

Israel and the Church

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Talk 2: The Present: The Restoration of a Jewish Expression of Church

Today we move to the present time and to the remarkable fact of a restoration of a Jewish expression of the Church. Though there have been many forerunners preparing the way, as the TJCII power point presentation shows, it is really only in the last 40 years that we can speak of a movement for restoring the Jewish Church. As a movement or current of restoration, we point in particular to the Messianic Jewish movement. I do not think that the Messianic movement is the totality of the Jewish church being restored, although it is its most visible, most vocal and most prophetic part. It is the Messianic Jewish movement in particular that confronts all the Christian churches with this prophetic work of restoration, and challenges us all to a profound rethinking and renewal.

The initiative **Toward Jerusalem Council Two**, of which I have been privileged to be part since its beginning in 1996, is precisely a vision for the restoration of right relationship and for a full reconciliation between the Jewish and Gentile parts of the Church of Jesus Christ. This initiative stems from the vision of a Messianic leader in the United States, Marty Waldman of Dallas, Texas, who was given the conviction that one day there will be a second Council of Jerusalem. Whereas the first Council, described in Acts 15, was a gathering of Jewish believers in Yeshua, who decided on the conditions for Gentile admission to the Church, so in Marty Waldman's vision, a second Council would bring about a restoration of the proper place of the Jewish believers in the body of Christ-Messiah. So in talking this morning about the present day situation of Jewish and Gentile believers in Yeshua, I am largely describing the convictions and the work of the TJCII leaders.

The first task of TJCII in relation to the Christian churches is to make known the Messianic Jewish movement. Many church leaders are either totally unaware of the Messianic Jews, or they have a minimal awareness complicated by serious misunderstandings. That is why in TJCII the first two booklets we produced are on TJCII and on the Messianic Jewish movement. Both are available in German. Since our first task is to make known the Messianic movement, it is important that we present the reality and not just some people's ideal! So the booklet on the Messianic movement covers the points of tension and disagreement as well as the variety within the movement, as well as what is not disputed. In Germany the Messianic movement first became known largely through the ministry of Benjamin Berger from Jerusalem, supported by Christa Behr. More recently, the influx of Jewish believers from the former Soviet Union has led to a growing Messianic movement in Germany, led by Beit Sar Shalom congregation in Berlin, that presents a rather different face from the assembly of the Berger brothers in Jerusalem.

After an initial presentation of the Messianic Jewish movement, the task of TJCII focuses on three key issues, which I will now address:

1. The distinctiveness of Jew and Gentile.
2. The first place of the Jew, and Gentile inclusion through ingrafting.
3. The unity of the two in one body.

There is a natural progression from the recognition of distinctiveness to the right order between the two, and finally their unity within this right order. In this presentation, the concept of the “one new man”, uniting Jew and Gentile in the one body of Messiah, is central. Each of these three points is illuminated by the teaching of Romans and Ephesians, which are complementary.

1. The distinctiveness of Jew and Gentile

The Messianic Jewish movement is above all a congregational movement, seeking to bring into being local Jewish expressions of the body of Messiah. While there are many Jewish believers within the Christian churches – of whom an increasing number are sensing the importance of their Jewish roots – it is the distinctive witness of Jewish congregations that challenges the Churches concerning the Holy Spirit’s work of restoration. The *raison d’être* of Messianic Jewish congregations is then the legitimacy and the importance/necessity of a distinctive Jewish witness to faith in Yeshua. The first objection that Messianic Jews have to answer is “Why be separate? Are you not just rebuilding the wall of separation that Jesus pulled down?”

The resurrection of a Jewish expression of the Church requires that there is something distinctively Jewish about the faith expression, personally and corporately, of the Jewish believers in Jesus (Yeshua). The suppression of this Jewish expression, effectively pursued from the 4th century, following earlier marginalization, required the total assimilation of Jewish believers in what had become a Church of the Gentiles. This assimilation was effected by a requirement at baptism to renounce Jewish identity and to cease all forms of Jewish practice. The argument, sometimes advanced, that Jesus has made us all one, and abolished the distinctions, is in practice an argument in favour of total Jewish assimilation, for the resulting unity into which all are subsumed is a Gentile unity. The best model for understanding the two who become one without losing their distinctiveness is the union of man and woman in marriage. When Paul writes of marriage “This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church” (Eph. 5: 32), this cannot be separated from the teaching in Ephesians 3 on the mystery of Christ as the inclusion in the body of Christ of the Gentiles with the Jewish believers.

The restoration of the New Testament pattern requires a distinctive Jewish witness to Yeshua, both personally and corporately. But this is easier to affirm than to realize in the flesh. Because there has been no corporate Jewish witness to Yeshua for so many centuries, there is no existing model for Jewish believers in Jesus to adopt. Of course all Messianic Jews say that they want to restore the New Testament model. But here

one encounters the first difficulties. First, there is no agreement on one New Testament model. And, secondly, it would seem that there were different patterns of being Jewish disciples in the New Testament, with at least three models: that of James, that of Peter and that of Paul.

So it is not surprising that in the emerging Messianic Jewish movement, there is great variety in theology and in practice. It is not surprising that questions long regarded as settled, but that agitated the church in New Testament times, now resurface. Of these the most difficult is the ongoing role of the Torah for Messianic Jews, on which there is a range of positions, exegetical and practical.

But I think some principles can be established from the start. First, that this restoration can only be the work of the Holy Spirit. **What it means to be a Jewish disciple of Yeshua must be sought from the Holy Spirit.** Secondly, that we Gentile Christians cannot tell the Jewish believers what form their Jewish witness to Yeshua should take. The Jewish believers in Yeshua have to discover themselves what it means to be a Jewish disciple by allowing the light of the Holy Spirit to shine on the Holy Scriptures paying particular attention to the Jewish heritage of exegesis and of liturgy. In this process, a Jewish evaluation of Gentile exegesis, theology and practice has its place, but it cannot be the starting point. Thirdly, that the Messianic Jews have to listen to each other and reject the temptation to project their own form of Messianic Judaism as the only valid expression.

2. The first place of the Jew, and Gentile inclusion through ingrafting

Once the rightness of a Jewish expression of faith in Yeshua is acknowledged, the next question concerns how the Christian Churches should relate to these Jewish congregations. Here there is a big challenge. For the New Testament teaching is not just that Jews and Gentiles are made one, but that the Gentiles are grafted into the cultivated olive tree of Israel and become “co-heirs”. In other words, the Jews have a priority that can be expressed in various ways:

- to the Jew first: “first for the Jew, then for the Gentile” (Rom. 1: 16);
- the Jew as the elder brother;
- Israel is the root: “You do not support the root, but the root supports you” (Rom. 11: 18).

So the first responsibility of the Gentile believers towards the Jewish believers is to honour them, and to give them the place that is their due. Through the centuries, we have dishonoured the Jews, and held them in contempt. So an appropriate honouring will be accompanied by a confession of our failure to honour them in the past. Is there a passage in the New Testament that directly addresses the question how we Gentiles are to treat the Jewish believers in Jesus? I believe there is, and it is in the story of the judgment of the nations in Matthew 25. Cardinal Lustiger points out in his book *La Promesse* that the judgment of Israel has already been spoken about in

Matthew 19: 28. Here the nations are judged according to how they have treated “the least of my brothers” [*eph’hoson epoiesate heni touton ton adelphon mou ton elachiston, emoi epoiesate*] (Matt. 25: 40)¹. Here it is highly likely that by “my brothers” Jesus is referring to the Jewish people. In the Scriptures, the term “brothers” is never used to describe humankind in general; it refers to sharers in the divine covenants, first in Israel and then in the body of Christ. This is supported by the fact that this is a description of the judgment of the nations. It fits with the severe judgments pronounced against Esau-Edom for actions against his brother Jacob.² This interpretation does not exclude an application to Gentile disciples, but suggests that the first and original meaning referred to the treatment of the Jewish believers.

Just as the Messianic Jews seek from the Lord what it means to be Jewish believers in Yeshua today, with no historical model ready to follow, so we Gentile believers have no model for honouring the Jewish believers and their community of faith. Obviously we know the difference between contempt and honour, between hatred and love. But what does it mean to give the Jews the first place, also within the Church? Here the elder brother does not just mean an older brother, but introduces the biblical theme of the firstborn. Israel is the first-born son. Here there is a connection between Israel as the first-born son, and Jesus as the only-begotten Son of God, who becomes “the first-born from the dead” (Col. 1: 18)³.

We may express the challenge facing the Gentile churches in this way. Just as the Messianic Jews have to learn what it means to be Jewish disciples of Yeshua, so the Gentile Churches have to learn what it means to be grafted into the natural olive tree of believing Israel and what it means to draw our nourishment from this cultivated olive tree. A major difficulty here, even for those Christians sympathetic to the Messianic movement, is that Gentile Christianity is so massive and is dispersed through all the continents of the earth, whereas the Messianic Jewish movement is small, and is largely limited to certain nations (especially Israel, the U.S.A., Canada, the Ukraine, and Russia, but also in Germany, Moldova, Belarus, South Africa, Brazil and Argentina). I think the right perspective here is that we are still in the early stages of a prophetic restoration, and we must trust the Holy Spirit to help us answer these questions as the Messianic movement grows and matures, and as the Churches cast off the shackles of replacement theology.

What does it mean for the Gentile Churches to honour the first place of the Jew? One thing it has to mean is recognition that the root is in Israel, or better the root is Israel embodied in Yeshua. Paul describes what this means in a vivid image: “you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root” (Rom. 11: 17). This requires that we purify ourselves from every legacy of replacement thinking that substituted the Church for Israel. I want to mention here the very helpful distinctions made by an American

¹ In Matt. 10: 42, the “little ones” [*micron*] are “disciples”.

² See Joel 3: 19; Amos 1: 11; Obadiah 10 – 15.

³ See also the phrase “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15: 20).

Methodist scholar, R. Kendall Soulen, who speaks of three different forms of replacement thinking, or in his language three patterns of supersessionism. The first is punitive supersessionism: God rejected Israel because of their sin. The second is economic supersessionism: God rejected Israel because by bringing the Messiah into the world they had fulfilled their calling and have no further role to play. The third, and the most damaging for “the nourishing sap from the olive root” is what Soulen calls structural supersessionism: that is, that when we present our basic vision of Christian faith, there is no mention of Israel. Soulen sees this structural supersessionism already present in the second century in Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyon, who both adopt a model of going from creation and fall to the need for a Saviour and hence straight to the Incarnation and Redemption. In this model, Israel plays no essential role, and the role of the Old Testament is reduced to providing some typological illustrations and some moral examples. To be nourished by the sap from the olive root means to ground all our understanding first in the Old Testament revelation and the covenants with Abraham and Moses.

We can further say that it is not for the Jewish believers to tell the Gentile believers how to relate to them. This restoration is a work of the Holy Spirit, in which the Spirit will reveal to both Jew and Gentile how we are to relate to each other.

3. The unity of the two in one body

The last question to be discussed in relation to the restoration of the church of the circumcision is that of unity. In Ephesians, Paul speaks of Jews and Gentiles becoming “one new man” in Messiah, and being formed into “one body” through the cross. This is not just a vision of two groupings with a great love and respect for each other, but a picture of organic unity in “one body”. In the early stages of the Messianic movement, when the Jewish believers were having to defend their right to form their own assemblies, there were some leaders who did not show any great desire to relate positively to the Gentile Churches. That phase seems to be largely past, though many Messianic Jews have in effect embraced an Evangelical free church doctrine, that is suspicious of the ecumenical movement, dismissive of denominations and institutions, seeing unity in terms of “spiritual” relationships. I remember clearly a conversation I had with Benjamin Berger several years ago, in which he shared his longing for an organic unity among the Messianic Jews, the kind of unity he saw in the New Testament and which he confessed was not yet present in the Messianic movement. First, there has to be a convincing unity among the Messianic Jews for the Churches first to take them seriously and second to be able to honour and receive them as elder brother.

This is one of the points where the Evangelical Christian influences on the Messianic Jews have not been so beneficial. In my view, the free church understanding of unity is **too** voluntaristic, being the free choice of converted believers to associate together. And if you can freely associate together, then you can freely disassociate, which clearly happens on a large scale! The challenge is: how are we formed into one body? It would seem that the Evangelical pattern of free association was historically a

protest against religious uniformity imposed by the combination of Church and state. My main contribution here is to suggest that the answer to this dilemma lies in Israel. All the biblical images of organic unity (vine, olive tree, temple, city) have their roots in the Old Testament. The Church is not a creation *ex nihilo* at the time of Jesus or at Pentecost, but is the Messianic renewal of Israel. The organic unity of the Church is both in continuity with the organic unity of Israel and is its radical transformation through the death of resurrection of Jesus. **The Jewish component holds the key to the healthy integration of organic structure and personal responsibility.**

Here the concept of covenant is central. Covenant is one of the key realities that had no place in structural supersessionism. The key question becomes: what is the relationship of the new covenant in Yeshua to the covenants with Abraham and Moses? The well-known prophecy in Jeremiah 31 speaks of a “new covenant” which the Lord will make “with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” (31: 31). In Romans 9, Paul lists “the covenants” (plural) among the Lord’s gifts to Israel. The most satisfactory account seems to be that the new covenant in the blood of Yeshua is a profound renewal and transformation, but not abolition, of the covenants of the Lord with Israel. The organic unity flows from the divinely-originated covenant.

Maybe the Revelation 21 picture of the Jerusalem on high, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven, can help us here: not by providing an organisational blueprint, but by loosening our imaginations! The image of the city of God is one of structural cohesion: “Jerusalem is built like a city that is closely compacted together.” (Ps. 122: 3). The detail in Revelation 21 that seems of especial importance for the unity of the body is the description of the gates and of the foundations of the walls. “It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. ... The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.” (Rev. 21: 12, 14). This image totally confirms the rooting of the Church in Israel. There are two issues I want to take up from this vision in Revelation 21. The first concerning Jerusalem, and the second concerning the twelve apostles.

First, the restoration of the Jewish church has to be centred on and in Jerusalem. We should see this return to Jerusalem as an end-times restoration, in a way that honours Paul’s description of the setting aside of Israel (and thus also of Jerusalem) as “mystery” (Rom. 11: 25). It was part of God’s plan to save the nations, as Paul insists in Romans 11. The Lord used the unbelief of the chosen people to reach the whole world with the Gospel. When the “times of the Gentiles” are fulfilled, and Jerusalem is no longer trodden under foot by the Gentiles, the promises concerning Israel begin to be fulfilled and Jerusalem becomes again the focal point for all who acknowledge Yeshua as the Messiah and Saviour. But our Churches are not accustomed to thinking in terms of changes that belong to the last part of the “end-times”! Here, we cannot limit ourselves to theological discussions about the patterns of ministry in the Church that have belonged in effect to the “times of the Gentiles”! Our churches have to be ready to recognize the prophetic work of the Holy Spirit in a way that does not fit all the patterns of the past.

Second, the twelve apostles play a key role in the renewed Israel. The organic unity of the Church is expressed in the role of the twelve apostles which is itself founded on the unity of the twelve tribes. But the historic concept of apostolic succession, which is very Jewish, has not been grounded on the Jewishness of the twelve. The charismatic movement, particularly in its non-denominational expressions, has seen a resurgence of ministries claiming to be apostolic. In this view, the restoration of the New Testament church requires the restoration of the Ephesians 4: 11 ministries, where the apostles are listed first. Many see the restoration of apostles as belonging to the Church of the end-times, preparing for the coming of the Lord. In general, the advocates of this apostolic restoration, though they base their arguments on passages from the New Testament, do not refer to the relationship between Jewish and Gentile believers. But a number of Messianic Jews, for example Benjamin and Reuven Berger, believe in the restoration of apostles as part of the restoration of Israel and the return to the land and to Jerusalem. In their view the restored apostles will appear in Jerusalem.

I deeply respect the prophetic gifting of the Berger brothers. I know that I must listen to them. I think that we have to distinguish between the apostolic ministry of the Twelve, to whom we can add Paul, that was foundational for the universal Ekklesia, and wider less foundational forms of apostolic ministry. That there will be apostolic ministries in the last days would appear certain. But I am very hesitant about affirming a restoration of the apostolic ministry of the Twelve, precisely because this belonged to the foundations. There will not be new foundations. What the Scriptures do lead us to expect is the appearance of an Elijah figure in the last days.

Humility in Place of Arrogance

The history of separation and of oppression was a long story of arrogance. It seems that when Paul wrote Romans he already had a premonition of the coming Gentile arrogance towards the Jewish people. Three times in chapter 11, he warns the Gentile believers against arrogance: “do not boast over those branches” which have been cut off (Rom. 11: 18). “Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.” (Rom. 11: 21). “I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited.” (Rom. 11: 25). To fall into the replacement view of the Church over against Israel was precisely not to understand the mystery, and to become arrogant and conceited.

This lesson is of huge importance for the work of restoration. If the damage came through massive pride, the restoration can only occur through a profound humility. It requires a great humility on the part of the Christian Churches to confess their sins against the Jewish people, and especially against the Jewish believers in Yeshua. To confess to anti-Semitism is not easy, but it is not as difficult as confessing that we have not rightly understood the mystery of Christ. For the historic Churches of East and West, the difficulty is confessing that the Great Tradition has failed to grasp a key component of the Church. For the Churches of the Reformation and for the free

churches, the difficulty is confessing that they have not rightly understood the Scriptures.

This process of restoration also requires a great humility from the Messianic Jews. I suspect that this will be every bit as difficult as the repentance of the Churches. The Messianic movement does not always present a face of humility! There are no doubt many reasons for this situation, one being the psychology of formerly oppressed and powerless people when they acquire freedom, influence and power. We must remember that the Messianic movement is not only small, but has continually had to fight for its right to exist, denied by the Jewish community as a whole and by the Churches. This situation has contributed to an aggressive element in the Messianic movement that does not easily adopt a humble posture. There are deep fears among the Jewish people, particularly that they cannot trust non-Jews. It is the fear that when the crunch comes, the Gentiles will abandon them to their fate. In the same way, the Messianic Jews have the fear that when the chips are down, the Churches will stop saying nice things about them and will abandon them. The Messianic Jews are also afraid that the Churches will give in when the rabbis say to the Church leaders: no Jewish-Christian dialogue or friendship if you befriend the Messianic Jews.

Humility for the Messianic Jews will mean being freed from a spirit of accusation against the Churches. Because the existence of a Jewish expression of the Church was denied through replacement thinking, Messianic Jews are often vulnerable to simplistic accounts of Christian history. For example, many if not most Messianic Jews think (wrongly) that Sunday observance among Christians was totally the result of replacement teaching. Less widespread but still not very rare are tendencies to demand of the Gentile churches more than the Jerusalem Council required in Acts 15. It is normal that in a popular revivalist-type movement, scholarship only tends to follow after two or three generations there is much Messianic literature that is not very sound theologically and that contains numerous historical errors. Here we need a humility not to look down on them, but to love, respect and help them in a way that will promote deeper reflection. Because the Messianic Jewish fears and insecurities are the consequence of Gentile arrogance and sin, it is our responsibility as Gentile believers and communities of faith to demonstrate our love for and commitment to the Messianic Jews so that they can truly be healed and freed from these fears. Only then will it be possible for them to let go of their defense-mechanisms and trust the Lord and their Gentile brothers in humility and love.