

Gentiles in the Messianic Movement

H Bruce Stokes, Ph.D.

Editor's note: This article is a revision of a paper presented to the International Messianic Jewish Alliance meeting in Puerto Vallarta Mexico in 1997. It also appeared as the cover article for the first edition of *The Messianic Jew*, a magazine published by the International Messianic Jewish Alliance

The Messianic movement is a revitalization of Jewish ethnicity, as well as certain aspects of first-century Judaism, based on the belief that Yeshua (Jesus of Nazareth) is the Messiah promised to Israel. The movement includes both Jews (openly defined) and non-Jews. Messianic Judaism holds that Torah observance (the laws of Moses) is normative for Messianic Jews. Messianic congregations also include non-Jewish (Gentile) participants. In many cases, the role of Gentiles in Messianic congregations and the larger Messianic movement is unclear. This article will attempt to address the need for clarification of the role that Gentiles can play in the Messianic movement.

Types of Gentile Involvement

Gentile participants in the Messianic congregations fall into several categories that are described as follows:

1. Some Gentiles are what have been described as "wanna-be Jews." These Gentiles have come to the conclusion that God has "called" them to be Jewish. They often wear kippahs and are sometimes unwilling to be totally honest about their Gentile identity.
2. A second group includes Gentiles who find Jewish ethnicity attractive and find meaning and fulfillment in Messianic styles of worship. By copying Jewish ethnicity, these Gentiles seek to demonstrate their love of the Jewish people and the Jewish roots of Christianity.
5. A third group of Gentiles has come to the theological position that the Torah is equally binding on Jews and Gentiles. The result is a loss of Jewish--Gentile distinction.
4. A fourth group is made up of Gentiles married to Jewish spouses. These Gentiles engage in some forms of Torah observance and Jewish practices in an attempt to bring their children up in a home that reflects the children's Jewish heritage.
5. Finally, there are Gentiles who have joined the Messianic movement out of a desire to minister faith in Yeshua as contextually relevant to Jews.

The Problem

The problem of the Messianic movement with regard to the issue of Torah observance is complicated by the presence of these Gentile groups in the congregations. This problem gives the non-Messianic Jewish community a picture of the movement as made up of few actual Jews.

Jews and Gentiles in the Early Faith Community

The original disciples of Yeshua were Jewish. They were Jewish by birth and religion. Their belief that Yeshua was the Messiah did not stop their Torah observance. It did, however, alter their way of observance in some areas. Within a short time Gentiles called God-fearers were included in the Body of the Messiah. The Book of Acts explains how, as the faith spread into the pagan Gentile community, some among the Jewish believers began to teach that the Gentiles must become Jewish in order to be saved. The apostles and the Jerusalem congregation discussed the issue and determined that these pagan Gentiles did not need to become Jewish to be saved. But some observance of the Torah was placed upon them, namely, abstinence from items identified with idols, fornication, things strangled, and blood (Acts 15).

One Lord, One Faith, Two Expressions

The brief history of the two groups (Jews and Gentiles) living in the unity of the Spirit was to give way to a split that the first-century congregation could not have imagined. As the Messianic Jews became alienated from their fellow Jews, because of theological and historical events, they also began to be outnumbered by their Gentile counterparts in the church. As primitive Christianity gave way to Roman Christianity, the place of Jews, and things Jewish (including Torah observance) became increasingly small. The result was a loss of the distinctive roles of Jew and Gentile in the Body. This led to a historical Christian church where Jews had to abandon both ethnicity (family) and Torah observance (religion) to believe in the Messiah. As the church entered the Dark Ages, little remained of the Jewish roots of Christianity.

A Flicker of Hope

With the Reformation, there was a flicker of hope when Martin Luther realized the purpose of God to place Jew as Jew and Gentile as Gentile into a Messianic community of faith. His attempt to open dialog with the Jewish community was understandably rejected. His resulting wrath at the Jews from that point guaranteed that Jew and Gentile would not find unity in the Messiah for several centuries.

In the 1800s, the modern Hebrew-Christian movement slowly attempted to restore Jewish identity to Hebrew-Christians, and once again declare a Jewish Gospel to Jewish people. This movement gave rise and opportunity to the current Messianic movement with its congregational emphasis.

The Present Task

Today, Messianic Jews struggle with the question of religious expression. Are they Israelites? Do they identify with Israel by observance of the Torah covenant? How do they observe Torah? To what extent can the history of Rabbinic Judaism inform that observance? And how do primitive Gentile Christians and Messianic Gentiles participate in that process without confusing the issues? How can the five groups of Gentiles in the Messianic movement play a productive role? The Book of Ephesians declares that God has made Jews and Gentiles into one new man in the Messiah. This new man is neither Jew nor Gentile. This must be understood. The major error that must be avoided is to make Jews into Gentiles and Gentiles into Jews. Jews and Gentiles must remain authentic in their own identity or the unity Of the Body of the Messiah cannot be seen. The Body of the Messiah must show a unity-Jew and Gentile united by one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

The Gentile Role

Gentile believers have been grafted into the root of Israel. They are no longer strangers or aliens, but fellow citizens with the saints (Eph. 2:19). But they are not Jews. Paul gives a clear and significant guideline when he tells those called in circumcision to "not seek to be uncircumcised, and those who were called in uncircumcision to not become circumcised" (I Cor. 7:18). The Gentiles in the movement have at least two Biblical roles to play in the Body of the Messiah. One is to identify with Israel. Another is to provoke unbelieving Israel to envy.

Identifying With Israel

The primary role of Gentiles in the Body of the Messiah is to identify with Israel. To identify with Israel is different from identifying as Israel. As Gentiles, our struggle must be to show that we have been brought into a relationship with the God of

Abraham without being a replacement of Israel. But there is a danger here. If Gentiles lose their own identity and become copy-cat Jews, or if the differences become hidden, the purpose for the body to be both Jew and Gentile in one new man will be lost.

Provoking Israel

A second, significant role for Gentiles is to provoke unbelieving Israel to envy. Indeed, this role is used as an explanation for God's bringing Gentiles to salvation (Rom. 11:11). This role involves an authenticity in obedience to the commands of God that makes unbelieving Israel envious that she is not participating in what is rightfully hers. Too often Christians and Messianic Gentiles provoke Israel to apathy (by not having significance in what we do) or to anger (by preaching replacement theology or acting like Jews). The role of the Gentile in the body must include an attractiveness in obedience that provokes unbelieving Jews to envy Therefore, I believe that we can best fulfill this role by Torah observance that is consistent with the Torah commands but is distinctive with regard to Jews and Gentiles.

For example, the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 makes it clear that Gentiles are to abstain from blood. This command was not an option for Gentiles. It was an essential item. As a Gentile, when I observe this command in the presence of unbelieving Jews, or discuss my observance in their presence, I am often engaged in conversations regarding Judaism, Messiah, and other related topics. Another example is the Sabbath. In our home, we celebrate the Sabbath in a manner similar, but not identical, to the traditions of Judaism. All of the Torah's commands and elements of Judaism are present. But the form is distinct. Our Jewish neighbors who know of our observance sometimes express a desire to have what is rightfully theirs. They see an authenticity in what we do that reminds them of childhood Sabbaths at home. We are often asked why we observe the Sabbath. We respond with the text from Isaiah 56:6-8 which tells of the Gentiles who keep the Sabbath. Jewish and Gentile believers must work together to protect our separate identities while becoming one new man in the Body of the Messiah.

One Additional Role

One additional role is incumbent upon us because of the present lack of Messianic understanding within the historic church. Messianic Gentiles must make the movement understandable to Christians who have no idea of the Jewish roots of their faith. If Gentiles are absorbed into the movement and lose their Gentile distinctions, the historical church, like unbelieving Israel, will ignore us or become angered. There is a great need for authentic Gentile believers to identify with Messianic Jews and assist the remnant of Israel in being a light unto the Gentiles.

Getting Started

So what are we to do? I believe the first step is a recognition that Jews and Gentiles each have a role to play in the Body of the Messiah and the Messianic movement. The roles are distinct as we are distinct. We need authentic Jewish believers who observe the Torah in a manner that "fulfills their role to identify as Israel and to be a light unto the Gentiles". We also need authentic Gentiles who understand their distinctive role to identify with Israel and to provoke Unbelieving Israel to envy.

We must also address the groups of Gentiles already participating in the movement who fall into the five categories of involvement described earlier. How do they grow from their present participation into the role as described here? The "wanna-be" problem must be addressed with sensitivity and candor. While it may be the smallest group, it is the one that has the most potential to cause serious damage. The problem is either a misunderstanding of what being Jewish means in the plan of God, or an identity conflict within the person. It is not a biblical doctrine that God calls some Gentiles to be Jewish believers.

The group of Gentiles who enjoy the Jewish flavor of the Messianic worship style must be careful to not confuse ethnicity with Torah commandments. The Torah addresses the Jew as a light to the Gentiles. This is accomplished by observance of the Torah commands. There is nothing wrong with the Hebrew dancing and

singing, but this is not the essence of what God is doing in reviving Judah. I would suggest a serious attempt to learn as much as possible about Jewish expression but make the focus of your study the Torah commands related to Gentiles.

To those who believe that the commands of God are identical to the Jew and the Gentile, the danger of Judaizing becomes a real concern. This group must find a way to establish a form of non-Jewish religiosity that embodies the essence of the Torah commands without simply copying everything that Jews do.

The Gentile married to a Messianic Jew is in a unique situation that must be addressed with great care. In the case of a Gentile man married to a Jewish woman, it is clear that maintaining the identity of the children is a significant goal. There is also a Biblical precedent for a woman married to a Jewish man to be absorbed into the community of Israel (Ruth). While conversion of these individuals is a possibility, and I am open on this question, it adds to the problem of acceptance by the larger Jewish community. Regardless of the disposition of the Gentile spouse, if the children are raised in an authentic observant manner, their identity will be questioned less by themselves and the larger Jewish community.

To those who, like myself, have been involved in the Messianic movement because of a desire to see an authentic Messianic Judaism that can be presented to the Jewish community with integrity, there is a need to be informed in the content and observance of Torah so that Messianic Judaism is encouraged to grow in authentic observance. We also need to maintain our obedience to Torah commands in a manner that is clearly Biblical-but-distinct from Jewish expression so that we identify with Israel but not as Israel.

In addition, we must reintroduce the Torah basis for the New Covenant among our Gentile brethren so that they will embrace observant Messianic Jews as their brethren and move toward the unity that God intended.

1996 H. Bruce Stokes. All rights reserved.