

ICPE. Allerheiligen, Germany: Thursday November 22, 2007

Talk 3: Jewish Believers in Jesus

A final dimension of the Israel-question is the appearance in our day of a distinctively Jewish expression of faith in Jesus. Of course there have always been Jewish converts in every period of the Church's history. But from at least the 4th century, such Jewish converts were forced to embrace Gentile Christianity, and to renounce their Jewish identity and all Jewish practice. In other words, a Jewish expression of faith in Jesus, which marked the Judeochristian church of the origins, was outlawed. Total assimilation was the only permitted path. This is ironic in view of the amazing generosity of the decisions made by the Jewish apostles and elders concerning the requirements for Gentile converts at the first Jerusalem Council described in Acts 15.

So what is new in modern times are three things:

- Jewish believers in Jesus claiming the right to remain fully Jewish after coming to faith in Jesus; after all, they say, we only want to do what the first generation of disciples did naturally;
- the formation of groupings and congregations of Jewish believers in Jesus so as to live their faith-lives corporately as Jews in a way that is consonant with the New Covenant established in the blood of Jesus;
- the Churches are slowly coming to recognize, first the legitimacy of Jewish congregations, and second, their desirability.

Catholic Developments

There have been several developments over the last 50 years:

- The establishment of the Confraternity of St James the Apostle in Israel in 1956, with permission from Pius XII to have the Liturgy of the Word in Hebrew.
- The beatification (1987) and the canonisation (1998) of Edith Stein, described by John Paul II
- The establishment of the Association of Hebrew Catholics, founded in Israel by a Carmelite, Fr Elias Friedman; St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross has now become one of their patron saints
- The teaching, influence and personal convictions of Cardinal (Aron) Jean-Marie Lustiger, Archbishop of Paris (1981 – 2005), who died in August this year. He always insisted that he was still a Jew. Plaque since placed in Notre Dame "I was born Jewish. I received my paternal grandfather's name, Aron, I became Christian by faith and baptism, and I remained Jewish like the Apostles did." Signed Aron Jean-Marie Cardinal Lustiger.
- The formation in Paris with church approval of an Association Marie, Fille de Sion.

- The appointment in 2003 of Mgr Jean-Baptiste Gourion, OSB, a Jewish convert, as bishop for the Hebrew-speaking Catholics of Israel, as auxiliary bishop to the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, but with an administrative independence. Sadly, Bishop Gourion died in the summer of 2005. No successor has yet been appointed.

The Messianic Jews

Again there have always been some Jewish converts to Protestant forms of Christianity. But they were expected to simply become Christians the same as all other converts, though much was often made of Jewish converts. But during the 19th century, there were two major developments in the Protestant world: (1) the establishment of missions to the Jews; and (2) the formation of a Hebrew Christian Alliance, first in Britain. “Hebrew Christian” was a term used to describe Christians of Jewish origin, for whom their Jewish origin mattered, and who desired some fellowship with fellow Hebrew Christians. But at this point there was no vision for a specifically Jewish expression of faith in Jesus. The establishment of missions to the Jews however heightened the awareness of the distinctiveness of the Jewish people in the plan of God. It was found that Jewish believers in Jesus were the best evangelists for the Jews. And then there was the question of nurture and formation after conversion and baptism. In the USA, where there was a big immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe in the late 1800s, it was found very difficult to integrate Jewish converts into ordinary Gentile congregations. This led the Presbyterian Church to establish some Hebrew Christian congregations for such converts. But it was still a Hebrew Christian rather than a Messianic Jewish vision.

One of the first pioneers of a Messianic Jewish vision, i.e. a vision for a genuinely Jewish corporate expression of faith in Jesus, was Joseph Rabinowicz from Kishinev, Moldova. Converted during a visit to the Holy Land in 1882, Rabinowicz founded a congregation called the “Israelites of the New Covenant”. Rabinowicz formed his own Jewish liturgy, but was unable to use it because the (Czarist) Russian authorities did not recognize him as an ordained minister.

An Episcopalian priest in the USA, Mark Levy, had a Messianic Jewish vision, but was unable to win over the Hebrew Christian Alliance in the USA. However, he did persuade the leadership of the Episcopal Church to endorse this vision!

The establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 had an influence here. The Jewish believers living there at the time of the British Mandate were urged to leave before independence, because of the likelihood of their suppression by a Jewish state. However, among those who remained, the Messianic vision grew, because it was natural in that setting. Also some missions to the Jews, e.g. the Norwegian, saw that there had to be a Jewish Israeli character to the congregations they were serving and planting.

But the development of a Messianic **movement** arose in the USA, largely from the impact of the Jesus movement on many young American Jews in the wake of the 6 Day War in 1967. When many young Jews came to faith in this counter-cultural current, and Christians said, “Now, you will have to join a Church”, they said “Why? We are Jews.” For them, “Church”

meant something alien, their historic oppressors. Much of the leadership of the movement that then developed came from these young Jewish converts of the late 1960s and early 1970s. HCAA becomes MJAA in 1975. A change of vision as well as change of name.

The Messianic Jewish movement contains a lot of variety, with major differences concerning such subjects as (1) understanding of the meaning of Torah for MJs today; (2) attitudes to rabbinic Judaism; (3) use of Jewish patterns of liturgy; (4) political issues in Israel. However, in general it can be said: (1) they believe in the deity and the humanity of Jesus, and in God as Father, the Son and Holy Spirit, though they typically avoid traditional Gentile terminology, like Trinity; (2) that the Messianic Jews have been much influenced in their theology and teaching by Evangelical Christianity, particularly of the pre-millennial dispensationalist kind; (3) almost all observe the Sabbath, and have their main weekly worship on Friday evening or during the day on Saturday; (4) they are strongly evangelistic and a majority are charismatic (in both unlike the Hebrew Catholics); (5) they have a strong eschatological orientation, especially in Israel, believing that their restoration is a sign of the coming end or fulfilment.

Why are the Messianic Jews important? Because they confront the Church with her Jewish origins in a particularly vivid way, in particular the original understanding that the Gentiles were ingrafted into believing Israel, and that the unity of the Church is the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile in one body. They confront the Church(es) with a reality, not just with a theological idea. This means also that they confront us with forms of worship, and particularly with ways of reading and understanding the Bible different from our own. While it is true that often their doctrine is Evangelical, and their exegesis often has Evangelical characteristics, their approach to the Bible is different: e.g. they naturally begin from the Old Testament and from the Torah and then move to a fulfilment in Jesus.

But MJs are very different from Evangelicals in one respect: they are “searchers”. They are less “I found it!”. They are searching for what it means to be and to live as a Jew who believes in Jesus. There are no models for this in Christian tradition. What patterns of worship? How liturgical? How to celebrate the Jewish feasts? How to relate to the rabbinic traditions? Messianic Jewish Halakah? Evangelical eschatology?

Hidden Jesus-Believers in the Synagogue

Besides the Jewish members of Christian churches and the Messianic Jews, there is another category of Jewish believers in Jesus, who continue to live within the synagogal community. There have been examples of this in the past, e.g. Lichtenstein in Hungary. But it is reported that there are a number within the Orthodox community in Israel. The motives for remaining within the synagogue can be varied. It may be the view “I must stay until I am expelled”; or “The Lord has told me to stay and be a silent witness.”

The most fully Jewish, but at a more elementary stage of Jesus development.