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3). How was this achieved? Peter replies: "You have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God. . . . And this is the word which was preached to you" (vv. 23, 25). God changes individuals, communities, and nations through the preaching of his word. The Spirit uses the word of God to vanquish Satan's opposition, free his captives, and give life to the dead.

Once converted, we discover the power of the Spirit through the word in the everyday of our lives. We are made spiritually and morally wiser by the word (Ps. 119:7), encouraged by it and made joyful (v. 14). By the word we are kept from sin (vv. 1, 4), enlightened (v. 130), and strengthened (v. 28). God works according to his word and through it in the lives of those who belong to him, warning them against sin (vv. 9–10), teaching them the path of righteousness (v. 30), and evoking in them a desire for heavenly things (v. 97).

In this way God sets the redeemed sinner on the path to eternal glory. He preserves sinners in that path, secures their safe arrival, and succors them along the way by his word. Salvation is a divine work, executed by means of the Spirit's blessing on the word of God, applied to human hearts.

Jesus taught his disciples that his words must reside in them (John 15:7, 10). How is that done if not, among other means, by coming under the sound of the gospel as it is preached in church? The Spirit works by the word and through it. He cleanses stumbling Christians by the washing of the water through the word (Eph. 5:26), and they, in turn, sanctify themselves by obeying the truth proclaimed (1 Peter 1:22).

God will overcome every opposition Satan can throw in his way, and he does so through preaching. He captures sinners and brings them to himself through preaching. The book of Revelation portrays Christ as overcoming Satan by his word (Rev. 19:17–21—note the sword in the mouth of the Lord). Faithful, believing, Spirit-filled preaching of the word of God is the means by which God prepares us for eternity. We are given foretastes of heaven as we contemplate the truths of God's word and have lain out before us the wonders of the world to come. The word of the Lord teaches us to pray, informs, instills and stirs our hope, drives us to further action on behalf of the kingdom, and assures us of God's blessing as we labor for him. We Jewish Christians need the gospel to move us to trust in and live by the power of God.

DO JEWS REMAIN JEWS ONCE THEY ARE CONVERTED?

Of course we do. Why should we not? Because Jesus is the promised Messiah, there is no reason we should cease to be Jews in consequence of faith in him. Believing in Jesus is a very Jewish thing. Rabbinic Judaism is not Jewish. That is why we refuse to bend the knee to rabbinic dictum, as our people have done for 2,000 years. History will prove that they were wrong and that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel.

The apostles assumed that the faith they proclaimed was Jewish. So much so that they were surprised by the growing number of Gentiles who embraced it, and they were at a loss for what to do with them. Discussion was even held whether or not Gentiles should embrace Judaism and join the nation of Israel (Acts 10–11); after all, they believed in the God of Israel and were redeemed by the Son of Israel's hope.

None of the Jewish religious leaders of the day questioned the right of the Jewish disciples to be considered Jewish. That came later, when the rabbis took over the nation's self identity and posited themselves as the sole arbiters of Jewishness. The conflict over whether or not Jesus is the promised Messiah was, until then, an internal Jewish affair (Acts 18:15, 23:6–9).

The apostles addressed the people as Jews: "Men of Judea and all you who live in Jerusalem" (Acts 2:14); "Men of Israel" (Acts 3:12; 13:16). The apostles argued the case of the gospel from the Hebrew Scriptures (Acts 2; 3:18–26; 7; 13:16–41). But the message was always the same: "Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away" (Acts 3:19); "Let it be known to you, brethren, that through him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed" (Acts 13:38). The gospel is not a negation of Jewishness but an affirmation of it, just as it is not a negation but an affirmation of Gentile identity and of God's love to both Jew and Gentile. Jews need not cease to be Jews to follow Messiah (1 Cor. 7:18). Neither should Gentiles be expected to embrace Jewish culture in consequence of their faith in him (v. 18). We were bought with a price and should not become the slaves of men (v. 23).

Each should remain in the condition in which he was called (vv. 20, 24). If there is doubt as to what the apostle meant, he spells it out: was "any man called being circumcised? Let him not become

uncircumcised. Is any called in uncircumcision? Let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing” (vv. 18–19 KJV). In other words, whether we are Jewish or Gentile, that is what God has called us to be, and that is what we should remain. Jews in Messiah remain Jews, and Gentiles in Messiah remain Gentiles. Both believe the gospel and are saved. Both enjoy forgiveness of sin and are baptized by the Spirit “into one body,” whether they be Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and all are “made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13).

Christians and Nothing Else?

Sometimes people tell us that we Jewish believers in Messiah are “Christians and nothing else.” This is patently untrue. We are all also human beings, men or women, married, single or widowed, educated or unlearned, rich or poor, Swiss or American, Jews or Gentiles. Our conversion should bring to fruition every aspect of what God has made us to be, serving as a channel for our loving obedience in every department of life.

The issue is not *what* we are but *how to express* what we are in the context of worship and obedience. There, our being married or single, poor or rich, Jewish or Gentile should make no essential difference, even if it requires, for example, worship in a different language or relating to a spouse, so long as these do not affect the substance of our obedience.

IS IT IMPORTANT FOR JEWS IN MESSIAH TO REMAIN JEWS?

It most definitely is, although we have no right to condemn any who opt out of the nation. The loss of any is painful, but we have no right to force people to remain Jewish. On the other hand, we should reject the opinion of those who deny the right of Jews to remain such in Messiah, or who prefer that option for purported biblical reasons.

Embarrassing Historical Facts

For almost two millennia, the church has insisted that Jews who believe in Jesus are no longer Jewish. The fourth century Confession of

Faith issued by the church of Constantinople required Jewish converts to declare: "I do here and now renounce every rite and observance of the Jewish religion, detesting all its most solemn ceremonies and tenets of faith that in former days I kept and held." In other public statements, Jewish converts were required to affirm, "I altogether . . . shun all intercourse with other Jews and (will) have the circle of my friends only among honest Christians," "Nor (will I) associate with the cursed Jews who remain unbaptised."⁹

They were called upon to promise that they would never return "to the vomit of my former error, or associate with the wicked Jews. In every respect I will lead the Christian life and associate with Christians." As far as the family members are concerned, "we will not, on any pretext, either ourselves or our descendants choose wives from among our own race, but in the case of both sexes we will always link ourselves with Christians." Such language bespeaks an antagonism from which the church still needs to be cleansed.

One of the few issues on which church and the synagogue have agreed for two millennia has to do with this issue. Jews who professed conversion were expected by both the church and the synagogue to disavow their national customs and sever themselves from their people. Some Jewish converts were required to prove the sincerity of their faith by eating pork in public, while rabbinic edicts ensured that Jewish believers in Jesus could not remain effective members of the community. As a result, some Jewish converts evidenced loyalty to their new religion by becoming enemies of their people. A shameful chapter in the history of Jewish-Christian relations was thus written and now awaits an honest historian's research.¹⁰

It is reasonable for the rabbis to insist that Jewish Christians are no longer to be considered Jewish. But why should the church agree? To claim that loyalty to Jesus implies a rejection of Jewish identity is to imply that Jesus is not the promised Messiah of Israel. If he is not Israel's Messiah, he is no Messiah at all, for no other Messiah is spoken of in either the Old or New Testaments.

9. Stefano Assemani, *Acta Sanctorum Martyrum Orientalium at Occidentalium*, vol. 1 (Rome, 1748), 105.

10. David A. Rausch, *Messianic Judaism: Its History, Theology and Polity* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1982), 16–17; James Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1964), 394–400.

Jewishness and Being Christian

There are no biblical grounds to require Jews to reject their national identity. That is why Rausch was right to quote Fanny Peltz, a Jewish Christian, who stated that “in accepting Jesus, I was not giving up anything Jewish!”¹¹ But, please note, we are speaking here of Jewishness as a *national* identity. When we speak of a *religious* identity, we are Christians. Judaism is not biblical while true Christianity is.

The rabbis claim that a change of religion necessarily leads to a loss of national identity. The majority of our people have bought in to that theory, but it is wrong. It even contradicts Jewish halacha (religious dictum), which states, אף על פי שחטא, ישראל הוא, (although he has sinned, he still belongs to Israel).

History has rendered the cause of Messiah a great disservice. The anti-Semitism to which the church succumbed imposed on converts a denial of their Jewishness. I need not elaborate. Anyone interested in the question of Jewish Christian identity is abundantly aware of the shameful history, the blot of which still has not been erased. Christian anti-Semites—a logical contradiction in terms—persecuted the Jews while seeking to obliterate every trace of Jewishness in their own faith and practice. Remnants of anti-Jewish sentiment are still to be found in Christian pulpits and commentaries.

ROMANS 1:16: TO THE JEW FIRST, BUT ALSO TO THE GREEK

Paul insisted that the gospel is “to the Jew first,” and only then (*also*, to use his term) for non-Jews (Rom. 1:16). Paul was not discussing chronological order but the essence of the gospel. He was saying that the gospel has a primary claim on the Jewish people, and that the Gentiles have been “added.” Many assume that the faith of Jesus is a Gentile faith, and that Jews who adhere to it are somewhat unusual. Paul insisted that the Jews are *first* in terms of the gospel, and that it is the Gentiles who are *also*.

God’s Power to Save

In Romans 1:16 Paul describes the gospel as God’s power to save. It is in the essential nature of the gospel to save in a way that differs greatly

11. Rausch, *Messianic Judaism*, 87.

from other purported ways to salvation. Other religions leave salvation in man's hands: he must make up for his sins, he must pray, he must make pilgrimages, he must placate God through sacrifice.

Not so the gospel. The gospel divides between the redeemed and the lost because the gospel is not a way by which man saves himself, but "the power of God for salvation." It is God who saves. No wonder Paul was unashamed of such a message! If God saves, then the saved are saved fully, powerfully, effectively. They are saved by the power of God.

Everyone

The gospel saves "everyone who believes." The gospel treats all mankind equally. It declares that all without distinction (Jews and Gentiles) have sinned and fallen short of God's glory; all (Jews and Gentiles) need to be saved; and God saves all (Jews and Gentiles) without distinction. According to the gospel, all men are equal.

Faith

Paul has still another important statement to make about the essential nature of the gospel: not only is it God's power to save, and to save everyone, but it saves everyone "who believes." The gospel does not allow man to be passive. Faith is a gift of God (Eph. 2:8–9) that drives men to work, moves them to change, modifies their priorities, and drives them to strive for goals they would never otherwise adopt. Faith and faithfulness are indistinguishable in both Hebrew and Greek, and they should be in our lives.

To The Jew First

Paul goes on to describe the nature of the gospel by saying that it is "to the Jew first." This, too, has to do with the nature of the gospel because the message of God's kindness did not appear out of the blue. It is the fulfillment of Old Testament promise, the accomplishment of all the Old Testament stands for.

What does "to the Jew first" mean? It means that the gospel most obviously, most directly, and most intentionally relates to the Jewish people, and only then to the rest of the world. It is to Jews *first* and to

Gentiles *also*. As Peter put it in Acts 3:18–20, 25–26 while addressing a Jewish audience,

The things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets . . . He has thus fulfilled. Therefore repent . . . that he may send Jesus, the Messiah *appointed for you*. . . . It is you who are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God made with your fathers. . . . *For you first*, God raised up His Servant and sent Him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways.

The point is this: the Mosaic Covenant has been replaced by the New Covenant promised in Jeremiah 31. But the Abrahamic covenant has not been replaced; it forms the basis for the coming of Messiah and his blessing to the world (Gal. 3). Jesus came in fulfillment of that covenant in order to redeem the elect within the nation (Rom. 9:6–13; 11:1–5) and those among the Gentiles whom the Father appointed for salvation.

The gifts and the callings of God are irrevocable. God will yet work within the Jewish nation so that “all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, ‘The Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob’” (Rom. 11:26). There is no need for a lengthy discussion about the meaning of “all Israel.” It is enough for us to say that “all Israel” is not the whole Jewish nation but that remnant within the nation God has appointed to salvation.

We may conclude, then, that the existence of a visible, identifiably Jewish body of Christians within the body of Messiah is not in conflict with the gospel. A denial of the right of such an existence is tantamount to a denial of the Old Testament basis for the New Testament Faith. The continued existence of an identifiable body of Jewish Christians within the nation of Israel is a testimony to both the church and the nation that God remains true to his covenant, even when Israel failed. This is a vivid expression of the wonder of God’s grace: even “if we believe not,” he will remain faithful, for “he cannot deny himself” (2 Tim. 2:13 KJV).

A Jew to the Jews. There is at least one other reason why it is important for Jewish Christians to remain an integral part of their nation. The Jewish people must hear the gospel and see it lived out before them. This can be done most effectively by fellow Jews who live and speak in the

cultural language of the people and who are able to address the nation from within. We Jewish Christians are no strangers to our people. We share the same joys and sorrows, hope the same hopes, and bear the same scars. We feel the anguish of the Holocaust. We are partners in the struggle against assimilation and the loss of Jewish identity.

God has not forsaken Israel, nor will he. He loves our people by grace, and we love our people because they are ours and we theirs, no matter what they do or how they treat us. We labor for their welfare and pray for their ultimate good, which we know can only be found in the Messiah.

HOW CAN JEWS IN MESSIAH REMAIN JEWS WITHOUT DENYING THE GOSPEL?

That is a crucial question, often arising for fear that the way Jewish Christians express their Jewish identity may conflict with the gospel.

National Culture

The only means for Jews in Messiah to identifiably belong to their nation are those employed by other nations for the same purpose. Jewish Christians adhere to the cultural norms adopted by the majority of their people so long as these do not contradict the gospel. Those norms constitute the national consensus which defines, expresses, and maintains the nation's identity. On the other hand, it is the duty of Jewish Christians, as it is of Christians from any nation, to challenge any part of the national consensus that conflicts with the gospel. Jewish Christians are recognizably Jewish by their national custom. We belong to the Jewish people by more than an accident of birth. We are Jews by choice, by heartfelt identification with our people in all aspects of life—with the notable exception of their rejection of Jesus.

That rejection creates a tension between our national and our spiritual identities, which cannot be resolved by our adopting a rabbinic way of life or returning to the yoke of the Torah. It will be resolved only when our people turn to God, repent, and believe all that the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament say of Jesus. We are assured by the promises of God that such a day will yet come, and, though it tarries, we wait for it with confident expectation. Someday Israel will cast away the part of its

national custom that contradicts the gospel and constitutes a rejection of Jesus—who they will then adore.

Jeff Wasserman writes, “When, at the age of twenty, I became a believer in Jesus as Messiah, I strained to find reference points in Christianity that were in any way familiar to me.”¹² If he had been made familiar in childhood with the truly Jewish themes of God, sin, grace, covenant, sacrifice, Messiah, forgiveness, and so on, he would have found many of the major “reference points in Christianity” to be exactly what he sought. But Jeff was looking for something else. He was looking for externals, rituals and customs. That is where he and many Messianic Jews have erred. What is really important cannot be found in national religious custom but in the faith that the Bible inculcates.

Why should Jeff be surprised not to find familiar reference points between his new faith and the customs in which he was brought up? Judaism, as developed over the last 2000 years, is a denial of the gospel, a rejection of Christ. Jeff’s disappointment was misplaced when he says, “it was with a sense of mourning that I abandoned my Jewish heritage . . . and set aside all that I had been in order to apprehend what I had become in Christ.”¹³ He made the right choice, if a choice had to be made. Compared to Jesus, Jewishness is worthless. But no such choice is required. It is not inherent in either Jewishness or in the faith of Messiah.

It is amazing to note what Jeff means by “elements of . . . Gentile background.”¹⁴ In a footnote he speaks of “somberness in worship, magic-style incantations in Jesus’ name, a pantheon of divine beings that included a very powerful devil, and an influential Mary.”¹⁵ One wonders what kind of church Jeff had wandered into! Most of the features that offended Jeff would offend every biblical Christian. As to sobriety, is that a distinctly Gentile attitude of worship?

Jeff goes on to describe what he believes is characteristically Jewish worship: “joyful celebration of God’s presence and favor, and a strong consciousness of the need for human repentance in the face of the one and only God.”¹⁶ This is so idealized a version of Jewish worship that

12. Jeffrey S. Wasserman, *Messianic Jewish Congregations: Who Sold This Business to the Gentiles?* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000), 1.

13. *Ibid.*, 2.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, 9.

16. *Ibid.*

the average Jew would hardly recognize in it a normative synagogue service. Jewish services are generally characterized by little reverence. Latecomers rush through their prayers, while others follow suit so they can talk with a business partner or client. It is not uncommon for the rabbi to call repeatedly for silence. There is generally little sense of joyful celebration and no need for repentance. God is absent from the thoughts of the worshipers.

Truth be told, the purported tension that exists between our national and spiritual identities is nothing compared to that under which our people presently labor. Present-day Jewish identity is the product of a sinful fluke of history during which our people rejected him who is the goal and culmination of everything truly Jewish, while those who professed to be our co-religionists harassed and persecuted their own people for their honest faith in him.

The tension our people live under is the result of a calling to which they subscribe yet refuse to obey, a duty which is the ultimate product of their Jewishness. It is not without reason that the pressing question “who is a Jew?” keeps rising in Israel. The Jewish people will never know the God of their fathers until they come to know Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, God who came to live and die among men for their salvation. Only then will the issue of their identity be resolved.

Cultural Mores

Since the destruction of the temple in 70 AD, the synagogue has served as the national community center, while rabbinic custom was the glue that kept the nation together. It is now generally assumed that Jews are Jewish by virtue of their adherence—theoretical or otherwise—to biblical and rabbinic traditions.

All nations express their identity by cultural conventions. Religious concepts helped to formulate a substantial part of these Jewish conventions before they lost their significance. When they contradict biblical norms, they are forbidden to disciples of Messiah. For example, Paul allowed the eating of meat sold in the marketplace (1 Cor. 10:25) although he knew such meat came from pagan altars. Eating the meat, in and of itself, carried no religious significance. As soon as religious significance was attached to consumption, Paul forbade it (1 Cor. 10:28). In other words, the act was allowed or forbidden by the absence or

presence of religious significance. The issue was not the act but the significance attached to it.

In the same way, Paul had no difficulty maintaining Jewish custom so long as doing so was not a matter of religious obligation. He “became” (amazingly, that is the term used in 1 Cor. 9:20 NIV) as a Jew to his fellow Jews, while insisting upon his liberty to become “as a Gentile” to the Gentiles. Paul did not consider himself obliged to practice the Judaism of his day. Peter, too, lived like a Gentile (Gal. 2:14), and when he did not, he acted hypocritically (v. 13), contrary to the truth of the gospel (v. 14). Again, the issue was not the act but the motive.

Paul consistently refused to accept Jewish custom when it impinged upon the gospel by taking on religious significance. He did not hesitate to enter into controversy with Peter when he considered the gospel to be at stake (Gal. 2). He led many Jews out of the synagogue but never led Gentiles into it. There is no biblical evidence that would cause us to think that Paul’s converts attended synagogue for any length of time, or that they established their own once they left. The congregations Paul founded were not called synagogues. He coined a new term for them—churches. James used the term “synagogue” to describe a community of believers in Jesus. But he was probably addressing a Jewish Christian congregation that labored under the same misconception that guided the messengers to Galatia (Acts 15:1, 5; Gal. 2:4, 12–13). Its members therefore probably insisted on the religious necessity of maintaining national traditions.

There is no doubt that the gospel can be put at risk by some Jewish conventions, particularly those that retain religious overtones. For instance, fasting and giving are not, in themselves, unacceptable. But fasting on the Day of Atonement for the forgiveness of sins is a denial of the sufficiency of Christ. Giving to the church to obtain merit in the eyes of God is a contradiction of grace. We need to distinguish between cultural conventions and religious obligations. Circumcision and other traditions established by the law are not of themselves contrary to the gospel. But if we are circumcised, convert to Judaism, or keep what is described today as a Torah lifestyle because we believe ourselves obliged to do so or in any way spiritually advantaged, we are denying the sufficiency of the work of Messiah.

In matters of morality and religion, none but God has the right to bind a believer’s conscience. Here God has exclusive authority, and he

exercises that authority through his word. In matters of national identity, Jews are as free to be Jewish as are the Swedes to be Swedish and the Hottentots to be Hottentot. There is no spiritual advantage in eating pork or in abstaining from doing so. But neither Swedes nor Hottentots are free to adhere to national customs that contradict the gospel.

There are two major sources for the formulation of Jewish cultural norms: (1) the Old Testament, especially the Mosaic Covenant, and (2) the traditions of the rabbis. Let us examine these separately.

People from a Jewish background face difficult choices when they come to trust in Jesus.

To be Jewish, maintains Baruch Maoz, is a blessing from God. But how should Jewish Christians worship? If they join churches, there is real risk of assimilation. But if they establish synagogues, Gentile Christians feel excluded.

Some Jewish Christians have tried to solve these problems through Messianic Judaism, which allows them to proclaim Jesus as Messiah while retaining Jewish lifestyle and worship. Baruch Maoz maintains that the two cannot so easily be combined. He maintains that it is possible to be both Christian and Jewish without Messianic Judaism, and he points the way for Jewish Christians to retain their cultural identity without losing fellowship with other Christians.



“A supremely helpful analysis. . . . Baruch Maoz is uniquely qualified to write on the subject, and he has done so with a charitable tone and point-by-point thoroughness that will benefit people on all sides of the controversy. I greatly appreciate his relentlessly biblical approach.”

—**John MacArthur**, Pastor and Teacher, Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, California

“Jewish believers in Jesus have long been plagued with critical questions. . . . Are we to worship in churches with our Gentile brothers and sisters, or are we to commit ourselves to Messianic Judaism? This book is must reading for anyone who cares about the Jewish people.”

—**Stan Telchin**, Jewish Christian and Author of *Betrayed!*

“An excellent treatise . . . as well as an effective and appropriate critique of the current Messianic Movement.”

—**Harry L. Reeder III**, Senior Pastor, Briarwood Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama



Baruch Maoz served for 33 years as Pastor of Grace and Truth Christian Congregation near Tel Aviv and Field Leader for Christian Witness to Israel. He is Senior Editor of the *Modern Hebrew Bible*, Coeditor of the *Annotated Hebrew New Testament*, and Founder and former Coeditor of *Mishkan: An International Theological Forum on Jewish Evangelism*.

COVER DESIGN: CHRISTOPHER TOBIAS
www.tobiasdesign.com
Cover illustration © fotolia.com / Georgios Kollidas

www.prpbooks.com



EVANGELISM / OUTREACH
ISBN: 978-1-59638-406-4

EAN



9 781596 384064

5 1 9 9 9