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Can A Jew Be A Christian And Still Remain a Jew? By George and Hanna Miley

For some 1,800 years gentiles have grown accustomed to a Church void of her original Jewish expression. This has led to perceiving Christianity as being a gentile phenomenon—an understanding so foundational and pervasive as to be largely subconscious. But in the last 100 years or so this has begun to change.

The emergence and growth of Messianic Judaism in our day is challenging us toward re-symbolization in our way of seeing and understanding “Church”. Re-calibrating our terminology may prove a helpful starting point.

Jew: Defining what it means to be Jewish is problematic. Here are three ways:

- A descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But how do you prove it?
- A follower of Judaism. But many today who self-identify as Jews are atheists.
- Someone whose mother is Jewish. But what makes the mother Jewish?

Yeshua: We call Him “Jesus”. This is His name in English. When Mary called him to dinner she called him Yeshua—his name in Hebrew and Aramaic. Calling Him Yeshua connects us with His Jewishness. The Messianic Jewish movement increasingly calls Him this.

Christian: The word “Christian” is problematic for Jews. Ones calling themselves Christians have propagated and engaged in Anti-Semitism for centuries:

- Since the Church fathers Christians have spoken contemptuously of Jews.
- Christians forced Jews to convert during the Inquisition.
- Christians murdered Jews during the Crusades.
- Christians carried out the Holocaust, or turned a blind eye to it.

Jews typically understand the word “Christian” as being a designation for gentiles. My online dictionary: gentile—a person who is not Jewish, especially a Christian.

Personal note: When Hanna applied for Israeli citizenship in 1966, she was denied because she claimed to be a Christian. The fact that both parents were put to death as Jews in the Holocaust did not come into play.

Messianic Jew or Messianic believer: These are the terms that Jewish followers of Yeshua today are increasingly using to identify themselves. They are intended to establish that they are 1) followers of Yeshua while 2) still remaining Jews.

Church: The word “church” is also problematic for Jews. The church is understood to be a gentile institution that has throughout the centuries persecuted Jews. For

someone born Jewish to join such a community has been seen as a renouncing and betrayal of their Jewish identity.

When the National Socialists (Nazis) came to power in Germany in the 1930s, they made the church, Catholic and Protestant, an instrument of the state and of Nazi policies. Jewish church members, even clergy, were expelled from the church.

Personal note: During the Holocaust Hanna's parents were gassed at the death camp at Chelmno, Poland. Some Jews, awaiting their murder in the forest outside of Chelmno, were held during their last night alive locked inside a church building.

(The history of the Church also contains heroic examples of Christians helping Jews, even at the risk of their own lives. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a very special German example; there are others. There is an area at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem in honor of righteous gentiles who protected Jews during the Holocaust.)

This history can only be cleansed and redeemed by genuine confession and repentance by gentile Christians for centuries of anti-semitism.

Messianic congregation or messianic synagogue: Today some groups of Messianic believers are calling their congregation a "Messianic congregation" or "Messianic synagogue." It is not unusual for their pastor to be called a "rabbi". These followers of Yeshua are seeking to underscore the fact that they have not renounced their Jewish heritage.

Body of Messiah: This terminology, rather than "Body of Christ", helps us connect with the fact that the Jesus movement was originally and essentially a Jewish movement. It was founded by Jews, with a Jewish leader/Messiah, and was shaped by practices rooted in Jewish Scripture and tradition. To this Jewish movement gentiles by the grace of God and of Jewish apostles and elders (Acts 15) began to be welcomed. The Jewish component is the original one. Messianic believers are our elder brothers and sisters in faith founded upon Yeshua.

Replacement Theology: This theology states that the church has replaced Israel as God's chosen people and inheritor of God's covenantal promises. God has rejected Israel because of their unfaithfulness.

This theology is deeply rooted in Church history, including Anglican history. Note, for example, hymns like 539 in our hymnal in the section "The Church's Mission": "O Zion haste "

The Messianic Movement: A Brief Historical Overview

Abraham was called by God to be the father of the people of Israel. The people of Israel were to be a channel for God's blessing to all peoples on earth—gentiles.

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a

blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.” – Genesis 12:1-3

God’s revelation of Himself to mankind is recorded in the Bible—overwhelmingly a Jewish book. It was written almost exclusively by Jews. Gentile Christians have received our faith from our Jewish spiritual forefathers.

Yeshua was born a Jew, raised a Jew, and His spiritual formation took place entirely in a Jewish context:

- He was born in fulfillment of Jewish prophecy.
- He was born in Bethlehem because Joseph was of the house of David.
- Shortly after his birth he was taken to the Temple to fulfill Jewish custom.
- As a young child his life was in danger because he was Jewish.
- His parents took him regularly to the Temple to participate in Jewish worship.
- He was a regular participant in synagogue worship—Psalms, readings, teaching.
- His public ministry was to the house of Israel.
- He chose Jews as His apostles, and entrusted His legacy to them.
- His spiritual life was formed by Jewish Scriptures, especially the Psalms.
- He acknowledged that He was King of the Jews and the Jewish Messiah.

The original Church was a messianic congregation. Those who confessed their faith at Pentecost, and those who joined them as recorded in the first chapters of Acts, were 1) followers of Yeshua, and 2) Jews. – *Acts 2:5*

The apostles continued in Jewish practices. They were Jews! – *Acts 3:1*

- They worshipped at the Temple.
- They attended the synagogue.
- They followed the Jewish liturgies.
- They kept the Jewish hours of prayer.
- They were recognized as a group within Judaism by both Jews and Romans.
- They were mistrustful of gentiles.

The Holy Spirit began to reveal that Yeshua was also the Savior of the gentiles (*Acts 10:1-11:18*). In retrospect, this should have come as no surprise. To be a blessing to the gentiles was foundational to God’s call to Abraham. (*Genesis 12:3*)

In the city of Antioch we see the first expression of the “one new man” emerging. What is this “one new man”? It is Jewish believers expressing their faith in Yeshua in Jewish ways, gentile believers were expressing their faith in Him in Gentile ways, and each doing so with honor and respect toward the other. – *Acts 11:19-26; Ephesians 2:15b-18*

The increasing numbers of gentiles coming to faith raised a crucial issue: If these gentiles are going to become followers of the Jewish Messiah, does that not mean that they must become Jews and fulfill Jewish practices? This seemed completely reasonable to many. – *Acts 15:1-2*

It was Jewish apostles and elders who recognized that gentiles were being added to the Body of Messiah. This is something the Holy Spirit was doing. They were not to be required to become Jews to live out their faith. How indebted we gentiles are to these godly Jewish leaders! – *Acts 15:5-35*

Decisions reached at the first Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 opened the flood gates of evangelism to the gentile world. Many more congregations were planted by Jewish apostles in fulfillment of God's covenant promises that Israel would be a blessing to all nations.

.... and many peoples shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. – Isaiah 2:3

Thus says the LORD of hosts: In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you." – Zechariah 8:23

Messianic followers of Yeshua began to be increasingly excluded from the Jewish community. This was taking place around the time the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

Between the 2nd and 4th centuries Jewish identity in Yeshua was increasingly suppressed by replacement theology. Jews who embraced Yeshua were forced to assimilate into gentile identity. The Church became a gentile institution.

(Note: The following history was drawn largely from writings of Toward Jerusalem Council II)

16th and 17th centuries: The Protestant Reformation, with its call for a return to the Bible, opened doors for reevaluation. Puritan teachers who advocated a positive destiny for the people of Israel included Samuel Rutherford and Elnathan Parr in Great Britain and Increase Mather in the American colonies.

18th century: German Lutheran Pietists arrived at similar understandings through Jakob Phillip Spencer and Count Zinzendorf and the Moravians. The Moravians influenced the young Wesleys and their emerging Methodist movement.

19th century: The conviction that God had made an irrevocable covenant with the Jewish people grew. Missions to Jews were founded in Britain, Norway, Finland and America. By mid century, many British Christians believed that it was part of Britain's destiny to reestablish the nation of Israel and help Jews return.

1840: An Anglican bishopric, with a Jew as the first bishop, was established in Jerusalem. Christ Church, by the Jaffa Gate, continues its ministry to this day.

1860: Jewish believers in Protestant churches began to reclaim their Jewish identity. The Hebrew Christian Alliance was formed in Britain—a fellowship to bring

together Jewish Christians from various denominations. They were not a church, nor did they seek in any way to usurp the authority of the church bodies.

1880: As anti-Semitic persecution gained momentum in the Russian empire, and Jewish immigration, especially to the United States, reached unprecedented levels. A sharp increase in mission activity toward the Jewish people took place.

Early 20th Century decades: Several missionary societies were formed in the USA for Jewish evangelism. Difficulty in integrating new believers from Eastern European ghetto cultures into largely Anglo-Saxon congregations gave impetus to Hebrew Christian congregations. The Presbyterian Mission to the Jews established congregations in Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia and Baltimore.

1948: Messianic Jews see the establishment of the State of Israel as fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy for the return of the Jewish people to the land of Israel. They emphasize the prophetic link made, for example in Ezekiel 36–37, between the return of the people to the land, the gift of the Spirit and their return to God in re-birth. In 1948, the year of Israel's birth, there were perhaps 150 Messianic believers in the country and two Messianic congregations.

1963: The first European Messianic congregation was founded in Paris, **France**.

1967: The reunification of Jerusalem through the six-day war was understood by the Hebrew Christians as a fulfillment of Luke 21:24 where Jesus said that "Jerusalem will be trodden down by the gentiles, until the times of the gentiles are fulfilled." The sense of entering a new phase in the "last days" with the political autonomy of Jerusalem under Israeli control increased the desire for a faith-autonomy among the Hebrew Christians.

Late 1960s: The Jesus movement, centered in California, made substantial numbers of hippies and Vietnam-war protesters, as well as less radicalized young people, into disciples of Jesus. Many were young Jews; open to Jesus of Nazareth rather than to Christianity. This fueled the Messianic Jewish movement in the USA.

Many young Jewish believers in Yeshua refused to join Christian churches, a move they regarded as assimilation among the gentiles. This further fueled a move toward a Messianic Jewish rather than a Hebrew Christian identity.

Messianic Jews believe that in their movement the "fullness" of the Jews is beginning (Romans 11:12), a "life from the dead" (Romans 11:15). They see in this "resurrection" a sign that "the times of the gentiles" (Luke 21:24; Romans 11:25) are coming to fulfillment. The way is being prepared for Yeshua's return.

1975: The Chicago Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church in the USA endorsed the new Messianic Jewish orientation for its Chicago Jewish congregation. **1976:** Fuller Theological Seminary's School of World Mission endorsed the movement. **1977:** The National Association of Evangelicals followed suit. **1980s:** A Messianic congregation was founded in Brussels, **Belgium**.

1987: Informal groups of Jews believing in Jesus began to form within the existing Protestant churches in the **Ukraine**. Many people began to reaffirm or rediscover their Jewish identity.

1990s: The Israeli movement tripled in size through the influx of immigrants from the former Soviet Union. It now numbered around one hundred congregations: 70 Hebrew-speaking, 25 Russian-speaking, and 5 Ethiopian Amharic speaking.

1995: A Messianic congregation was founded in Berlin by Vladimir Pikman from Kiev. There are now about twelve Messianic groups in **Germany**.

2004: Best estimates are that there are around 300 Messianic congregations in the **United States**. Up to half of their members may be gentiles; many are small.

2010: By this time the best estimates we can find indicate 10,000 to 15,000 Messianic believers in **Israel**, and over 100 Messianic congregations.

In August 2010, Jewish born Jean-Marie Lustiger, a Roman Catholic Cardinal and former Archbishop of Paris, died. His mother had been gassed in the death camp in Auschwitz. His funeral was held in Notre Dame Cathedral. The service included portions of Jewish liturgy and prayers. Arno Lustiger, an 83-year-old cousin of the Cardinal, and death camp survivor, led the reading of the Jewish Mourner's Kaddish along with other prayers central to Jewish worship. Before his death, Lustiger asked that a commemorative plaque be placed inside Notre Dame reading:

I was born Jewish. I received my paternal grandfather's name, Aron. I became Christian by faith and baptism. I remained Jewish like the Apostles did.

The Reach of the Messianic Movement Today

The movement is energized from two centers: **USA**, and **Israel**. The impetus for an international movement has come almost entirely from the USA.

In Western Europe, Messianic Judaism has been longest established in **England**, **France**, **Belgium** and the **Netherlands**, though its numbers are not large. Groups also exist in **Switzerland**, **Norway** and **Finland**. **Germany has the fastest growing Jewish population in the world**, with most of the new immigrants coming from the former Soviet Union. Messianic congregations have begun to spring up.

The fastest growth in the Messianic movement is found in some of the countries formerly part of the Soviet Union; e.g., **Russia**, **Ukraine**, **Moldova**, and **Belarus**. There are also Messianic groups in **Hungary**, **Romania** and **Ukraine**.

Marranos: In Latin America there are millions of people of Marrano ancestry—Jews from Spain and Portugal whose ancestors were baptized as Catholics under pressure but inwardly remained Jews. Many are reclaiming their Jewish roots.

The largest Messianic Jewish congregation in Latin America is in Belo Horizonte, **Brazil**, where a Messianic Jewish Bible Institute has been founded. The same

pattern of a thriving congregation, followed by a Bible Institute, is being repeated in Buenos Aires, **Argentina**. There are also Messianic Jewish groups in **Mexico**. There are messianic Jewish groups in **Australia, New Zealand** and **South Africa**.

Reflections on This History

The spiritual breakthrough that would come from Yeshua's prayer in John 17 being fulfilled (that all His followers would be one) could be of such magnitude as to result in 1) "all Israel will be saved" (Romans 11:26) and 2) "in you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:3)

How can the Church regain its relationship to a people whom we have persecuted for centuries?

- 1 - We must confess the evil. We must speak the truth clearly and publicly.
- 2 - We must repent for our own wrongs and the wrongs committed by our forefathers. (see Daniel 9)
- 3 - We must make restitution wherever possible.
- 4 - We must request forgiveness for our wrongs and those of our forefathers.
- 5 - We must honor our Messianic brethren as our elder brothers and sisters.