

LEGITIMATE CONGREGATIONAL MODELS AND MESSIANIC JUDAISM

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This paper hopes to inspire a variety of congregational models as a means to expand the numbers of Jewish people coming to faith and to bring Jewish people in churches to reconnect to their Jewish heritage and the Messianic Jewish movement. It also addresses concerns that are now the source of much debate in the Messianic Jewish Movement in America. In the early formation of the American movement, there was much debate over the issue of congregational membership. The first congregations that continue to this day from the early 1970s were Beth Messiah in Cincinnati, Beth Immanuel in Encino California, Adat Ha Tikvah in Chicago (formerly the First Hebrew Christian Church, and Beth Messiah in greater Washington, D.C. At this early point in the movement, most of us believed that Messianic Jewish Congregations would be majority Jewish. There was an influx of Jews from the Jesus movement. Messianic Jewish Congregations were planted to reach Jewish people and to disciple them in general and for them to remain Jewish. Most of us believed we could have Gentile members as well if they were called to be part of the congregations, but with our Jewish expression and outreach emphasis, we believed that we would remain majority Jewish. One of the early leaders of the movement, Rabbi Manny Brotman, of the Messianic Jewish Movement International, the first Rabbi of Beth Messiah in the greater Washington area, argued that Messianic Jewish Congregations should only allow Jewish membership but include the non-Jewish spouses. Jewish identity was defined by descent from either one's father or mother, similar to the Hebrew Christian Alliance of America, later the Messianic Jewish Alliance. Gentiles could be associate members and under the leadership of Manny, Paul Liberman, Sid Roth, and Mark Sircus, Beth Messiah was mostly Jewish in both membership and attendance. Manny's position on maintaining a Jewish majority was not, however, embraced by most of the other congregations or later by the larger growing movement.

Then something happened that was not anticipated. Gentiles became interested, not just to learn about the Jewish roots of their faith in order to understand the Bible better, but to join Messianic Jewish congregations and live in a Jewish pattern of life. Some thought it was a superior form of the Body of Believers and

disparaged the various streams of the Church. From a majority Jewish movement in the 80s, we became a majority Gentile movement by a good percentage a decade later. Some were happy to see Gentiles gain such an interest and respect for the Messianic Jewish orientation. They also enjoyed seeing their sanctuaries full. I was glad when we had over 400 people in the early 90s. Some were glad for the increased finances that enabled more ministry and even more programs of outreach to Jewish people. In some cases, the influx of Gentiles increased Jewish evangelism and, due to the witness of Gentiles, more Jews were won to the faith. An example is Baruch Ha Shem in Dallas, Texas that is probably 75% Gentile but with well over 100 Jewish members!

But others began to raise questions. Here is a paraphrase of what several have said.

“How authentic is it for a congregation that calls itself Messianic Jewish to have only a few Jews and a great majority of Gentiles who are donning Jewish symbols, kippot and tallitot, and chanting Jewish prayers? What will a visiting Jew who does not believe in Yeshua think of such a synagogue?”

These questions have mostly been voiced by a segment in the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations but there are some Messianic Jewish Alliance friends who have also raised this issue to me. Now the people who have voiced this were not referring to the aberrations from the Messianic Jewish world such as the Ephraimite Movement, or the One Law Movements, both of which teach that Gentiles are responsible to live in the same way as Jews. Those who are raising questions in this way are not questioning the congregations in doctrine. Both they and the congregations they question are biblically solid.

We do not have a scientific way to answer the question on the response of Jews who do not yet believe in Yeshua. We do have anecdotal evidence. I suppose it would be good to survey all the leaders in the movement on this question and get more than anecdotal evidence. I do know of cases where Jewish visitors found it amusing or offensive to see Gentiles embrace Jewish expressions, especially wearing tallitot or being called to *Torah*. One that I knew of said, “I am a real Jew, not like these pretend Jews.” However, another leader did tell me of an older Jewish man who was impressed that Gentiles loved the Jewish traditions and were embracing them. We had Jews come when we were majority Gentile and

were not offended. The particular man I speak of was drawn due to the Gentile love for Jewish tradition. I know of r negative responses as well. Some Jews see it as a wrong kind of cultural appropriation, but some streams of Judaism are open to Gentile spouse participation, especially the Reform and Conservative branches. And many are happy to find those who want to really convert.

We do have the issue that many Gentiles who have joined Messianic Jewish congregations think that they have joined the ideal form of the Church, a truer expression than the other expressions of Christianity. They keep the Sabbath and the Feasts and are connected to Jewish roots. This expression is seen as superior to other forms of the Church. Most who think this way do not have a deep connection or understanding of the very enriching patterns of the historic Church. Almost all Gentiles in a Messianic Jewish congregation are descendants of people who worshiped in churches that practiced such historic enriching patterns. For some they were recent ancestors. In the 1950s most believing Gentiles were in churches and their 19th century ancestors were, in most cases, in the various streams of denominational churches. Sometimes there is even a despising of the traditions of the historic Protestant Churches.

Added to this problem of the “ideal form of the church view” is the dissociation from one’s parentage or ancestry and their expressions of life in Yeshua. One asks if this is rightly honoring one’s ancestors and their faith. Yes, understanding the Sabbath, Feasts and Jewish backgrounds for biblical understanding are important, and Gentiles and Christian churches as a whole need to embrace understanding them. In addition, understanding the Jewish people with accuracy (both their good and bad of Jewish traditions), avoiding anti-Semitic attitudes, and more, are important if Gentiles are to love the Jewish people more deeply. In the New Testament, Yeshua is understood through Passover as our Passover lamb, and Shavuot is the time of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In addition, Yom Kippur (in Hebrews 8-10) provides the interpretative background for Yeshua’s sacrifice and intercessory work as High Priest. This is why much of the main tradition of the Church that united historic Protestantism is completely coherent with the Bible, and to not appreciate this, in my view, a deficit in understanding. Believers in Messianic Jewish congregations, Jew and Gentile, need to see how much the Church did preserve Jewish roots. Believers in the churches need to see how much indeed is from Jewish roots, for many do not understand this.

Then we have the issue that the vast majority of Jews who believe in Yeshua are in churches, hundreds of thousands and more if we count Jewish descendants with one grandparent. Mitch Glaser documented this in a survey sponsored by Chosen People which showed that most are not seriously living a Jewish life. How do we deal with that and the fact that we believe that Jews have an irrevocable calling to remain Jewish (Romans 11:29)? We originally expected that many of these would return to Jewish life and join our Messianic Jewish congregations. Some have, but more have not and many get offended that we would want them to. How should we respond to these Jews in churches? How do we encourage them to pass on a Jewish identity and heritage to their children and to bear witness to their Jewish family and friends?

How has the movement as a whole responded to all this? Some are ignoring the problem as if it is not a problem and just going on with the status quo. Some of them speak of being in the Messianic Jewish revival. I want to see this revival and to see multitudes of Jews come to faith. However, these trends are not happening now, and we do need revival. Those who believe we have a problem and are not ignoring it have given several responses. Several have decided to have congregations with exclusively Jewish membership. A Gentile spouse can join, and maybe an exceptional Gentile who has proven a Jewish calling. But almost all Gentiles will be told that there is a nice church they can join down the road or on the other side of town. Indeed, these congregations may seem more authentically Jewish in some ways, but they are small in number. We do recall that there was a day with some good size congregations that were majority Jewish! (100-250). That seems to be past now, at least in America, and I am not clear about the demographic in other countries. Many Gentiles have been offended by such exclusivity.

Some congregations have agreed to convert Gentiles to Judaism who are especially called. Such Gentiles are intensively vetted and then allowed to convert; the number of these congregations is small. For a Gentile to say he/she is now Jewish due to a Messianic Jewish conversion may or may not be accepted in the Jewish community, and Messianic Jewish authority to do this is controversial given the apostolic ruling in Acts 15, the instructions of I Corinthians 7:18, and Galatians (especially chapter 5). Tikkun has both a policy and a paper

on this that is negative to conversion but accepting of it if accomplished through a reputable authority.

A third response is to have a fellowship of Jews in the churches who have a desire to remain Jewish and to connect them to a larger inter-church fellowship of Jews. This harkens back to the old Hebrew Christian Alliance in America with their local city branches that gathered Jews from churches for periodic meetings.

One time I asked a question of a leader who had been involved in all three of these efforts – to lead an exclusive Jewish member congregation, to embrace limited conversion for Gentiles, and to build a fellowship of Jewish believers from within Churches. “Which is more authentic,” I asked, “a fellowship of Jewish believers from a church that meets in a home group that maintains Jewish life for the Jewish members of the Church, or a Messianic Jewish Congregation with only a few Jewish members where the Gentiles in it have embraced a Jewish life and expression? He said, “definitely the former.” I can understand his reasoning, but I do not take his position. I have, for many years, supported the idea of Jewish fellowships as part of churches and can indeed support an inter-church fellowship of Jewish people. I think we need to take these concerns seriously and address them even if we have different solutions. At the same time, while I would of course love to see more majority Jewish Messianic Jewish Congregations, I think it will come from an evangelistic outpouring of the Spirit and not by having exclusive membership. I believe that the way to solve the problem is by supporting a variety of models and training the members who are called to Jewish life and expression, whether Jew or Gentile, to have biblical motives while having respect for the Church as well.

Affirming today’s majority model.

Before speaking about new models, I want to affirm the large majority of Messianic Jewish congregations where the majority of its members are not Jewish. I do think that Gentiles are called to join us if they have a special calling to the Jewish people and a desire to live their lives with Jewish people without displacing them or blurring their distinctiveness. Such Gentiles in Messianic Jewish congregations need to be there for the right reasons and not due to disparaging the churches. We desire that our Gentile members appreciate Church streams and not see us as the ideal form of the Body of the Messiah for all. We

support Messianic Jewish congregations where Gentiles are in the majority, but do not foster the idea that Messianic Jewish congregations are the ideal form of the Church. We want to see these congregations become more effective in reaching Jews. The majority Gentile member congregations can mitigate the problems raised above by teaching their Gentile members to appreciate the churches and to appreciate what it means to be called as a Gentile to live with Jewish people as Gentiles who have been grafted in. They can teach them to live in a way that does not supplant or replace the Jewish people, and to receive the burden from the Spirit for Jewish evangelism. They also can be trained in a good apologetic for their joining, which I think is based on the prediction of Zechariah 8 that in the last days, 10 men from the nations would tell Jews that they want to go with them because God is with them. I would think that this passage fits Messianic Jews who would have God's special favor and the presence of God due to their faith in Yeshua. Thus, we can see congregations that have majority Gentile members as somewhat of a fulfillment of Zechariah 8. We can then teach our Jewish and Gentile members to project that they are a congregation that reflects "one new man." Let's also train them to be effective in Jewish evangelism. As for Gentiles living by Jewish life patterns, I can only say that, in our congregations, all are called to live a common life together while still identifying as Jew and Gentile.

Gentiles sometimes join to show that they are the Gentile part of the "one new man" referred to in Ephesians 2:14-16. There is no biblical violation in this. In addition, I take no position on Gentiles wearing a *kippah* or *Tallit*. Rabbinical Jewish synagogues intentionally give the former to Jewish visitors but not the latter. In the 90s I believed God spoke to me about the priestly meaning of the *Tallit* and that, although the *Torah* sometimes applies differently to Jews than to Gentiles, all are to embrace its proper application. I think these are issues for each congregation to discern, and circumstances can determine what a congregation's eldership chooses to do. This is the model for most Tikkun congregations. Some do use Christian written material so there is some dual heritage in most.

Jewish Home Groups in Churches

I want to affirm supporting Jewish fellowships within churches. It is a potentially important model, and we hope for its success. While not making this a major

point of this paper I do want to continue to foster a Jewish contingent in the churches. I think this is best done by fostering Messianic Jewish home groups for Jews and Gentiles called to join them. This means convincing pastors of churches in Jewish populated areas. Also, the new national fellowship in part led by our own David J. Rudolph and Mark Kinser can be a key in reaching Jewish people to help them regain (or maintain) their identity as Jews and reach other Jews with the Gospel as well. These churches can then grow in Jewish evangelism that is not destructive to Jewish life and identity.

The Twin Congregation Model

I am here presenting three other new models that have now been embraced within Tikkun. The first is a twin congregation model. In this model, two distinct congregations form that are joined together. They may be under a common eldership or two different elderships, but they are linked together in building facilities and by leadership in some way. There is some fluidity of attendance between the groups and there is learning one from the other. In this model, all learn the basics of Jewish roots biblically, but most on the church side do not live a Jewish pattern of life except for some joint celebrations, while those on the Messianic Jewish congregation side do. In this way, the twin congregation model affirms both the expressions of the Church and those of Messianic Judaism. It removes some of the issues of Gentiles taking on Jewish ways for the wrong reasons. Gentiles attracted to the Messianic Jewish twin have to be disciplined (just as in other Messianic Jewish congregations) to know the right reasons to join. In this model, both congregations are close and embrace one another so that they appreciate (but do not necessarily practice) each other's expressions, such as celebrating the incarnation of Messiah at Christmas, and celebrating Passover which was the time of the Messiah's death and resurrection. Beth Messiah and Grace in Milwaukee with Frank and Jim Susler and Yeshua Ha Meshiach and Live Destiny in Phoenix practice this model.

The Dual Expression Model

The second model is a Dual Expression model. In this model there is one congregation and one major service where Jewish traditional expression and mainstream Christian expression merge in a modern charismatic orientation. The Gentile members do not generally take upon themselves Jewish symbolic dress,

but they show themselves to be appreciative of Jewish roots. The Jewish members may wear a *kippah* and a *tallit*, and there is an emphasis on the Jewish Feasts for all, but there is also an appreciation of Resurrection Sunday and a recognition of the Incarnation celebrated during the Christmas season. Christianity is thus honored and not despised – a healthy thing for all Messianic Jews. As a result, the good things in the Jewish tradition are honored, and visitors will not conclude that the Gentiles they encounter are “pretend Jews.” There is some degree of Dual Heritage in the Dual Expression model since there is a positive recognition of Christian Holy Days and an affirmation of the good things in the Church heritage. Three of the Christian Feasts are based on the Jewish Feasts and need to be shown to be so rooted (Good Friday-Passover, Resurrection Sunday-Firstfruits, and Pentecost-*Shavuot*). Kingdom Living under Richard Clearly is our primary example.

The Dual Heritage Model

The last model is what I call the Dual Heritage model. This model goes one step further than the Dual Expression model. The Dual Heritage model puts forth the idea of honoring the Jewish heritage in a more parallel way to honoring the Christian heritage. Heritage connotes something that is old and passed down. Those leading this model include older expressions of the heritage of Christianity in a way that is parallel to honoring the ancient heritage of Judaism. The key to the dual heritage model is connecting both to what is more ancient in Judaism and Christianity. For example, some of the Jewish expressions used in the Synagogue and in Messianic Jewish Congregations today go back to the first century and probably were part of the life of Yeshua. Other material comes from 1500 years ago, 1000 years ago, and 500 years ago! Some of the Christian expressions also go back to the early second century and possibly even to the first century. In this way, the ancestry of the Jewish members and Christian members is honored. The New Jerusalem Church in West Chicago under George Koch is our primary example of this model.

Some Notes on Ancient Liturgy

The liturgy for the Lord’s Supper (Communion or Eucharist) was derived from the early Jewish Temple and synagogue liturgy. The Apostles’ Creed (or the old Roman creed) is, for the most part, a weaving together of Biblical texts. Like the

Sh'ma and the *Amidah* (recited for over 2000 years), the Apostles Creed has been recited for near 1850 years. The greatest old hymns in Judaism and the Church are ancient and contain much biblical content. Some are from the middle ages. The *Amidah* prayer and the proclamation of the holiness of God, the *Kedushah*, is connected to the Temple sacrifices according in Jewish teaching. This parallels the proclamation of the holiness of God proclaimed as part of the Lord's Supper liturgy.

Jewish Marriages: Intergenerational Continuity

If the number of Jews in any of the congregational models are small, Jews marrying Jews could be a challenge. We do seek to see Jews marry Jews or at least legitimately called Gentiles. To expand the pool, conferences of Messianic Jews and the new communal organization for Jews in Churches started by Mark Kinser and David Rudolph could be important. We do see intergenerational continuity in Jewish calling and identity.