

DO WE NEED MESSIANIC SYNAGOGUES? BIBLICAL, HISTORIC, AND PRAGMATIC ISSUES*

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An assessment of the Messianic Synagogue movement is difficult because it exists in so many forms, but some general observations to cover all the forms are possible. Early in the twentieth century, a Jewish Christian named David Baron evaluated the Messianic Judaism of his day. In the movement he saw specific dangers for the body of Christ, stressing how the movement tends to destroy unity in the body of Christ by erecting a wall of partition between Jewish believers and Gentile believers. Similar concerns about the Messianic Jewish movement prevail in its revival during the last several decades. They touch on biblical-theological matters, including the movement's bringing into the present the Judaism that Paul relegated to the past (cf. Gal 1:13-16), its tendency to promote divisions among Christians (cf. Gal 3:28; Eph 2:11-22), its emphasis on the shadow rather than the substance of NT fulfillments (cf. Col 2:16-17), and its tendency to redefine Jesus' deity. Other concerns arise in historical and pragmatic matters: a return to the Judaism of apostolic times is impossible; history teaches that Messianic Synagogues are not more effective in witnessing to the Jewish community; taking Jewish believers away from churches contributes to "Gentilization" of the church; Messianic Synagogues may become an excuse for the church to transfer efforts in Jewish evangelism; and emphasis on non-biblical Jewish observances is subject to Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees' Oral Law. The early church in Antioch of Syria in its assimilation of Jewish and Gentile believers into one body offers a suitable model for the contemporary church to follow.

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The one who writes about Messianic Judaism/Synagogues faces serious challenges. Not the least of these is what exactly to call the movement. The problem is that the term “Messianic” could possibly refer to any Jewish person who believes in a personal Messiah, whether or not that Messiah is identified with Jesus of Nazareth. For example, the Lubavitcher Hasidim fervently proclaim their belief in “Moshiach,” some even to the point of identifying their former “Rebbe” (Menachem Mendel Schneerson) with that Moshiach. Does that mean that Lubavitchers are also “Messianic Jews”?

The title “Messianic Judaism” is here to stay, and to argue about its semantic nuances is fruitless. This essay will use the expression even though many may not believe it to be the best title. It is also true that some prefer “congregation” to “synagogue” to describe their local body of believers. I will simply use “Messianic Synagogue” for convenience, while recognizing the great diversity of expression among both adherents and opponents of the movement. Messianic Judaism, whatever be the strengths or shortcomings of the title, is a “fait accompli”—and that is the movement to be evaluated here in the light of theological, historical, and pragmatic considerations.

The movement in its modern form is now over thirty years old. Most of those involved in Messianic Judaism for any length of time have by now made up their minds and will probably not be dissuaded by arguments proposed against it. On the other hand, persons interested in exploring the questions that Messianic synagogues inevitably raise may find some help here as they sort through those issues.

Evaluating the movement creates another obstacle, that of which form of Messianic Judaism to address. In the early 1990s a Reconstructionist Rabbi named Carol Harris-Shapiro made an ethnographic study of Messianic Judaism.¹ Ethnography requires the researcher to enter a community as both an observer and, to some extent, a participant. Though other full-length treatments of Messianic Judaism have been done by non-Messianic Jewish writers,² Harris-Shapiro’s work is a fairly reliable treatment by someone who, as an outsider, tried to view the movement from the inside. She categorizes the various organizational strands of Messianic Judaism into five basic groups: 1. Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations; 2. International Alliance of Messianic Congregations and Synagogues; 3. Fellowship of Messianic Congregations; 4. Association of Torah-Observant Messianics; and 5. The International Federation of Messianic Jews. Referring to the last three as the smaller of the five, Harris-Shapiro adds, “These Messianic margins point to the increasing diversity in the movement, while their small numbers

¹Carol Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism* (Boston: Beacon, 1999).

²David Rausch, *Messianic Judaism: Its history, theology and polity* (Lewiston, N.Y.:Edwin Mellen,1982) and B.Z. Sobel, *Hebrew Christianity: The Thirteenth Tribe* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974).

highlight the strength of the mainstream expression of Messianic Judaism.”³

Therefore, to whom do these observations apply? I will leave that question to be answered by the reader, who must realize that I may paint at times with a broad brush. If I wrongly cover someone, I fully realize that such is inevitable in light of the movement’s great diversity.

Before I address my concerns, I would like to share a few personal observations about my involvement in this subject. First, I rejoice greatly in the fact that God is preserving a remnant of Jewish believers, as Paul would say, “at this present time” (Rom 11:5). Jewish evangelism has always been a major factor in my life, first, following seminary during my seven years as a pastor. I then had the privilege of working with a ministry to Jewish people for seventeen years, ten of which I served as dean of a Bible institute dedicated to teaching students, many of whom were Jewish believers, about the history and culture of the Jewish people both in America and Israel. I received a master’s degree in Judaic studies under the tutelage of a well-known conservative rabbinical scholar and gave the valedictory address at the commencement in a Philadelphia synagogue. Recently my teaching in a Christian liberal arts college has been primarily to Gentile Christian students, and it has been a joy to introduce them to the culture, history, and spiritual needs of the Jewish people. In addition to teaching, I am also the director of our college’s branch campus program in Israel and have led thirty-six study trips to that country. There I have tried to familiarize myself with the challenges that “Yehudim Meshichim” (Messianic Jews) face in their homeland.

I write this, not to impress anyone, but to let the reader know that, although I am a Gentile, I write as one who is a sympathetic friend to Jewish believers. One of my ministry goals has also been to educate the churches where I minister about the Jewish people and Israel and to expose anti-Jewishness wherever it raises its ugly head. So let my criticisms of Messianic Judaism be understood in that light. If I wound anyone be assured that it is done in the spirit of Proverbs 27:6, “Faithful are the wounds of a friend. . . .”⁴

A Voice from the Past

Jewish Christianity is certainly not a modern phenomenon, but has existed since the first century. As an identifiable movement within the church, however, it ceased to exist by the sixth century A.D.⁵ There was a renaissance of faith in Jesus as the Messiah during the nineteenth century, when literally thousands of Jewish

³Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism* 28-29.

⁴Scripture quotations are taken from the *English Standard Version* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2001).

⁵Hugh J. Schonfield, *The History of Jewish Christianity* (London: Duckworth Press, 1936), chapter IX.

people came to such faith.⁶ Jewish Christian organizations formed and new Jewish missions appeared in England, in America, and on the Continent. Some of the greatest “giants” in Jewish Christianity lived and ministered in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Among the most notable was the great David Baron, who came to faith in Jesus as Messiah from an Orthodox European background and went on to found the Hebrew Christian Testimony to Israel in England. Baron contributed major scholarly works that are still read and appreciated today, such as *Rays of Messiah's Glory, Types, Psalms and Prophecies, Israel in the Plan of God*, and the invaluable commentary, *Visions and Prophecies of Zechariah*. A highly respected Jewish believer who died just recently has written, “Many of David Baron’s friends testified that he was the most Christlike man they had ever known.”⁷

Most of Baron’s writing originally appeared in the periodical *The Scattered Nation*, magazine of the “Testimony.” In 1911 he published an article in that periodical titled, “Messianic Judaism; or Judaising Christianity.” Reading this article should recall Kohelet’s statement that “there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl 1:9). That article makes it clear that the movement is not a new phenomenon, but was significant enough at the turn of the century to cause great concern to David Baron. The issues he raised ninety years ago are important for today, especially since he was regarded so highly as Jewish believer.

Baron writes that Messianic Judaism’s founders such as Theodore Lucky advocated

that it is incumbent on the Hebrew Christian not only to identify themselves with their unbelieving Jewish brethren in their national aspirations—as explained, for instance, in Zionism . . . but to observe the national rites and customs of the Jews, such as the keeping of the Sabbath, circumcision, and other observances, some of which have not even their origin in the law of Moses, but are part of the unbearable yoke which was laid on the neck of our people by the Rabbis.⁸

He cites writers who prepared both a “Minimum Programme” and a “Maximum Programme” for their turn of the century form of Messianic Judaism. The “Minimum Programme” advocated the following:

A Hebrew Christian movement will hold fast to Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles, Chanukah and Purim; will include in its liturgy a good deal of the traditional Synagogue prayer; will be favorably disposed towards every ceremony that has entwined itself in the

⁶Ibid., chapters XVIII-XX.

⁷Louis Goldberg, *Our Jewish Friends* (Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1983) 167.

⁸David Baron, “Messianic Judaism,” *The Scattered Nation* (October 1911):4. Reprinted by American Messianic Fellowship (Chicago, Ill.). For further information on an example of this movement, Joseph Rabinowitz and his congregation, see Schonfield, *History of Jewish Christianity* 223-26.

Hebrew consciousness; . . . insists on circumcision; attaches itself to the Hebrew consciousness and holds by the historical and Biblical continuity of Israel's mission.⁹

This was the "Minimum Programme." In Baron's words, the "Maximum Programme" also included "joining in all forms and ceremonies of the Christ-rejecting synagogue, to wear phylacteries and the talith, to use the Jewish liturgy, just as the other Jews do, only to smuggle in now and then the Name of Jesus into their prayers."¹⁰

Baron also mentions the following in a section he calls the "Dangers of the Movement."

These Judaizing brethren forget that during the period of Israel's national unbelief a *new thing* is being formed. Every essential element of what constitutes *nationality* is to be found in this new brotherhood. Those who profess allegiance to Christ become members of the body of which He is the Head, and must be ready to take up the cross and follow Him. And one very heavy part of the cross is the separation which it involves to disciples . . . for those near and dear to them. It is hard to bear suffering and reproach, but the conditions of discipleship are not different now than they ever were. 'He that taketh not his cross and followeth after me is not worthy of me'.¹¹

He compares the present situation of the Jewish believer to the scene in Exodus when "everyone who sought the Lord went out into the tent of meeting which was without the camp" (Exod 33:7). "So also during this much longer period of national apostasy God's tabernacle is removed from the camp of corporate official Judaism, and everyone from among Israel who in truth seeks the Lord must be prepared to go forth unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach."¹²

Lastly, Baron stresses the unity of Jews and Gentiles in the terms of Gal 3:28 ("neither Jew nor Greek") and the picture of unity in one body found in Eph 2:11-22.

Now, to say that in the one Church of Christ are one set of rules, one attitude in relation to certain rites and observances enjoined in the law, and certain earthly or "ritual hopes" and expectations are incumbent on its Jewish members, which are not incumbent on its Gentile members, is nothing less than to try to raise up again the middle wall of partition which Christ by His death hath broken down, and to introduce confusion into the one "House of the Living God." The New Testament nowhere tells the Gentile believer that he is 'free' from anything from which the Jewish believer is not freed.¹³

⁹Ibid., 4.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., 6.

¹²Ibid., 7.

¹³Ibid., 8.

Baron concludes this section by offering that Paul also had in mind Jewish as well as Gentile believers in his strong warning against law-keeping in Galatians 4–5.¹⁴

One more significant point that Baron makes lays the groundwork for something to be expressed later in this essay. He notes the claim often made by advocates of Messianic Judaism that early Jewish believers remained in unbroken continuity with the Hebrew nation and attended the Temple and synagogue worship, kept the Sabbath, and the Jewish festivals, as is evident in the Acts of the Apostles. He deals with this issue by declaring that it was the unbelieving synagogue which made this “unbroken continuity” between church and synagogue an impossibility by driving the Nazarenes from their midst. “What these brethren overlook is that in relation to this and other matters the Acts of Apostles introduces us to a transition period and describes conditions which most evidently were not intended by God to be permanent.”¹⁵

Baron’s point is that the destruction of the Temple should have ended once for all any perplexity that the Hebrew Christian may have had about what were called those “national observances.” “With the breaking up of the Jewish national polity there emerged the Church of Christ—not dependent upon any building or land for its center of unity, and whose worship does not consist in observances but in spiritual sacrifices and service which are acceptable to God through Christ Jesus.”¹⁶

I have summarized Baron’s article to illustrate that Messianic Jewish issues were a live concern well over a century ago—and also were strongly opposed by one of Hebrew Christianity’s greatest lights. The rest of this essay will build upon what Baron so passionately wrote out of concern for his fellow Jewish believers and for the overall cause of the Messiah.

Biblical-Theological Concerns

Concerns expressed about the Messianic Jewish movement have been largely theological in nature. To these biblical-theological issues can be added some historical and pragmatic issues. Though the first area is the most important, the last two also raise significant questions about Messianic Judaism and Messianic Synagogues. Three general propositions will summarize the biblical-theological concerns. The fourth proposition expresses what is only a potential theological danger at the present time.

1. The Apostle Paul described his previous life in “Judaism” as something that was part of his past life, not something that was part of his present life. The word “Judaism” (Ἰουδαϊσμός) occurs in the NT only in Gal 1:13-14 (emphasis

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., 13.

¹⁶Ibid.

added):

For you have heard of my former life in *Judaism*, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in *Judaism* beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.

The context of this passage indicates clearly that those practices that were part of Paul's "Judaism" ended when God revealed His Son to him (1:15-16). This "Damascus Road" experience in Acts 9 so completely re-oriented Paul's thinking that he never afterward identified with "Judaism" as a way of life. Why, therefore, would Jewish believers desire to be part of any form of "Judaism"?

That does not mean that Paul thought he had ceased being a Jew. He evidences that in many places, both in Acts and in his epistles (Acts 22:3; Rom 11:1). But his involvement in "Judaism" ended when Jesus was revealed in him. He was then part of something new. How, then, can modern Messianic Jews desire to take part in the rituals of their pre-Messiah life?

Paul uses even stronger language about that past life in Phil 3:4-8:

Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.

In listing the privileges and attainments of his life before the Messiah, Paul first grouped together privileges that were his by birth and could never be changed (circumcision, membership in Israel and the tribe of Benjamin, and his Hebrew-speaking heritage). The second set of attainments were those things he attained by his own effort (Pharisaic membership, persecuting zeal, and his Torah-observant life). He did not view these things as badges of honor, however, but rather as impediments to pleasing God. He describes them with a very strong word—"rubbish." Although he lost all these human attainments, he had no regrets. The knowledge of Jesus as his Messiah was far more valuable than any of those privileges and accomplishments.

That does not mean that Paul became an example of the "self-hating Jew" described in so much recent Jewish literature. It means that those practices that some Messianic Jews emphasize so strongly are the very things that often can lead to self-righteousness and actual loss of the real knowledge of the Messiah. Though many today want to find their identity in "Jewishness," Paul found his identity in the Messiah.

I know that these are strong words, but Paul's words are even stronger. The

usual response to this is to point out the incidents in Acts where Paul observed certain Jewish rituals such as the Nazirite vow (Acts 18:18; 21:23-26). Such incidents, however, cannot be interpreted as contradictions of his clear teaching in Galatians and Philippians, as well as what will be seen in Ephesians and Colossians—letters written by Paul himself! Paul's actions should be viewed as illustrating *personal* choices motivated by the pragmatic concern of becoming a Jew to the Jews. Those actions, recorded in the narrative genre of the book of Acts, were never intended as normative for others or to set forth a norm for congregational worship. His choices have been “over-interpreted” to justify a pattern of observances that were never intended.

Furthermore, the present-day absence of the Temple with its elaborate ritual is a serious factor that needs to be taken into sober consideration. How does the lack of the Temple impact the observance of these and other ritual practices that belong to another time and often cannot be observed today in the way they were originally commanded? A more serious question also arises. Where in the NT are the ritual practices of Second Temple “Judaism” and did they ever characterize the congregational pattern for early churches?

2. *Messianic Judaism tends to promote divisions that the redemptive work of Jesus has torn down.* The key texts in this regard are Eph 2:11-22 and Gal 3:28. Even without a citation of the entire Ephesians passage, it is evident that it clearly proclaims the spiritual unity of all Gentile and Jewish believers in one body. Verses 14-15 deserve special notice:

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace. . . .

Most interpret this text with a layout of the Herodian Temple as its background. Paul declares that the Messiah's work has resulted in His abolishing “the law of commandments and ordinances.” The Greek text reads literally “the law of commandments *in* ordinances” (τὸν νόμον τῶν ἐντολῶν ἐν δόγμασιν, *ton nomon ĩn entolōn en dogmasin*). At the very least this would refer to the disannulling of the ceremonial laws and also the so-called “civil laws” of Exodus 21–24. The phrase “the law of commandments” occurs in Exod 24:12 (הַחֻקִּים וְהַמִּצְוֹת) [wĕhatōrah wĕhammišwāh in the Masoretic Text; τὸν νόμον καὶ τὰς ἐντολάς [*ton nomon kai tas entolas*] in the LXX), referring to what God had given to Moses on the mount up to that point.

Paul further illustrates this unifying work of the Savior by referring to the fence (*soreg* in Hebrew) in the Herodian Temple that kept Gentiles from entering into the more sacred area of the Temple (ναός, *naos*) where only Jews could enter and worship. That dividing wall, in the Pauline spiritual analogy, has been abolished because that which kept the two peoples apart, “the law of the commandments,” has

been disannulled. Both Jewish and Gentile believers can now enter together, not into a physical temple, but into something brand new, the spiritual body of the Messiah.

It has sometimes been charged that Messianic Judaism is rebuilding this wall of partition. Actually, no one can rebuild the wall—it is done away with forever. But Messianic Judaism, by its emphasis on laws that have no continuing spiritual relevance for either Jews or Gentiles, is creating an appearance that the wall still separates the two groups.

A prominent Messianic Jewish commentary on the NT spends pages trying to explain these verses as having no reference to the Mosaic laws. The commentary states that the “ordinances” referred to in Eph 2:15 are not the laws of Exodus but are the “takkanot,” i.e., Rabbinic ordinances added to the Torah, such as the “soreg” or dividing wall.¹⁷ This bifurcation of “commandments” and “ordinances” with the idea that the Messiah abolished the latter and not the former is unsupportable by any fair reading of the text. Is a preconceived position forcing this commentator to avoid the plain reading of the text? Scholarly commentaries on Ephesians do not support his imagined distinction between divine and human commands in the passage. Hodge represents the scholarly consensus:

This may mean the law of commandments *with* ordinances—referring to the two classes of laws, moral and positive; or it may refer to the form *in which* the precepts are presented in the law . . . *ἰὼν ἐντολῶν* giving the contents of the law, and *ἐν δογμασι* the form.¹⁸

The most often recognized Greek lexicon in use today does not support the idea that the “ordinances” are Rabbinic decrees, but defines them as the specific ordinances in which the commandments are expressed.¹⁹ Therefore, it appears that the author of the previously cited Messianic commentary employs a questionable meaning when calling these ordinances “takkanot.” Furthermore, that is a rather anachronistic comment, since the Rabbinic decrees refer almost exclusively to decisions made by the rabbis much later than the NT period. An example of such a takkanah is the one by Rabbenu Gershom banning polygamy in the eleventh century A.D.²⁰ The article on “takkanot” in the highly regarded *Encyclopedia Judaica* nowhere refers to the fence in the Temple as an example of a “takkanah.”²¹

¹⁷David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, Md.: Jewish NT Publications, 1999) 588.

¹⁸Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966) 134.

¹⁹F. W. Danker, ed. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 2000) 254.

²⁰Jacob Neusner, ed., *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996) 614.

²¹“Takkanot,” *Encyclopedia Judaica*, CD-ROM ed. (Jerusalem: Judaica Multimedia, 1997).

Messianic Judaism proponents will go to great lengths to explain away texts which clearly teach that observance of Jewish ordinances confounds the unity of Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ.

One of the key texts in this discussion is Gal 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." The three pairs of people mentioned in this verse focus on ethnic (Jew/Gentile), social (slave/free), and gender (male/female) distinctions. Obviously, such distinctions do not just disappear when someone comes to the Lord. To say that no one can speak of himself as a Jew or a Gentile anymore is foolish, for then one could not speak of himself as a free man, a slave, a man, or a woman! Paul addresses all such groups by name in his epistles (e.g., Col 3:18–4:1).

The unity described is clearly a spiritual one. But how Christians manifest that unity in personal practice and congregational life is the crucial question. If it is necessary to establish Jewish congregations to accommodate Jewish believers, is it necessary to establish slave congregations or female congregations to meet the needs of those social and gender groups? The epistles indicate that the early churches had all groups in them, each finding its needs met in the Messiah and not in ceremonial observances or cultural "identity." Is not the establishment of such congregations contrary to the whole emphasis of Gal 3:28? Should not the ideal be for congregations to exemplify the spiritual unity of a body in which ethnic, social, and gender differences do not matter? Should not worship be patterned in such a way as to "flesh out" what it means to be "all one in Christ Jesus"? Should not our congregants seek their identity in their Lord and not in their culture?

3. *Messianic Judaism emphasizes the "shadow" of OT typical practices when believers should be emphasizing the "reality" of NT fulfillments.* The key text here is Col 2:16-17, but Galatians 4 and Hebrews 10 also affirm what this passage teaches. "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ."

Paul states that two main categories of the Mosaic Law, dietary restrictions and festival observances—as important as they were to the OT Israelite—were intended to be temporary from the very beginning. For many centuries these ordinances were only a shadow (σκιά, *skia*) of the Messiah. Now that believers have the "substance" (literally, "body"—σῶμα, *sōma*), why would anyone want to encourage others to continue to practice the shadow? F. F. Bruce writes,

Under the Levitical economy the observance of such days, like the food laws, was obligatory on the Jews. But now the Christian has been freed from obligations of this kind. If a Christian wishes to restrict himself in matters of food and drink, or to set apart days for special observance or commemoration, good and well. . . . But to regard them

as matters of religious obligation is a retrograde step for Christians to take.²²

The stress on those observances in many messianic circles leaves the impression that they are not personal preferences but “as matters of religious obligation.”

Some defenders of Messianic Judaism have argued that Paul addresses only Gentiles here and that the words do not apply to Jewish believers. This also is the case, according to some, when Paul so strongly opposes the observance of time-bound festivals in Gal 4:10-11: “You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.”²³ Yet no one can prove that the Colossian and Galatian churches were completely or even predominantly Gentile. Scholarly commentaries provide abundant evidence of large Jewish communities in the Lycus Valley location of Colosse.²⁴ Though it is true that the Colossian heresy was a mixture of Jewish and Gnostic ideas, it also involved plenty of Jewish elements, enough to argue for a significant Jewish presence in the church. Why would Jewish believers be exempt from the warning? Also, J. B. Lightfoot provides extensive evidence for a large Jewish population in the region of Galatia during the first century A.D. and shows there were a significant number of Jewish believers in the Galatian church.²⁵ Paul nowhere indicates in either of the two epistles that he is addressing Gentile believers without including Jewish believers in the warnings. If it is wrong for Gentiles to follow shadows, it is wrong for Jews as well.

Such a supposed disjunct in the apostolic teaching regarding the “shadows” (i.e., that the warnings apply to Gentiles and not Jews) is certainly answered by the epistle to the Hebrews: “For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near” (Heb 10:1). This verse is only a small part of the much larger “word of exhortation” found in a book written primarily to Jewish believers. If there is any support for Messianic Judaism, it should be here, but just the opposite is the case. The anonymous author states that as good as were the prophets, the angels, Moses, and the ceremonial law, Jesus is better! After a careful consideration of Hebrews 8–10, one must conclude that the institutions of the Mosaic Law have been replaced by something far better—the reality of which they were only the shadows. Therefore, why would anyone want to confuse believers by emphasizing ephemeral observances, when they have the reality for which the observances were only a shadow? To use such “shadows” as teaching tools is proper; to use them as worship ordinances in Christian congregations is to reverse redemptive history.

²²F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 244.

²³Cf. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* 558, 611.

²⁴E.g., Bruce, *Epistle to the Colossians* 244.

²⁵J. B. Lightfoot, *Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957) 9, 10, 26, 27.

Much more could be said about the implications of Hebrews for this study. But a reminder of the last of the author's famous "hortatory subjunctives" must suffice: "Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured" (13:13). All believers, Jewish or Gentile, are called to suffer outside the camp of whatever religious system they followed previously. Jesus did not please the Jewish religious leaders of His day, and He suffered because of it. Messianic Jews will never be able to please the Jewish religious leaders today, no matter how "Jewish" they try to be. They must be willing to suffer because of that fact. May believing Jewish readers be willing to join Him outside the camp of Rabbinic "Judaism," the Judaism of the last nineteen centuries. His company will sweeten any suffering they may be called upon to endure.

4. A last concern may or may not develop into a major problem. *Christians should beware of a few Messianic writers who have tended to raise the issue of Jesus' deity in ways that seek to redefine that aspect of His person for Jewish believers.* The reason given is that the Trinitarian discussions of the fourth century were framed in Greek philosophical terminology rather than in Jewish categories. Framing truths in ways that Jesus and the NT writers expressed them is commendable, but concern about where this tendency leads is justified. In the ancient church, some Nazarenes (the general term for Jewish Christians from the first through the fifth centuries) slipped into a heresy called Ebionism, which affirmed Jesus' messiahship but denied His deity. Attempts to redefine the doctrines so carefully hammered out at Nicea and Chalcedon is cause for alarm. Will this result in limiting the full deity of Messiah? Since any teaching that portrays Jesus as more than human will be rejected by Judaism, what purpose will be served? What appears to be a desire to express truths in less of a "Greek" way may actually be encouraging an unintended slide toward Ebionism. Messianic Jewish leaders in Israel have recognized that there are congregations in that country that espouse views similar to Adoptionist and Arian positions.²⁶ Believers must heed the warning "Caveat Lector" ("Let the reader beware!").

Historical and Pragmatic Concerns

Having traced four areas of theological concern, a brief discussion of some historical and pragmatic issues about Messianic Judaism is necessary.

1. *Messianic Judaism must face the reality that returning to the same situation that Jewish believers faced in apostolic times is impossible.* Many Messianic Jewish authors seek to recreate for today conditions that existed before A.D. 70. That recreation is simply impossible and unwise. Three historical events must factor into a discussion of why this is so: 1. The Destruction of the Temple in

²⁶Personal email correspondence with Israeli pastor wishing to remain unnamed, August 14, 2002.

A.D. 70; 2. The Decisions at Yavneh around A.D. 80; and 3. The Bar Cochba Aftermath in A.D. 132-135.

The first event ended Jewish believers' participation in the Temple observances they practiced in the Book of Acts (e.g., 3:1; 21:26). Early church history records that the Nazarenes even fled to Pella before the Roman siege and returned afterward.²⁷ Recalling their Master's prophetic words recorded in Matthew 24:2 must have been sobering for them. If God allowed the destruction of the Temple, arguments from Acts that are tied to that system cannot be used for Christian participation in the Temple observances. Besides, since so many ceremonial observances were intimately involved with the Temple ritual, how can they be observed today, especially in their modified rabbinical form? The current observances of Shavuot and Yom Kippur, for example, differ radically from their OT format. The rabbis gave entirely different interpretations following the Temple's destruction.

In the post-destruction decade, the Pharisees, under the leadership of Yohanan ben Zakkai, reorganized Judaism along Pharisaic lines at Yavneh (Greek: Jamnia). One of their many decisions was the introduction into the Amidah prayer—also known as the Shemoneh Esreh—of an additional petition to the eighteen in the prayer. This petition was the much-discussed “Birkat Haminim,” which was basically a curse pronounced on the Nazarenes and “heretics.”²⁸ That innovation made it impossible for Jewish believers to continue participating in synagogue worship. In other words, the rabbis at Yavneh finally ejected Jewish believers from official and unofficial participation in any synagogue.

Most Messianic Jews today do not attempt to continue worshiping in non-believing synagogues. That momentous event, however, should cancel any notion that somehow the synagogue will accept Jewish believers. Attempts to contextualize Messianic synagogues to make them more acceptable to modern Jews simply ignore the events at Yavneh.

The Nazarenes could not support Bar Cochba's rebellion in A.D. 132-135 due to Rabbi Akiba's advocacy of him as the Messiah. Although the sources are scanty, it appears that this pseudo-messiah strongly persecuted the Nazarenes,²⁹ which, in addition to their earlier expulsion from the synagogue, effectively led to their final rejection even from the Jewish community.

Faith in the messiahship of Jesus is consistent with the Hebrew Scriptures. Such faith, however, was declared clearly and finally to be inconsistent with the “Judaism” that emerged in the aftermath of A.D. 70. To attempt to remain part of “Judaism” or even the Jewish community is to ignore these historical realities and is an anachronistic action. The “parting of the ways” between synagogue and church

²⁷Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History III*, 5.

²⁸Jacob Jocz, *The Jewish People and Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 51-57.

²⁹Ibid., 71.

clearly and irrevocably took place by A.D. 135. Nothing said by the Rabbis in nineteen centuries since then has even begun to reverse the events. However one may disagree with their decisions, the Jewish community has the right to define who belongs to their community. They may be inconsistent with Scripture and even with later rabbinical rulings about who a Jew is, but they do have the right to be inconsistent and wrong. Therefore, as painful as it may be to some, Jewish believers today are not part of that Jewish community. Like Paul, they need to realize that their identity is not to be found in their Jewishness, but in their Savior—“. . . and in Him you have been made complete” (Col 2:10a).

2. *The idea that Messianic Synagogues are a more effective witness to the Jewish community ignores historical realities.* No hard statistics prove that Messianic Synagogues are more effective in evangelizing Jewish people. The fact is that many Jewish people who come to faith in Jesus find their spiritual home in Bible-teaching churches. All areas of the body of Christ have benefitted from the increased spiritual harvest of Jewish believers in the last thirty years. Only anecdotal evidence shows that Messianic Synagogues are more effective witnesses to Jewish friends and co-workers than are godly believers who attend non-Messianic churches. Many members of the Messianic congregations are actually transfers from Christian churches.

Another historical reality is that most members of Messianic Synagogues were led to the Lord by Gentile believers. Even most of the Messianic leadership today were led to the Lord by Gentile believers or grew up in Jewish believing homes which were not involved in the movement. That some who argue for greater evangelistic effectiveness of Messianic Synagogues were actually evangelized by Gentile believers is strange.

Historically, some current advocates of Messianic Judaism originally opposed the “new” ideas. The American Board of Missions to the Jews, now called Chosen People Ministries, issued a statement against the movement in 1976.³⁰ Consider also the conclusions of another early opponent of establishing separate congregations for Jewish believers:

The main problem with a Hebrew Christian church, however, is that it goes against the biblical ideal of Gentile and Jewish believers worshiping and functioning together in the local church. . . . Establishing Hebrew Christian churches is not the solution to the problem. . . . Such a solution robs the local church of the benefits it can derive from having Hebrew Christian members. . . . The local church must be composed where possible of both Jewish and Gentile believers working together for the cause of Christ.³¹

³⁰Daniel Fuchs, “Messianic Synagogues,” *The Chosen People* (January 1976):14.

³¹Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Hebrew Christianity: Its Theology, History and Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974) 94, 96.

The organizations represented by these authors now support the establishment of Messianic congregations. What happened to cause these and other leaders to change their positions?

3. *By taking Jewish believers away from good churches, Messianic Judaism is actually contributing to the greater "Gentilization" of the church.* Thus, the more the exodus takes place, the legitimate complaint that the church is too "Gentile" becomes more legitimate. We need each other in the body. Gentile believers need their Jewish brethren—not in some theoretical way, but in tangible ways—to remind them of the Jewish roots and Hebraic contours of their shared faith. Jewish believers also need their Gentile brethren to keep them from possible ethnocentricity, a potential danger for any ethnic group, not just the Jewish people.

4. *The more Messianic Synagogues develop, the more the church is relieved of its missionary obligation to reach out to the Jewish people in evangelism and discipleship.* The church has always had difficulty in seeing its duty to include the factor of "to the Jew first" in its mission program. If Messianic Synagogues become the norm, an attitude of "defer and refer" will become the attitude of the church. Churches will think that they cannot reach Jewish people and will "defer" that responsibility to Messianic Synagogues, to which they can then "refer" them. That is clearly an unbiblical attitude and denial of the Great Commission. Churches need to be challenged with their obligation to provide a place where Jewish people are welcome and can hear the gospel. If Messianic Synagogues are the only place where such can happen, then the church is relieved of that sacred responsibility.

5. *By emphasizing so many non-biblical Jewish observances, Messianic Judaism falls under Jesus' condemnation of the Oral Law of the Pharisees.* Practices such as wearing the yarmulke (*kippah* or head covering) and the *tallit* (prayer shawl) as separate garments, as well as specific ways in which many holidays plus the Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebrations are observed, have no basis in the Torah but date from Rabbinic and sometimes even medieval times. The danger of adding to the Word of God, even unwittingly, needs to be seriously considered in light of Jesus' warning about the "tradition of men" in Matt 15:3-9 and Mark 7:6-8. All churches have traditions, but a serious problem arises when Messianic leaders make the traditions part of the worship ordinances and give the impression that they are what God desires. Immature believers do not always have the discernment to distinguish between preferences and commands. Unfortunately, many Messianic Synagogues give the impression that God expects these things even when they were added in later centuries by the Rabbis.

A Concluding Model

Many churches have failed to minister the good news in a Jewishly

sensitive way. Insensitive anti-Jewish comments abound. Churches desperately need to rediscover the Jewish roots of their faith. All these are valid criticisms, but Messianic Judaism and Synagogues are not answers to such concerns. Yes, it will take time, but Jewish believers should not give up on the church. The church, however, will not improve its Jewish sensitivity if Jewish believers abandon it. Consider, therefore, an alternative to Messianic Synagogues that was utilized for generations—a Hebrew Christian Fellowship within a church.

The solution is not to organize separate Hebrew Christian churches, thus violating the Biblical norm, but to organize Hebrew Christian Fellowships where believing Jews can come together as often as they like. Such a fellowship would help to meet the needs of new believers, hold children's classes in Jewish studies, and become a center for Jews to reach out to unbelieving Jews, and be a place where Hebrew Christians can gather to study the Scriptures in a Jewish context and perform the functions involved in the various Jewish celebrations.³²

Many Hebrew Christian fellowships are still active in churches today.

In light of the above discussion, a sound biblical-theological, historical, or pragmatic case cannot be made for the establishment of Messianic Synagogues. Though exceptions may occur in extraordinary circumstances, like some situations in Israel, exceptional circumstances should not be the norm to follow for congregational life.

Finally, let me urge my readers to look at a specific church in the NT as a model to emulate. That church was not in Jerusalem but in Antioch of Syria. It was really there that the "church," in its multi-cultural and multi-ethnic dimensions, was truly "born."

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians (Acts 11:19-26).

The Antioch congregation cannot simply be explained away as a "Gentile church," because it is evident from the context of the passage that Jews were already

³²Ibid., 97.

being reached there when Gentiles began to come to the Lord in great numbers. A potentially explosive situation in a mixed Jewish-Gentile congregation was channeled into peaceful paths by the wisdom of the “encourager” Barnabas, and the “exhorter” Saul. Also, in that same church Paul rebuked Peter’s inconsistent Jewish behavior (Gal 2:11-14), rescuing the church from legalistic disaster.

Let us then try to follow in our twenty-first-century churches the example of the first-century church at Antioch. We need congregations like Antioch which “flesh out” the truth of Gal 3:28. We need congregations like Antioch who do not just say “Gentiles are welcome,” but proclaim a Messiah who is for all men and women. We need congregations like Antioch where the center of their fellowship is not culture but Christ. Finally, let us also remember that it was in Antioch where all believers, both Jews and Gentiles, were first called “Christians.”