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A GROWING NUMBER
OF JEWISH CHRISTIANS
ARE RECOVERING
THEIR DISTINCTIVE
RELIGIOUS HERITAGE.

BY DEBORAH PARDO-KAPLAN

ILLUSTRATION BY PETE RYAN



The lights are dim during a Friday night service in a sanctuary that holds 4,000 people at the non-denominational Gateway Church in Dallas, Texas. Many traditional Jewish elements of the Sabbath are present: There's a blessing over the bread and wine, candle lighting, a Torah scroll, and a prayer shawl. About 12 musicians play contemporary Christian music that contains a spattering of Hebrew lyrics.

Pastor Greg Stone, associate pastor of Gateway Jewish Ministries, offers a message based on the words of Ezekiel and Daniel to an audience of 700, of whom 30 percent are Jewish, according to an in-house survey. Gateway's lead pastor, Robert Morris, believes in the principle "first to the Jew" (Rom. 1:16, ESV), therefore the church created this first Friday Jewish service and incorporates Jewish learning in its adult education classes on all six of its campuses. This megachurch of 36,000 also gives the initial one percent of its tithes and offerings to ministries that serve the Jewish people. "It's part of the DNA of Gateway," Stone said.

Gateway is only one of many Christian spaces around the world where Jews can foster their identity. In Toulouse, France, Sister Eliana Kurylo, a Jewish Catholic nun from The Community of the Beatitudes, prays Jewish liturgy on the eve of the Sabbath. In Jerusalem, Father Antoine Levy, a Jewish Dominican priest, studies modern Hebrew during a one-year sabbatical from his post in Finland.

Last August, Stone, Kurylo, and Levy joined a group of 40-plus Jewish believers in Jesus from various countries and traditions; they convened at The King's University in Dallas for the First International/Interconfessional Congress of Jewish Disciples of Jesus.

The conference participants were Jewish Christian and Messianic leaders committed to a renewed corporate expression of Jews who believe in Jesus, yet without relinquishing particular ecclesial affiliations. They were motivated by their common lament that,

for nearly two millennia, there has not been an extensive, visible Jewish body of faith in Jesus. Together they grieved that Christianity has been without its Jewish constituency and without the original Jewish orientation in Christian identity. For these attendees, this loss has deeply wounded the Christian church and the Jewish people, which can only be healed by resurrecting a visible Jewish presence within Christianity.

"We are given one chance to stand on our feet as a community," said Levy, co-organizer of the congress. "Unity is bound up in the renewed presence of the Jewish people."

Repairing a Fractured History

Historically, tension between Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus dates back to an early dilemma: how to include Gentiles in the early Jewish Christian community of faith. The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) decided to hold incoming Gentiles to limited Jewish ritual standards. Gentiles eventually eclipsed Jews numerically, and by the fourth century, the issue was reversed, with Gentile leaders questioning the presence of Jewish identity in Christianity.

From that point on, institutional Christianity cut itself off from its Jewish setting, requiring Jews to leave their community and identity in order to believe in Jesus. Within a few centuries, as rabbinic Judaism took shape, its leaders also marginalized Jewish followers of Jesus and put distance between a developing Judaism and an evolving Christianity.

Many attendees of the Dallas congress posit that this first "divorce" not only suppressed Jewish identity but also set a precedent. "The failure of the church to deal successfully with the Jew-Gentile distinction," said Mark Kinzer, a Messianic theologian and co-organizer of the congress, "can be seen as a foundational flaw that set the stage for ruptures and schisms to follow."

The congress stems from the Helsinki Consultation on Jewish Continuity in the Body of Messiah, a smaller group of Messianic Jews, Catholic, Orthodox, and Episcopal Jewish Church leaders worldwide. Evangelical Jewish leaders joined the consultation for the first time at the Dallas meeting. They included Greg Stone of Gateway; David Klein, a Presbyterian (PCA) pastor; and Lee Spitzer, a minister and general secretary of the American Baptist Churches USA.

The Helsinki Consultation has been meeting annually for more than ten years to hash out the theological rationale for Jews who believe in Jesus to maintain a distinctive Jewish identity. Its participants have developed statements that now serve as the core theology for this expanding network. Undergirding their theology are Bible verses about the irrevocability of God's gifts and call to Israel (Rom. 11:29) and Jesus' validation of the law (Matt. 5:17).

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Potential exists for the creation of a large group of loosely defined Jews who believe in Jesus across denominational lines. Projections in the 19th century suggested that up to 300,000 Jews existed across Christian traditions, but current research is inconsistent. A recent LifeWay Research survey, sponsored by Chosen People Ministries (CPM), discovered that more than 870,000 people with one Jewish parent or grandparent attend American evangelical churches. Levy estimates that there are an additional 50,000 to 100,000 Jews in the Russian Orthodox church and about 10,000 Jewish Catholics globally. Jews in Messianic congregations likely figure in the tens of thousands globally.

Jacob vs. Jacob

The congress was an unprecedented gathering, given these Jewish attendees came from a diversity of Christian streams and denominations. Those at the congress view themselves as building on the work of the International Hebrew Christian Alliance, an older fellowship of Protestant Hebrew Christians that began in 1915. This earlier alliance's success was hindered by the Holocaust and the Messianic Jewish community's stronger Jewish orientation, which created a chasm between Jews in churches and those in Messianic congregations.

Messianic Jews have been establishing their own congregations for half a century and could assist their siblings in churches that want to revitalize their Jewish identity. While a majority of Messianic Jews would prefer that Jews in churches join their community, many Jews are attached to their particular affiliations and believe their presence within their denominations provides a concrete connection to the Jewish people and an integrated witness to the kingdom of heaven. For unity to occur among Jewish followers of Jesus, Messianic Jews will need to accept the reasons some Jewish Christians choose to remain committed to their churches, despite the way it can restrict the flourishing of Jewish identity.

A sign of reconciliation occurred at the Dallas congress. Two Messianic Jewish leaders, Monique Brumbach, the executive director of the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations, and Marty Waldman, the senior rabbi of a large Dallas Messianic congregation, expressed regret for having insisted that all Jews should be part of the Messianic congregational community.

“I need to ask God for forgiveness and from my brothers and sisters for judging them,” Waldman said. “As a Messianic Jew with evangelical roots, I professed Jews who joined historical churches were mishugenah [crazy].”

Messianic Jews have striven to emphasize the Jewish context of Christianity for decades. If this new alliance grows, however, so could opposition from Christians and Jews alike.

MARK KINZER, MESSIANIC THEOLOGIAN
AND CO-ORGANIZER OF THE CONGRESS

Many Jews and Christians remain uncomfortable with theologies they believe blur the boundaries between Judaism and Christianity.

Rabbi David Fox Sandmel, director of interfaith affairs at the Anti-Defamation League, admits that joining Jewish identity with belief in Jesus is less of a contradiction today than in the past. He attributes this to the growing appreciation among scholars of the Jewish roots of Christianity and secular or cultural Jews increasingly separating Jewish identity from faith. However, Sandmel maintains that Jewish institutions unequivocally reject Jewish Christians. From the traditional Jewish perspective, core Jewish identity is irrevocable, said Sandmel, “but there is pretty much a consensus that professing belief in Jesus places one outside of the Jewish community.”

Sandmel acknowledges some Jewish Christians have positively impacted the Jewish community, such as Catholic theologian Monsignor John Maria Oesterreicher, who worked to improve Jewish-Catholic relations by repudiating anti-Semitism. Tackling anti-Semitism is an ongoing objective of the congress. Spitzer, who published a book about Baptists hiding Jews during the Holocaust, attended the Congress with this motivation: “I feel that the church of the 21st century needs to proactively find its voice on anti-Semitism.”

The congress shares many key goals with the broader Jewish world. Faydra Shapiro, an Orthodox Jewish observer at the conference and executive director at the Israel Center for Jewish-Christian Relations, said in a *Jerusalem Post* article, “At a time when the mainstream Jewish community finds it so challenging to get Jews to live active and committed Jewish lives, this gathering was an unexpected inspiration.”

Re-Establishing Jews as the People of God

Many scholars believe all streams of Christianity are supersessionist, believing that Israel has been replaced by the Christian church. Such churches will be unlikely to encourage their Jewish brethren to renew their Jewish identity.

Gentiles need to acknowledge they are dual participants in the story of salvation, said Willie James Jennings, associate professor of systematic theology and Africana studies at Yale Divinity School and one of the founding members of the Society for Post-Supersessionist Theology. “Salvation was intended to be us learning how to enter the lives of others—Jews entering the lives of Gentiles, Gentiles entering the lives of Jews,” said Jennings, “figuring out in life together how we would worship and serve and love the one true God through faith in Jesus Christ.”

While some Christians see Jews as the people of God, many have not cultivated a theology that undergirds that

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PASTOR DAVID KLEIN

view. Chosen People's LifeWay survey found that 41 percent of evangelicals do not think that the church has replaced Israel, while 28 percent believe it has (32 percent weren't sure).

Mitch Glaser, president of CPM, has noticed one difference. Most evangelical Christians apply passages about the people of Israel to themselves in light of their own needs, he said. However, he believes that many, when asked directly, would deny the church has replaced the Jewish people. "I call that pragmatic supersessionism," Glaser said.

One of the Protestant attendees in Dallas, pastor David Klein, said his Christian faith has been shaped by Reformed theology, which formally denies that the church has replaced Israel as the people of God. In reality, Klein admitted, the theology effectively erases Israel, and the New Covenant supersedes the Old. Though raised attending a conservative synagogue, Klein recalled, "When I came to faith, I was given the clear impression that faith in Jesus is the doorway out of Judaism into Christianity, and not in any way an entryway into a deeper Jewish life."

During graduate studies and while serving as a Presbyterian pastor, Klein came to a new understanding that encouraged him to think theologically and personally about Jewish life and identity. "It was a moment of genuine insight, followed by genuine horror," he said. He was deeply distressed that his previous understanding had negatively impacted his family, ministry, and personal life.

To address such concerns, the Dallas initiative sees itself as a Jewish support network. Some denominations, such as the Southern Baptists, the Assemblies of God, and the Foursquare churches, have developed communal space for Jews through their own Messianic Jewish fellowships, and the Catholic church maintains an Association of Hebrew Catholics. Still, churches have a long way to go, according to Kinzer.

"It is very difficult for Jews to sustain any kind of Jewish identity and preserve Jewish life within the church context," he said. "It can only happen if something pretty dramatic changes."

Unity Between Jews and Gentiles in the Church

The Dallas congress hopes to restore a space for Jews in churches and renew the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in Christian churches by putting Jesus into the center of Israel's story. For Kinzer, that doesn't imply that all Christians should practice Jewish customs or offer Jewish services. Rather, he hopes that churches—Jewish members or not—would develop a sense that their identity is intertwined with the Jewish people. This could be acknowledged through church rituals, in prayers, and by forming relationships with Jewish people. Kinzer sees the

Lord's Supper as the ideal time for Jews and Gentiles to celebrate together and reflect the unity in diversity of the kingdom of heaven.

Some Christians, especially abroad, have grasped the centrality of the Jewish people to their faith, as witnessed by Ephraim Radner, a Jewish Episcopal priest, a theology professor at Wycliffe College, and an attendee at the Dallas conference. Radner warmly recalls the sermon that Archbishop Samuel Sindamuka preached at his ordination in Burundi in the 1980s. The archbishop was astonished that a Jewish savior, born from the ancient line of Abraham, would welcome into his fold a Gentile nation (the Barundi), who would in turn ordain a Jewish man, Radner, from the new world.

Sindamuka had asked his congregation to marvel at this divine ordering of history that brought Jews and Gentiles together. Through Radner's ordination, the archbishop had seen a glimpse of when God will "bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ" (Eph. 1:10).

Yet according to Radner, the archbishop understood that within that unity exists a distinction between the nations of the world and Jewish Israel. "The genealogy was not something to be surpassed in Christ," said Radner, "but lifted up as a confirmation, in the present, of God's reality and truth for others. Not only can one not shed one's Jewishness in this context; to do so would be to deny the reality of God for others."

This expanding fellowship of Jewish believers in Jesus is still in its infancy. The conference last summer produced a resolution on identity and vision and established a steering committee to strategize ways to approach Jews in varied church settings. Organizers are planning another congress to be held by 2020.

While promising, an extensive alliance of Messianic Jews and Jewish Christians, represented in part by the Dallas conference, still faces uncertainty. Jews across all streams of Christianity exist as individuals and small groups, but the question remains whether they will want to form such a broad, determined, and visible union—together with the established Messianic Jewish community—that could also eventuate a long-lost unity in the body of believers in Jesus and with the broader Jewish world.

"It's kind of like trying to awaken a slumbering giant," Kinzer said.

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