

The Catholic Church and the Messianic Jews

I: How Should We Respond?

In this first talk, I want to address the question “How should we respond?” when today we are confronted by the existence of the Messianic Jews. There are two dimensions to this question: How should we respond as Christians? And how should we respond as Catholic Christians? For the rise of the Messianic Jewish movement in our day is a profound challenge to all Christians, and of course in a particular way to the Catholic Church.

The first question has to be: Does this come from God? Is this a work of the Holy Spirit? The first questions are not primarily theological - about the doctrine or the theology of the Messianic Jews – but they concern **discernment**. Now of course theological and doctrinal issues play a role in discernment: “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God.” (1 John 4: 2 – 3); “no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit.” (1 Cor. 12: 3).

I am speaking here about a discernment concerning the overall phenomenon: the reappearance of a distinctively Jewish manifestation of faith in Yeshua (Jesus), the Messiah of Israel. The question is not whether bizarre and heterodox beliefs can be found somewhere among people calling themselves Messianic Jews, but about the character of the whole movement.

Let me begin from my own experience. As I was already teaching theology when I came into the experience of the Lord in the charismatic renewal, I soon became a student and researcher on the whole charismatic phenomenon. In 1977, a huge charismatic conference was held in Kansas City in the USA, involving charismatic Christians from all kinds of church background. The conference structure became a model for such gatherings: in the mornings, people met in their own

church or denominational groupings; in the afternoons there were workshops by speakers from all traditions, and you could choose which you wanted to hear; and in the evenings everyone came together for a mass meeting in the sports stadium. The first time I think I heard of Messianic Jews was in reports on the Kansas City conference: one of the groups that met each morning was Messianic Jewish. This alerted me to the fact that within the charismatic movement, there were Jews coming to faith in Jesus and maintaining a Jewish identity, who were also receiving the gifts of the Holy Spirit. At Kansas City, they were being accepted as authentic believers in Jesus, who professed the basic faith of Old and New Testaments.

In 1989, I had the opportunity to receive sets of printed teachings of a French Reformed pastor, Louis Dalli re, who had founded a dispersed community, known as the Union de Pri re, formed to pray for four subjects: revival and conversion; the illumination of Israel; the organic unity of Christians; and the coming of the Lord with the resurrection of the dead. Dalli re emphasised that Israel belonged to the “mystery” that is the Father’s plan, hidden for long ages and then revealed in Christ. He understood clearly before 1948 or 1967 that in the final phase of the Church, the Jews would enter into their rightful place¹.

In 1990, I gave some workshops at a prophetic summer school in Wales organised by new (independent) charismatic churches. It was here that I first formulated a teaching on the four surprises of the Holy Spirit, that later became chapters 2 and 3 of my book *The Glory and the Shame*. Here my prayerful reflection on the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the 20th century led me to see a series of 4 surprises of the Spirit, first in the 20th century and then in the 1st. The 20th century surprises were: (1) the Pentecostal movement; (2) the

¹ Dalli re spoke of three stages in the mystery of the Church: first, the laying of the Jewish foundation, in which “Jesus himself, followed by Peter, was the apostle of the Jewish remnant that was so precious in the eyes of the Almighty”; second, the time of the Gentiles, during which Jews would only be converted one by one into the Church of the nations; third, at the end in the time of “l’Eglise du Retour” [the Church of the Return] when the mass of the Jewish people will be reconciled and brought into the Church.

charismatic movement in the historic Protestant churches; (3) the charismatic renewal in the Roman Catholic Church; (4) the Messianic Jews. I searched for a parallel in history – of the same blessing being poured out in sequence in very different and unexpected contexts. The only comparison I found was in the Acts of the Apostles: (1) Pentecost – all Jews (Acts 2); (2) the Samaritans (Acts 8); (3) the Gentiles with connection to the synagogue, the so-called “God-fearers” (Acts 10); and (4) the complete pagans in Antioch (Acts 11: 19 – 26). I received light on two important things from these sequences: (1) in our day, God is moving back through history to the original foundations; (2) the sequence in the 20th century is the reverse of that in the 1st. In the first century, the work of the Spirit took the Church out from Jerusalem, through Judea and Samaria, to the ends of the earth (Acts 1: 8). In the twentieth century, the Spirit is bringing the Church from the ends of the earth (Azusa Street, Los Angeles?) back through the historic roots in the Protestant and then the Catholic churches to the origins among the Jews. In this way, I realised that we have to see the appearance of the Messianic Jewish movement as a work of the Holy Spirit that is at the heart of God’s prophetic purpose. I knew less at that time about the mix of “charismatics” and “non-charismatics” in the Messianic movement, but my wider reading and contacts confirm the conviction that the dynamism of this new movement came particularly from its charismatic component.

From 1983 until 1996, I lived in Gaithersburg, Maryland. I was aware that also living in Gaithersburg was Dr Daniel Juster, pastor of Beth Messiah, the major Messianic congregation in the Washington, D. C. area. But I did not meet Dan Juster until about 1994. That was my first meeting with a Messianic Jew. The first Messianic worship I took part in was at Beth Messiah, which is also charismatic. It was perfectly clear to me that they were orthodox believers in New Testament revelation. The different aspect that struck me was this: they began from the Old Testament and then spoke of Jesus – as Jewish Messiah, as fulfilment, as Saviour of Jew and Gentile. There was a taking of the Old Testament seriously, which contrasted with much Christian usage, which

picks bits out of the Old Testament to illustrate a message which in its best expressions really begins from and ends with the New Testament. Already here I was sensing how challenging the Messianic Jews are to us Christians. When I met Dan Juster, I gave him a copy of *The Glory and the Shame*, just published.

Dan was very excited about what I had written. A year later, Marty Waldman, another Messianic Jewish leader in the USA, had the vision for a second Council of Jerusalem that would reconcile the Jewish and the Gentile believers in Jesus Christ. When they were seeking seven Gentile leaders to join seven Messianic leaders, Dan said they should invite me to join – because of *The Glory and the Shame*. I attended my first TJCII committee meeting in Dallas in September, 1996, the week before I returned to England after 20 years in the USA.

On the TJCII committee, there were then 7 Messianic brothers, 5 from the USA and 2 from Israel. At that first meeting, I had an important spiritual experience. I had an experience of being “ingrafted” into Israel. I understood that Paul’s image of ingrafting in Romans 11 is not just an abstract idea, but that ingrafting takes place at a particular point: one branch is grafted in at this point of the tree, and another at another point. I knew that I was connected to these Jewish brothers, and to one in particular. This of course gave me a new sense of the Jesus-believing Jews as forming the natural olive tree.

In February 1997, I made my first-ever visit to Israel, which was when I first met Benjamin Berger and his brother, Reuven. Visiting Israel raised the whole question of the land in God’s purposes. If God has not rejected the Jewish people, and the promises to Israel still stand, then what about the promises concerning the land? As a result of that visit, I joined Benjamin, Reuven, and Christa Behr in the team leading an annual Week of Prayer and Fasting, near Rome in 1997, and then in Israel approaching Jerusalem from 1998 to 2000. I knew that my relationship to Benjamin and Reuven was important, that their were in some way my connection to

Jerusalem. So the Lord was alerting me to the importance of Israel and of Jerusalem.

Particularly through TJCII, the Lord opened the doors to high-level contacts in the Catholic Church in connection with the Messianic Jews. In May 1997, I first met Archbishop (now Cardinal) Schönborn of Vienna with 3 Messianic brothers; in September 1998 I met Cardinal Ratzinger with 5 Messianic brothers, and in October 2002 Cardinal Lustiger in Paris with 4 Messianic brothers. Before the first two meetings, a contact person had said to me, Be ready to answer a question about apostolic succession – i.e. about the Messianic Jews forming independent networks of congregations and ministries, without any relationship to the historic episcopate. We might say, an obvious Catholic question. In fact, none of these Cardinals asked any question about apostolic succession. At the first two meetings, all the Messianic brothers gave a personal witness: their Jewish background, how they became believers in Yeshua, their ministry now. What I saw was that the witnesses convinced the Cardinals of the authenticity of their call. There was a recognition that the Lord was doing something extraordinary, that has eschatological meaning.

This brings me back to my first remarks. The first task is discernment. Is this from God? The three Cardinals concerned are all very knowledgeable men, familiar with the history of the Church, knowing the story of Christian origins. Such men quickly see that the rise of the Messianic Jewish movement is something remarkable. Though not huge in numbers, it has an immense significance in the Lord's purposes.

The witnesses make clear that God is at work. Many Jews have come to faith in Yeshua, not by Gentile evangelism, but by personal revelation of the Lord or by the Holy Spirit just opening up the New Testament to reveal the Messiah of Israel. The witnesses also show that this is truly a movement: the Messianic Jews are seeking; they have found, but they are still seeking. They are seeking what it means to be a Jew, a son or daughter of the promise given to Abraham, and to believe in

Yeshua as the Messiah. What this means in practice is not in every respect immediately clear. Such a thing – a corporate Jewish expression of faith in Yeshua – had not existed for at least sixteen centuries, indeed it had been forbidden. So we should not be surprised that there are differing views as to what it means to be a Jesus-believing Jew, nor that the movement is in development, in discovery. This is one reason why it is better to speak of the Messianic Jewish movement than of Messianic Judaism, because an –ism suggests something more fixed.

The fact that the Messianic Jewish phenomenon is a movement can make it a bigger temptation for Gentile Christians to want to influence its direction and development. Especially, when we Gentiles become excited about such a work of the Holy Spirit, we can want them to be orthodox Christians like us, evangelical Christians who understand the Bible like us, believers who share our enthusiasms. I believe we Gentiles have to deny ourselves here, and allow the Holy Spirit to show the Messianic Jews what they are supposed to become in the Lord's purposes. All our Gentile Christian expressions have been affected in some way by our distancing from the Jewish roots, however much we may love the Bible, however much we may insist on the Jewish roots of much Catholic liturgy. The contact with the Messianic Jews is going to challenge the wrong distorting forms of "Gentilisation" that occurred over the centuries.

Here I just want to say how we can help the Messianic Jews. They need us, and we need them. This is because the Church that the Holy Spirit formed is the union of Jew and Gentile in Messiah through his blood. The first need is love and acceptance, leading to fellowship. Love and acceptance does not mean 100% approval of everything they teach and do. It means recognising that they are a wonderful creation of the Holy Spirit, a work of divine restoration, the elder brother to be honoured and cherished. We Gentiles must be humble in our approach. This should be true of all Christian approaches to others, but it is especially important with the Jews, because they have experienced so much of the arrogance of the

Gentiles, and particularly the arrogance of the Church of the nations. That is another reason why it is wrong for us to begin by demanding a list of doctrines, and then setting ourselves up as the judges who decide whether they qualify for our friendship.

In fact, the Messianic Jews have had strongest relations with Evangelical Protestants. As Catholics, when we listen to Messianic Jews, we will probably think that they are very like Evangelical Christians. Sometimes we may think some Messianic Jews are like Baptists who wear a kippah and a tallith. We need to see these links first in their positive fruits. The Evangelicals were the first Christians in modern times to take Old Testament prophecy about the future of Israel, the land and Jerusalem seriously. The Evangelicals have always emphasised the priority of evangelism and the need for personal conversion. Many Evangelicals invested a lot of time, energy and money in reaching the Jews with the Gospel. Also, the Evangelicals have made the Scriptures and the person of Jesus the absolute centre of their faith, both of which have resonated with Jews coming to faith in Yeshua. It is natural then that the Messianic Jews have closer links with the Evangelicals than with any other Christians. The evangelistic dynamism of the Messianic Jewish movement owes much to the Evangelicals.

However, Evangelical Christianity, notwithstanding its love for the Bible, has also been characterised by Gentile ways of thinking that are not in accordance with the Jewish heritage. (The same is true for all Gentile expressions of Christian faith.) An obvious example is its individualism. The process of discovery of what it means to be Jewish and Messianic at the same time will involve a process of purification: being open to all that is good and authentic from the Gentile expressions, but sifting them in the light of the Jewish and biblical heritage. We can help the Messianic Jews here, not by telling them to copy us, but by encouraging them, and by wanting ourselves the same purification.

Authentic renewal for all of us means a return to the Jewish roots. Last February, at a TJCII consultation in Vienna, Cardinal Schönborn gave a talk commenting on three paragraphs in the Catechism of the Catholic Church that treat of the Jewish people. One of his most interesting remarks was when he quoted a sentence from para. 528 on the Epiphany and the coming of the magi. “Their coming means that pagans can discover Jesus and worship him as Son of God and Saviour of the world only by turning towards the Jews and receiving from them the messianic promise as contained in the Old Testament.” The Cardinal pointed out that this is not just a statement about the time of the infancy of Jesus, but remains true today. But here we are getting on to the challenge that the Messianic Jews pose to us Christians, which is the subject of my second talk.