

A DISCIPLING CHAPTER ESPECIALLY FOR GENTILES CALLED TO MESSIANIC JEWISH CONGREGATIONS (a Supplement for *Growing to Maturity*)

The Messianic Jewish Congregation movement has included Gentile members from the first. In the early days they were a minority, but since then a larger number of Gentiles have joined Messianic Jewish congregations. There are good reasons and wrong reasons for Gentiles to join Messianic Jewish congregations. There are good ways to live out that membership and not so good ways. This paper is a discipling tool that is intended to aid leaders in their helping Gentiles to play productive roles in Messianic Jewish Congregations.

The right reasons for Gentiles Joining a Messianic Jewish Congregation

The primary reason for Messianic Jewish congregations is based on the premise that Jews who come to faith in Yeshua are called to identity as Jews and live as Jews. The primary purpose of Messianic Jewish congregations is to foster that goal, to provide a social, discipling congregational life where that goal is fostered. Also, one of the central original purposes of Messianic Jewish congregations was to train our members to share their faith with Jewish people and to see them come to faith in Yeshua.

There are important secondary reasons for Messianic Jewish Congregations. One is restoring a more biblical Jewish rooting for understanding the Bible and God's purposes in the last days. By having unity with believing churches, over time, we are able to bring a return to those Jewish roots while being blessed by the riches they offer to us.

The primary right reason for Gentiles to join Messianic Jewish congregations is because they are led by the Spirit to do so. There is no other mandate for doing so. However, when one is so led by the Spirit, that person resonates with the goals of seeing Jewish people come to faith in Yeshua and ultimately seeing the whole nation confess Yeshua. This leads to Yeshua's return (Romans 11:15). Gentiles who join for the right reasons seek to live out the vision of "One New Man" by being in regular and intensive fellowship with Jews. This demonstration of "One New Man" is biblical.

Gentiles who are called appreciate Jewish life. The Spirit within them inspires them to enjoy hearing the sounds of the Hebrew language and the biblically based Jewish liturgical prayers, and they enjoy celebrating the Jewish biblical feasts with their Jewish brothers and sisters. In addition, they desire to be a witness to Jewish people. Gentiles who love the Jewish people have fewer

barriers to overcome in their witness since they are not resisted as traitors to Judaism. Sadly, Jewish believers are misunderstood as betraying their people when they believe in Yeshua. When Gentiles declare their love for the Jewish people and their gratitude and heart for the nation of Israel, Jewish hearts often become open. Anointed and trained Gentiles may be our greatest (but as yet not fully tapped) evangelistic human resource.

The wrong reasons for Gentiles joining a Messianic Jewish Congregation

There are also wrong reasons for joining Messianic Jewish Congregations. When those wrong reasons are primary, there are many negative effects. There are even some movements that have developed wrong theologies for Messianic Congregations, but their leaders are, thankfully, not in the mainstream of the Messianic Jewish Movement.

One of those wrong reasons is thinking that the Messianic Jewish Congregation is the ideal for all, and that all churches should be like Messianic Jewish Congregations. This wrong reason leads to denigrating other streams of the Church. We see some of this error in some segments of the what is known as "Jewish Roots Movement." The argument is put forth in the following way.

1. The Feasts of the Jewish people (as they are designated in the Gospel of John) are the Feasts of the LORD in the *Torah*. They are for all people and all people should keep these Feasts.
2. The Church embraced pagan dating of days and is compromised. They keep Sunday which was the day of Sun Worship at the end of the first century in the Roman Empire.
3. The Church embraced the wrong date for the Resurrection and calls it Easter which goes back to the goddess Ishtar.
4. The Church embraced the Roman Winter Solstice Festival as the time of the birth of Jesus. Christmas is rooted in paganism and should not be celebrated by Christians.
5. The Church rejected the Law, and all Christians should keep the Law in the same way as Jews.

This orientation leads to church-bashing and demeaning the churches and streams that are not living according to these dictates. Messianic Jews do have difficulty with some Roman Catholic practices, especially prayer to Mary and the Saints. But the criticism of the Church by these folks includes Protestant Evangelicals, Pentecostals and charismatic streams; all who celebrate Christmas, Easter and worship weekly on Sunday and do not keep the Jewish Feasts and the 7th day Sabbath. Basically, the whole church world

is, for the most part, somewhat delegitimized outside of its small Messianic contingent, and those who criticize the Church are made to look small and cultic as they declare in pride that they are the superior.

A good bit of this criticism is based on what is called the genetic fallacy. This is that the meaning of a practice should be interpreted according to the parallels in the pagan culture when the Christian practice was embraced. The genetic fallacy has been one of the errors of logic that first year students of logic study in philosophy. It is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of words and symbols. In language, words sometimes change their meaning and develop in ways that lose their original meaning totally. Today, if a young man tells his girlfriend that she is cute, it will be received as a compliment. But 450 years ago, it meant fat and bow-legged, and would have been considered a put-down. It would be wrong for a woman to read this older meaning into the term as used today. In biblical interpretation, the classic by James Barr, *"The Semantics of Biblical Language,"* made the case that is generally accepted today. Words and concepts in the Bible need to be interpreted in terms of their contextual meaning at the time they are read. We must not read into the text the history of the meaning of the word (philology) or the possible range of its meanings, but rather limit ourselves to the intended meaning in contemporary use and contextual use (see endnote).

The whole quest of finding hidden meaning due to parallels in ancient times is wrong headed. Yes, the parallels can teach us some things, but just what it too lengthy for this study. I hold most strongly that the meaning of Church traditions and practices is what the Church tells us that they mean in their documents and profession, nothing more and nothing less. We can no more legitimately criticize practices in the Church world due to supposed pagan parallels or origins than we can accuse people for saying things that are not the intended meaning of their words by their contemporary definition. Ritual practices are a symbolic language that have to be defined on their own terms. Here are the most common examples of Church bashing.

1. Christmas is said to be a pagan festival. The fact is, that one cannot find one statement in the Church Fathers of the early centuries stating that they chose this date to celebrate the birth of Yeshua to embrace pagan meanings. There are two statements that are commonly made today in defense of December 25th. One is that the actual date of his birth was on Christmas. One of the fathers of the Messianic Jewish movement, Dr. John Fischer, who was the President of the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations when I wrote this (and its Vice President in 1979) argues that the evidence is that He was really born on Dec. 25th. I personally do not believe this. The other assertion in the Fathers was that this date was **a counter to paganism**. The pagan feast was actually on the 22nd when the day first begins to

lengthen. The Sun will not disappear as pagans feared. But it appears that the choice of the date may not have been to embrace paganism, but rather but to counter it. The idea of a Christmas tree as contrary to Jeremiah 10, where the wood was carved into an idol, is not a good proof text; we do not know of Christmas trees in the early centuries of the Church. While Christmas office parties today are akin to pagan orgies, Christmas celebrated correctly connects us to holiness. The traditions of the Church for celebrating Christmas are simply not pagan, especially the Protestant traditions. The hymns of the season are totally biblical and are a light shining in a dark world. While Messianic Jewish Congregations may or may not do something to celebrate this day due to Jewish sensitivity, the day is filled with biblical meaning through and through.

For serious Christians, the meaning of Christmas is not a celebration of the Sun, but the wonderful story of the incarnation and birth of Yeshua. I challenge anyone to find one statement by any of the early Church fathers that shows that they intentionally embraced syncretism in their argument for the celebration of Christmas. I note that the Talmud states that God gave Chanukah on the 25th of Kislev so that the Jewish people would have a feast at the same time as the pagans to counter paganism (Talmud, Avodah Zarah 8:3). If you use your search engine and look up Winter Solstice and Chanukah, you will find much material on this. Some think that the date 25th of Kislev was a background for dating the 25th of December. Bashing Christmas is wrongheaded and only serves to alienate us from the Christian Church world and precludes us from appreciating the richness of biblical Christian practices. It undercuts the quest for John 17:21 unity.

2. It is even more of a stretch to claim that Resurrection Sunday is pagan. Despite some who want to argue to the contrary, the Bible is quite clear that Yeshua's resurrection was after the Sabbath was over, on the first day of the week, and was discovered at Sunrise. This would be the day of First Fruits. When one examines the dating question, there are complexities. Yes, Yeshua rose on the first day of the week during the Feast of Unleavened bread after Passover. When the Church fathers dealt with the date, some in the 2nd Century kept the date according to the dominant Jewish calendar derived from the Pharisees, a lunar calendar that is reconciled with the Sun every few years. This practice is defended by Bishop Polycrates from Antioch as the correct dating for the Church's celebration. However, Victor of Rome claims that his tradition goes back to the Apostles and that the date is according to the Solar calendar (The debate was circa 175 C.E.). The tradition is that not only Paul but also Peter ended up in Rome. This second century debate was settled at the Council of Nicea, 325. It is not true that Constantine imposed the date on the bishops

due to pagan considerations. The bishops chose the view of Victor and the Roman practice from the 2nd century. It is possible that there were two traditions because the Apostles did not enjoin one tradition for the dating of the celebration of the Resurrection. It is true that Constantine, in the "Letter of Constantine," argued that the Church date for Passover should not be the same as that of the Jews. However, the official canons of Nicea do not argue on that basis, but argue what the date really was. It is interesting that Eilat Mazar of the Shalom Center, in its archaeology department, today argues that the actual biblical calendar as kept by the Sadducees and Essenes was a solar calendar. The Church dating is sometimes closer to the Biblical calendar than the Jewish, but not always the same. Whatever the origins of the use of the term Easter from the German, the day does not connote anything pagan just due to this name. We should be aware that this season does have a tradition of pagan elements of fertility in eggs and bunnies. However, this is not the Church's tradition; the Church's meaning of the day is the resurrection of Yeshua, and "Good Friday" that precedes it is a solemn worship time to commemorate the crucifixion of Yeshua. The day of resurrection is Passover-oriented and is the most joyous day of the church year. The announcement "Christ is Risen" resounds across the world. Hymns are sung centering on the resurrection and our future resurrection. Again, there is not one statement of any early Church Father that connects the dating or the celebration of Easter with paganism or syncretism.

3. Worship on Sunday is not based on paganism. The New Covenant Scriptures never require the Gentiles in this transitional age to keep the Sabbath day. Though it is a symbol of God's rest on the seventh day, and in the Ten Words (commandments), it is clear to us that the New Covenant expects this symbol to be part of Israel's calling; it is not laid on the Gentiles. Gentiles are free to embrace the seventh day Sabbath if they are led by the Spirit of God. In the first century Roman Empire, the seven-day week had not been adopted outside of Israel. Enjoining this observance would have hindered the spread of the Gospel. One could not simply go to employers and tell them that one was taking one day every week to not work. They would ask: "What is a week?" Only independently wealthy people could do whatever they wanted. One interpretation is that believers met on Saturday night, the beginning of the first week. As such, Jews and Gentiles could meet with each other. They could also recognize that on the first day, Yeshua rose from the dead. There are various factors that established Sunday in the second century. One was that the Empire embraced the seven-day week. The other was the exaltation of Sunday in the Empire, though not as a Sabbath day. However, when this day was established by the early Christians, it was primarily described as a celebration of the resurrection. Sabbath meanings were then imported

into it. The error of the Church was to claim that God had replaced the Sabbath with Sunday. The seventh day Sabbath remains a Jewish responsibility and can be embraced by all who are so led. There are many Christians who keep the seventh day Sabbath and who gather and worship to celebrate the resurrection on Sunday. The rule for Gentiles for this whole area is to be led by the Spirit.

4. Gentiles are not required to keep the annual Feast days that are required of Israel. The New Covenant Scriptures make this clear. Israeli Messianic Jews keep the feast days according to Rabbinic calendar calculations and in Israel, the days are national holidays. However, most scholars who do not have an Orthodox Jewish ax to grind believe that the Rabbinic calculations are wrong. The consensus is growing that the biblical calendar was a solar calendar (reconciling the moon months with the Sun year every year). So those who are legalists among us have to decide which calculation to use. Beyond this there are debates on how to set the days exactly on the solar basis. Hence the change from the Julian to the Gregorian calendars. Keeping the Feasts is part of Jewish identity and calling. It has intercessory meaning as well. It has profound eschatological meanings that have to do with the last days and the Age to Come. Keeping the Holy Days on the biblical calendar, however, would have been very difficult outside of Israel and would have caused great difficulty for other cultures. The Feasts were pilgrimage festivals for those in the Land. Applying Feast observance outside of Israel required much adjustment in application. Performing sacrifices for the Feasts, of course, cannot be kept. Gentiles are welcome to celebrate the Feasts as they are led by the Spirit.
5. Keeping the whole *Torah* is not something required of Gentiles. Rather, as Markus Bockmuehl of Cambridge (now of St. Andrews in Scotland) argued, before the time of Yeshua, the Hillel school already identified that part of the *Torah* that was universally enjoined and the part that was Jewish-specific responsibility (*"Jewish Law in Gentile Churches,"* and *"Paul's Rule in the Churches"* by David J. Rudolph). This is very clear regarding circumcision, especially in Galatians. It is also clear in the teaching on the Law in Romans 14, Galatians 5, and Colossians 2.

None of this means that the Church does not need correction. The greatest correction is for replacement theology itself, the doctrine that ethnic Israel is no longer elect, and that now the Church is the Israel of God and has replaced ancient Israel. This was a key error that led to terrible anti-Semitism in the historic church institutions. It is important that there be full repentance on this. Not seeing the fulfillment of Scripture in Israel's return to the Land is a significant error. Not realizing that Messianic Jews are called

to identify and live as Jews as part of their people is an error connected to replacement theology. The Church needs to repent of assimilating its Jewish members so that they no longer identify and live as part of their people.

The Church has preserved significant aspects of the Jewish roots of the faith. The Church partially keeps three of the Jewish Feasts – Passover as Good Friday, Resurrection Sunday which is First Fruits, and Pentecost 50 days after First Fruits which is another first fruits. Sometimes, by the calculation of some scholars, these are on the correct days of the biblical calendar. However, the church has sought to distance itself from its Jewish roots and the Jewish people. There is a dimension of Jewish roots that God expects of the Church. This includes acknowledging the irrevocable call of the Jewish people and the Church's connection to them. This would at least mean acknowledging indebtedness to the Jewish people and connecting its practices to their Jewish-roots origins. This includes connecting Good Friday to Passover, and Resurrection to First Fruits. It would mean respecting the Jewish Feasts and the people who maintain their celebration. In addition, it would acknowledge the connection of Pentecost to the Jewish teaching that the giving of the *Torah* at Mount Sinai occurred at that time.

Teaching about the Feasts during the times of Jewish celebration would be a positive way of connecting. The Feasts have universal meanings connected to world redemption. Without keeping the exact days, gatherings near the time of the actual Feast could have value for teaching and for connection. Churches in several cities have had "Unity of the Church" celebrations during the Feast of Sukkot, usually on the Saturday evening of the Feast. They proclaim the universal hope of World Redemption according to the description of the Feast in *Zechariah* 14. The Church can also teach on *Yom Kippur* and *Hebrews* 7-10. It can teach on the Feast of Trumpets, the return of Yeshua, and the trumpets of the "*Book of Revelation*." These are all ways of bringing Jewish roots to the Church and linking the Church to Messianic Jews. This linkage and connection to the Jewish people is crucial if the Church is to be in its right connection to its roots.

The Church does preserve other aspects that show Jewish roots. The architecture of the older denominations is based on the architecture of the Temple or Tabernacle. There is the outer court, the *narthex*, the sanctuary, the inner court, and the bema stage area as the Holy Place. The altar is in front of the bema and the communion elements are placed there. There is the eternal light with the seven branched *menorah*. All of this connects New Covenant fulfillment to the *Torah*. Amazingly, many Christians are not aware of this. In addition, the ancient liturgy for communion used by Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Lutherans, Methodists, and Anglicans goes back to the prayers of the synagogue, especially parts of the *Amidah* prayer and grace after meals (See Louis Boyer, "*Eucharist*"). The problem is that the churches do not regularly explain these aspects of Jewish roots and often fail to

acknowledge their indebtedness to the Jewish people. The Scriptures come from the Jewish people and were preserved by the Jewish people. The Hebrew Scriptures used by the Church were preserved by the Jewish people into the middle ages, and the Church depended on the copies based on that preservation.

The Unity of the People of Yeshua and One New Man

In John 17 Yeshua prayed for the unity of his people. Some commentators call this prayer the eschatological prayer of Yeshua, meaning the last days. John 17:21 is a very important summary. "That they may be one . . . that the world may believe that you have sent me." This prayer is to be fulfilled before Yeshua returns. It is a key in every city and region. Ephesians 4:13 notes that the leaders of God's people are to equip them until we all come into unity and the fullness of the stature of the Messiah. The Messianic Jew and Gentile demonstrate this unity by being one in a local Messianic Jewish fellowship. But beyond that, I do not expect that we can come into unity unless we have mutual appreciation. Unless Messianic Jews affirm the richness of the churches and its great heritage, and the churches affirm the richness of the Messianic Jewish community and its heritage and expression, it is difficult to see how we can come to unity. I am not talking about appreciating things in church tradition that are wrong, like the prayers to Mary and the saints and other objectionable practices. I am not saying that I do not recognize the good things that have been done through the more ancient churches. There is no influence from paganism to speak of in mainstream Protestant Evangelical traditions, at least when one evaluates according to how Protestant communities understand and embrace them.

Let us note the amazing heritage of the Protestant churches. There is the history of embracing the Bible as fully the Word of God. There is the movement of world evangelism that has brought millions and millions (we now approach a billion) into the Kingdom of God. There are the amazing aspects of social progress; the elimination of slavery, child labor, and equal rights which came from biblically informed people. There are hospitals, orphanages, colleges, universities, rescue missions, drug addiction centers and so much more. As one good friend in the Messianic Jewish movement says regularly, without the Church, it would be a much darker world.

There is the heritage itself. There is the proclamation of the resurrection of Yeshua every Sunday and on the annual Day of Resurrection. There is the amazing truth in the historic liturgies of worship. There is the depth of the hymnology of the churches and the continued production of modern forms of praise and worship. Then there is the amazing testimony of light in the hymns of the incarnation during Christmas season. The joy and light from these traditions are wonderful.

There are also the great confessions of faith, the summaries of doctrine in the great catechisms of the churches, the amazing theological writings, and the ongoing work of scholarship from believing scholars that help us understand with greater depth. There are also the amazing devotional traditions with countless great devotional classics.

It is true that Messianic Jewish congregations have chosen a way of life and worship that does not generally follow church traditional life patterns, though some groups incorporate some aspects and join churches in some of their celebrations. Messianic Jewish life is deep-rooted and worthy as well and fulfills the importance of preserving the role of Jewish believers as part of Israel's election.

Living out One New Man: Unity with Distinction

There are two primary aspects to showing the unity of One New Man (Humanity). One New Man is the Unity of Jew and Gentile. There is, first, the life of Jew and Gentile together in a Messianic Jewish congregation. Second, there is the unity of the Messianic Jewish congregation with the area churches. There are many churches that have Jews in their membership, though most would not have many Jews that are serious about Jewish life. This may change through the influence of Messianic Jewish Congregations. This demonstration of unity can take place through clergy fellowships, joint celebrations and joint programs for reaching the community, and programs where Jewish identity is respected. We have been involved in such activities and have seen amazing mutual regard built as we participated together.

The issue of how Jew and Gentile live together in a Messianic Jewish congregation is challenging. There is no clear agreement on how to do this. We have learned something over many years. Unity with distinction is important in the Messianic Jewish congregation, though the distinction part is easier when churches and Messianic Jewish congregations come together because their heritage and practices are more distinct. The beginning of unity and distinction is that Jews identify themselves as Jews, and Gentiles as Gentiles. Gentile simply means one from the nations and is Paul's usage in Romans 11 when speaking of believers. Then Gentiles can give wonderful testimonies of their desire to be more closely joined to the Jewish people and their call by the Holy Spirit to be in a Messianic Jewish Congregation. Some Gentiles do not receive a call to be in a Messianic Jewish congregation for the rest of their lives, but some do have such a calling. Secondly Gentiles are called not to engage in rituals that are part of professing to be Jewish. This is more challenging. Covenant circumcision for boys on the 8th day whereby they are entered into Jewish covenant responsibility is one clear distinction between Jewish and Gentile families. The *Pidyon Ha Ben*, the redemption of

the first born, is another ceremony that is for the Jewish parents of the firstborn male child only. In this ceremony, a symbolic amount of money is given to a priest in lieu of the tribe of Levi being chosen instead of the first born to serve in the Temple and in lieu of the firstborn who were spared in the last plague in Egypt.

In traditional synagogues, a Gentile visitor is given a *kippah* to wear but not a *tallit*. The *tallit* is seen as a profession of covenant responsibility to live a Jewish life. However, many Messianic Jewish Congregations do not maintain such a symbolic distinction, seeing the fringes on a *tallit* as a sign of responsibility to the *Torah* as it would apply variously to Jew and Gentile. The community has to define the meaning of the symbol. In a *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah*, the profession of the Jewish child is to live out Jewish covenantal responsibility. A Gentile in a such a rite of passage would profess loyalty to covenant responsibility in Yeshua and for being an instrument in Israel's salvation. This distinguishing is helpful. However, Gentiles are not excluded from most practices. Gentiles in some Messianic Jews congregations are not called to *Torah* since this is seen as a profession of Jewish covenant responsibility. But in other Messianic Jewish congregations they would call the Gentile to *Torah* since the *Torah* is God's word to him or her as well. They call Jewish readers as Cohens, Levites, or Israelites, but Gentiles are called as a sons or daughters of Abraham, grafted in. In a Messianic Jewish Congregation, all members live a common life, keep the Sabbath, celebrate the Feasts, and pray Jewish prayers. Gentile members may also in their homes maintain family and ethnic traditions that enrich them but that are not part of the traditions of Judaism. This is perfectly acceptable provided the traditions are not contrary to Scripture.

The other issue is marriage. We believe that Jews are not to marry into assimilation. This means that Jews can only marry Jews or Gentiles who profess a lifetime call to the Jewish people and to raise their children with the Jewish spouse as Jews. Not all Gentiles in a Messianic Jewish Congregation have this calling.

Summary

In summary, some Gentiles are called to be part of a Messianic Jewish congregation. The first and most important reason is that the Spirit has so led. The second is the desire to identify with the Jewish people in a deeper way than is the calling of most Gentiles. This means sharing in most of the patterns of Jewish life in a Messianic Jewish congregation. This calling includes a passion to see Jewish people come to faith in Yeshua and prioritizes witnessing to Jewish people. Such a calling is best fulfilled by people who appreciate the heritage of the Church. It is not fulfilled by those who think that the Messianic Jewish congregation is the ideal form of the Church. It is not fulfilled by those who bash the church and demean its

heritage. It is fulfilled by those who have a heart for the unity for which Yeshua prayed in John 17.

Endnote:

At the end of the 19th century there was a movement known as the *“history of religions school of Biblical interpretation,”* also called the *“comparative religions school of interpretation.”* This was applied to both the Tanakh and the New Covenant Scriptures. It showed the parallels in Bible practice to that of the surrounding pagan culture. The parallels existed before the biblical practices. They were still being taught as the source of Biblical practices and applied to the New Covenant Scriptures as recent as fifty years ago. This is still common as applied to the Hebrew Bible. Those who interpret the Bible through these lenses today are said to have been affected by “parallel-o-mania,” but we still have this orientation in Jewish critiques of the New Covenant Scriptures. The historical testimony of the New Covenant Scriptures is downplayed, and the origins of the so-called “Jesus myth” can be traced to the idea of the Greek heroes and the dying and rising gods in pagan mythology. For example, the pagan idea of Semiramis and Tammuz (the god who is killed and yet lives) and triune ideas of God are also traceable to paganism and to this myth. Rudolph Bultmann traced the themes of the Gospel of John to the parallels in Greek pagan Mandaean Literature, though it was from a later date.

Today, most scholars do not think that parallels show the correct meaning. Cultural background studies need to show real connections. The profession of what is meant by the text itself or by the author of a text are the center. Two books were classics, showing the parallels as the origin of biblical ideas from pagan parallels. They are *“The Golden Bough”* by James Frazer, and *“Myth, Legend and Custom in the Old Testament”* by Theodore Gaster. Everything from temple designs to many of the details of how sacrifices are done in the *Torah* find parallels in pagan sacrificial systems and in the times that preceded the Biblical events. That is why some liberal Jews and Christians hold to the idea that the sacrifices were pagan and that, in biblical days, the pagan elements had not yet been overcome. The Feasts of the Bible are also said to be based partly on the pagan seasonal agricultural feasts because there were many common elements such as harvest sacrifices and bringing agricultural offerings to the pagan temples.