

TJCII Open Day, Nijkerk: February 13, 2015

Talk 1

Why do Christians need Messiah-confessing/Messianic Jews?

It would be good to show in overview and in detail what will be the fruit of a renewed fellowship with the Jewish part in the Body of Messiah.

You could show the audience perhaps what God is doing in those things around the world.

Text

Who are the Messianic Jews? What is the Messianic Jewish movement? For most of the leaders in the movement, these two questions are tied together. The Messianic Jews are those Jews who believe in Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah of Israel, as Lord and Saviour (or Yeshua as they would say) and gather themselves into congregations of Jewish believers in Yeshua so as to live a corporate life as Jewish disciples of their Messiah. There are people who call any Jew who believes in Jesus a Messianic Jew. In my opinion, this is not a helpful way of speaking and can cause confusion. Jewish and Christian faith is inherently a shared faith in covenantal relationships. To call any person of Jewish roots who believes in Jesus a Messianic Jew can also lead to vastly inflated and unrealistic figures of how many Messianic Jews there are.

The Messianic Jewish movement as an identifiable movement really dates from 1967 - 68, though its antecedents go back much further. Over the last 150 years there have been sporadic attempts to found congregations of Jewish believers - in the USA, in Eastern Europe, in Britain, for example - but those in the USA were basically ethnic in motivation without any vision for the restoration of a Jewish expression of the Church. The first important pioneering venture was in Kishinev, Moldova, where Joseph Rabinowicz founded a Jewish congregation in the 1880s that he called the Israelites of the New Covenant. But this congregation did not long outlast Rabinowicz, who died in 1899.

The Messianic Jewish movement proper was triggered by several factors - in particular the counter-cultural Jesus movement in late 1960s California, which attracted many young American Jews, and Israel's victory in the six-day war of 1967 (5th - 10th June). This combination brought to faith in Jesus a significant number of young Jews deeply enthused by Jewish Messianic hopes who were opposed to joining Christian churches. Before 1967, there had been a few small groups of Jewish believers in Yeshua in Israel (but most had left in 1947 - 48), but hardly a movement. As the Jesus movement was charismatic, the congregations formed by the new Messianic believers in the USA were charismatic. The charismatic component provided a dynamism for the movement. It led to the creation of much new music for Messianic worship and encouraged the use of dance.

What is the importance of this development for the Christian Churches? First, the Messianic Jewish movement presents the Churches for the first time since the fourth century with a corporate Jewish expression of faith in Jesus Christ, or, as they would say, in Yeshua ha Mashiach. This encounter raises the question for Christians of what happened to the original *ecclesia ex Judaeis* and why it disappeared from history. This question prompts many more questions. For example, what were the consequences for the Church of the disappearance of its explicitly Jewish component? Consequences for doctrine, for worship, for practice. Theological consequences for ecclesiology, for eschatology, for ethics? Second, the Messianic Jewish movement arose at a time when the ecumenical movement was becoming established and the Catholic Church had finally joined in. When Pope John

XXIII announced the calling of a Church Council in 1959, he quickly indicated that ecumenism had to be on the agenda. I was a student at that time, very interested in ecumenism and totally ignorant about Israel. But I remember reading books and articles that made very clear that Christian unity could not be restored without the Jewish component, that the Jewish people belong within the ecumenical issue as God's covenant people in a way that is not true of other non-Christian religions. In particular I remember two chapters in a massive book by a French Canadian Dominican theologian, Bernard Lambert, on Israel as belonging to and as essential for the ecumenical quest.¹

The first assembly of the World Council of Churches had been held in Amsterdam in 1948. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, it had devoted real attention to the Jewish people. More attention was given to the issue of proclaiming the Gospel to the Jewish people than to the importance of Jewish believers in Jesus for the unity of the Church. But by the time of the second WCC assembly in 1954, opposition to evangelizing the Jews caused the question of Israel and the Church to be taken off the agenda. The sin of anti-Semitism was on the agenda, Jewish believers definitely not. In the Catholic Church, the conciliar declaration *Nostra Aetate* (1965) for the first time gave teaching on the Jewish people, mentioning that the first covenant had not been revoked. But here too the relevance of Israel to Christian unity, present in the first draft submitted to the Council, was omitted, though the origins of the Church in Israel were clearly affirmed. Since then, the development of dialogue with the Jewish community and the needs of sensitivity to their long history of suffering through Catholic proselytism have kept the Israel and Church unity issue off the official agenda. I have come to see that this period of establishing trust once again between church leadership and the Jewish community was the first priority along with an honouring of the Jewish tradition and heritage. After the centuries of oppression, persecution, and contempt, the longest suffering of any community through the ages, from the side of the Catholic Church the first priority has been confession of sin and repentance for this history. But the essential need of the Jewish witness to Jesus for the unity of the Church cannot be permanently avoided; the ecumenical venture cannot succeed without it.

This initiative, Toward Jerusalem Council Two, is focused on this question - the need for reconciliation between Jew and Gentile within the body of Christ. It reminds us that the original model for unity in the New Testament was the union between Jew and Gentile, realized through the cross that destroyed their hostility (Eph. 2: 16). This model was in effect replaced in the fourth century by the model of the Roman Empire, with the idea that the unity of the Church and the unity of the Empire were tightly bound together. So when Pope Leo III consecrated Charlemagne as Emperor of the West in the year 800, the Eastern Church in Byzantium saw this act as dividing the Church. Incidentally, this point makes the dismantling of remains of the imperial papacy by Bishop Francis of Rome very significant for Christian unity.

The existence of the Messianic Jews creates a new situation between divided Christian communities. I discovered this when I as a Roman Catholic was with Protestant Christians in meeting Messianic Jews. The presence of the Messianic Jews relativizes Catholic - Protestant differences. I realized that when Catholics and Protestants meet, we still have somewhere inside us the thought that when all is said and done we are right (for the Catholic, we are the original Church; and for the Protestant, we are the biblical believers) and in the end the other has to adjust to this fact. But in the presence of the Messianic

¹ In the French original, *Le Problème Oecuménique* (2 vols). In English, one volume entitled *Ecumenism*.

Jew, both Catholic and Protestant have to recognize that the Jewish believers came first. The original Church was the Jewish Church; to be biblical believers was to be Jewish readers of the Jewish Scriptures.

All Christians in some form acknowledge that renewal of the Church requires a return to the Scriptures, a return to the sources. Here the Messianic Jews remind all Christians that these origins and sources are Jewish. We forget that in effect the New Testament is also Jewish literature; the only Gentile author was Luke, who may well have been a God-fearer. This means that church renewal requires going back to the sources and interpreting them first in their original Jewish context. An element of this has been going on in biblical studies for some time. For example, the Reformation conflicts over the Lord's supper or eucharist - memorial or sacrifice? - have been largely overcome by Christian scholars rediscovering the Jewish concept and practice of memorial, made most clear in the liturgy of pesach when the people of Israel annually relive the exodus from Egypt.

Another Jewish and biblical concept is that of the representative person, who embodies in him/herself the whole people. This is true of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David and the suffering servant of Isaiah 42 - 53. But it above all true of Jesus. So the leading Messianic Jewish theologian, Mark Kinzer, writes about "Jesus-Israel," understanding how Jesus totally identified himself with his people and is in the strongest sense the embodiment of Israel, the Israel that the Father has sought. This concept is extremely important for Christian Christologies to recover, as it is the deepest refutation of and protection against all replacement thinking based on Israel's rejection of Jesus. Jesus is himself Israel's acceptance of God's calling to be the faithful first-born Son. We as Gentile Christians can only really hear from Jewish believers this key element in the biblical revelation. It is also a key concept for a deeper understanding of redemption/salvation. It can rescue Christian theology from legalistic understandings of the atonement: that God required an obedient act of infinite value to outweigh the cumulative weight of human sin. In these inadequate views, Jesus is presented as doing something for us - from outside, so to speak. The all-perfect all-holy Son of God offers up this sublime sacrifice of infinite value without any identification - first with Israel, and then through Israel with all peoples. But Jesus identified himself so totally that he could submit to a baptism of repentance, though he was without sin. So Paul could say, "He became sin for us who knew no sin." (2 Cor. 5: 20). This same concept is of the corporate person also important in relation to Miriam/Mary, who embodies in herself the calling of Israel to bring the Messiah into the world.

One of the areas where the encounter with the Messianic Jews quickly shows major differences of approach concerns the second coming of the Lord. First, Christians are struck by the prominence of this article of faith in the life of the Messianic Jews. It is a key doctrine, whereas for many Christians it is a kind of tack-on doctrine, found at the end of the Creed. So the Messianic Jews almost universally understand the return of the Jews to the land of Israel, the rise of the Messianic Jewish movement, and the soon coming of the Lord Jesus in glory as all inter-connected. The first two are signs of the imminence of the third. The cultivation of the land, the building up of Jerusalem, these all form part of preparing for the coming of the Messiah-King to his people and to his city. As Christians encountering Jewish believers in Jesus, we discover how the Jews are the bearers of the Messianic promises from of old. It quickly challenges Christian ideas that all the promises concerning the Messiah were fulfilled at his first coming. This question more than any other perhaps begins to reveal how great the challenges of a restored Jewish faith in Jesus are to established Christian thinking.

Worship and Theology?

Up to this point, I have been speaking about the fact, the existence, of the Messianic Jewish movement as raising key challenges for all the Christian churches. How important is Messianic Jewish worship for the Churches? How important is Messianic Jewish theology for the Churches and the quest for unity? Here it is necessary to say that there is a huge variety in Messianic Jewish worship and in Messianic Jewish theology. I see a parallel here with the Pentecostal movement as another current of spiritual revival. At the beginnings, Pentecostals did not have theologians - they were mostly people with little education, but filled with the fire of the Holy Spirit. They had a witness, but not a theology. As the Pentecostals organized themselves into new denominations, they needed to formulate their distinctive beliefs. So they took Evangelical teaching and added a couple of items about baptism in the Spirit and healing. The Pentecostals tended to accept the pre-millennial dispensationalism of the Scofield Bible even though this system is "cessationist," that is it denies the possibility of miracles, the supernatural, and charisms of the Spirit after the apostolic age. By the third generation, there began to be some genuine Pentecostal scholarship, and by the fourth generation, some articulate expressions of Pentecostal theology - in which a major element concerns insisting on their distinctiveness from Evangelicalism. The Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit is not a tack-on doctrine. In a rather similar way, though the Jews converted to Jesus were often very intelligent, and the Messianic movement is now only in its third generation, the Messianic Jews adopted Evangelical doctrine as a framework for their teaching. This is very obvious from the statements of faith of groups like the Messianic Jewish Alliance. As with the Pentecostals, the fittingness of Evangelical theological patterns for Messianic Jewish theology begins to be questioned. For example, the Evangelical opposition to liturgy and their suspicion of tradition do not accord well with Jewish patterns, since Judaism is a liturgical faith (the Lord told them how to worship, when to worship, what to do in worship, etc) and for Judaism continuity in an historical faith going back to Moses and Abraham is an essential part of their identity as a people. So, in fact, one major difference between Messianic Jews and Evangelical Christians is that whereas Evangelicals are the "I found It" or "I found Him" Christians, the Messianics are people very obviously searching - yes, we have found the Messiah, but we are seeking from the Lord how to follow and serve him as Jewish disciples.

So how much can Christians learn from Messianic Jewish theology? Let me share something of the experience in the Roman Catholic - Messianic Jewish dialogue which began in the year 2000! When we started, there were 5 Messianic Jews from Israel, and 2 from the USA (in fact the opposite proportion to the beginnings of TJCII). After a year or two of exploration, we chose topics on which to have Messianic and Catholic presentations. But this presented difficulties for the Messianic Jews. They could not agree on someone to present a Messianic position. So for a few years, we had to have 2 Messianic presentations for each one Catholic presentation (perhaps this was a form of historical compensation!): the two Messianic presentations represented the opposite sides of a major issue in the Messianic movement, the place of the Torah in the life of a Jewish disciple of Yeshua. On the one side the view represented by Messianics from the USA (where theological education among Messianics is more developed) of observing the Torah fully except where it is manifestly incompatible with New Testament faith; on the other side, the view represented by most of the Israelis, that there is no more legal obligation of Torah after the death of Jesus on the cross. Along with this major difference another big contrast was immediately evident: in their attitudes to rabbinic Judaism, to the Mishnah and the Talmud, for example. The Torah-observant or Torah-honoring Messianics held rabbinic Judaism in high respect, the Torah-replaced-by-Jesus position having little time for or interest in rabbinic studies. In fact, the tensions between the Messianics became so strong that the Catholics had a meeting to discuss this problem, and I was deputed to go to the

Messianic team and politely invite them to get their act together. In fact, the Messianic team had been gathered by Catholic invitation - probably the only way to get this wide representation of positions within the same team. So I said to them: "The Catholic Church isn't interested in knowing about one section of the Messianic movement. If one purpose of the dialogue is to make the Catholic Church better informed about the Messianic movement and what it is, it is important that your team is representative and covers the main positions found among Messianic Jews. Whether you like it or not, you are all Messianic Jews brought together by your faith in Yeshua. You need to accept that, so that we can move forward." The Messianic team then decided to gather a day earlier the following year, and have a day of prayer together before meeting with the Catholic team. They did this, and the difference the following year was amazing. The atmosphere had totally changed. I think that one thing that happened was that previously some Messianics doubted whether some other members of their team were genuine believers; but that the praying together convinced them that they were.

After about seven years of dialogue, we came to the point where for the first time one paper could be presented on behalf of the whole Messianic team. The leading Messianic theologian, Mark Kinzer, has been the basic formulator of these Messianic papers. I think it has been possible for the Israelis who had begun as opponents of Mark to accept his papers, because Mark showed that Jesus is at the centre, also of the Torah-observant Messianic position. Kinzer has developed the idea of Jesus as Israel in person, as personified Israel, as totally identified with Israel. So instead of Jesus-replacing-Torah, we have Jesus as Torah embodied, as Israel embodied.

So can Christians learn from Messianic Jewish theology? Yes, as the Messianic Jews begin to produce a theology that is genuinely Jewish arising from the light of the Holy Spirit upon their life as Jewish disciples of Yeshua. But this theology is still in a rather early stage. At present there is a vast amount of Messianic Jewish literature that is more popular, small booklets and pamphlets, books of testimony and apologetics. Much of this is of mixed quality. In my opinion, Christians need to recognize the whole movement as a work of God in our day, without making the mistake of thinking that everything Messianic Jewish is wonderful! Some is, some is not! A series of studies on Messianic Jewish exegesis of the New Testament is being prepared in the United States, and Richard Harvey from England is editing a new series on Messianic Jewish theology. There is an excellent book *Introduction to Messianic Judaism* edited by David Rudolph and Joel Willitts,² though it presents North American Messianic Judaism as though it is the whole movement.

We should be aware too of the growing interest in the New Testament and the person of Yeshua of Jewish scholars who do not accept him as Messiah. A remarkable example is the *Jewish Annotated New Testament*, published about 3 or 4 years ago in the USA, edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford University Press). Half this volume is a commentary on each of the books of the New Testament, the other half are articles concerning Jewish aspects of the New Testament and issues between Israel and the Church. There are individual studies like that of Daniel Boyarin in a book entitled *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ*,³ in which he situates Christianity's radical departures from Judaism within Jewish traditions and struggles. Boyarin refutes the oft-cited Jewish argument that the idea of a Messiah who is more than human and belongs to the divine realm is totally foreign to the Jewish tradition. These studies may still be more important at this time than most of the studies by Messianic Jews.

² Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013.

³ New York, NY: The New Press, 2012.

It is very interesting to me that the two Messianic Jewish teachers for whom I have the greatest admiration are Mark Kinzer and Benjamin Berger, who are on the opposite ends of the Messianic spectrum: Torah-observant versus Torah abolished; Rabbinic tradition treated as a source for Messianic theology versus rabbinic tradition ignored as irrelevant. Is this illogical? Maybe. But Kinzer is a real scholar and is undoubtedly Jewish. He challenges our Gentile theology. Berger is not a scholar, but a prophetic man of prayer. He is thoroughly Jewish in his prophetic character and through being prophetic in Jerusalem. It is no coincidence that the leading Messianic theologian comes from the diaspora, and a leading prophetic voice from Eretz Israel.

This last point shows is another reason why the Messianic Jews are important for the Christian Churches: they confront us with the prophetic. In the Christian world, the prophetic is either consigned to the last, or if extended to the present refers to bold voices speaking out against social injustice. I am not saying there is nothing prophetic about such voices, but they generally lack the other dimensions of prophecy in the Scriptures that are preparing the people of Israel for the coming Messianic kingdom, and that in the New Testament refer to the “new Israel,” not old Israel replaced by the (Gentile) Church, but Israel renewed in Messiah and opened up to the nations, to become part of the commonwealth of Israel. “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the Household of God.” (Eph. 2: 19). The Messianic Jews in Israel confront the Churches with the prophetic word of the Lord that draws deeply on the prophetic tradition in the Scriptures as it addresses contemporary reality in the light of Israel’s eschatological faith.

Benjamin Berger and his brother Reuven have in their garden of their house at Ein Kerem a series of ceramic plaques that tell the story of Joseph from the book of Genesis. But each plaque shows how Joseph is a type of Jesus, so each plaque includes a passage from Genesis and a passage from the Gospels. This is not just typology in the sense of the Church Fathers, but prophetic in that it is seeing a fulfilment in the present. For example, Joseph only reveals himself to his brothers at their second occasion - and it is totally the choice of Joseph at which moment this revelation takes place. This is speaking of the moment when Jesus will reveal himself to Israel at the second encounter. The Messianic Jews thus remind the Churches that the coming of Jesus in glory is the hope of Israel that becomes the hope of the Church. It is not a marginal coda for Christian theology but that which gives shape to the whole.