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Towards a Recognition of the ‘Jewish Church’: the Messianic Jewish Movement and Christianity in Dialogue

Evert Van de Poll

The Messianic Jewish movement presents unique theological and diplomatic challenges not just to the Jews whom they hope will come to honour Jesus Christ but to other Christian groups as well. This summary of a July 2022 conference clarifies the issues in a dispassionate, definitive way.

The international symposium titled ‘Jesus: Also the Messiah for Israel? Messianic Jewish Movement and Christianity in Dialogue’, which took place in Vienna on 11–13 July 2022, could well be called a unique event. Over 80 participants from the USA, Israel and numerous European countries gathered in a lecture hall of the stately, renowned University of Vienna to reflect on the relationship between the Messianic Jewish movement and Christian churches. They represented a range of faith traditions and theological persuasions: Messianic Jewish, Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, Evangelical and Charismatic.

In recent decades, there have been a number of meetings between Messianic Jewish leaders and representatives of Christian churches. Notable examples include the Helsinki Consultations of Messianic Jewish and Gentile Christian theologians between 2010 and 2018,¹ and the movement called Toward a Second Jerusalem Council (TJC2). The latter organizes national and regional meetings, aiming at ‘repentance and reconciliation between the Jewish and Gentile segments of the Body of Messiah’.² But never before has such a broad spectrum of participants come together as at this symposium, held by TJC2 and the Catholic Theological Faculty of the University of Vienna. It included key persons already involved in the Helsinki

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1 This series of theological consultations began at Helsinki in 2010 and concluded at Dallas in 2018. There have not been notable activities since then. See <https://worlddea.org/yourls/47101>.

2 Founded in 1996, TJC2 is an international organization with branches in various countries and regions of the world. Its aims are recognition, repentance and reconciliation, on an official level, with respect to the place of the Jewish believers in the body of Christ/Messiah. See <https://worlddea.org/yourls/47102>.

Consultations, TJC2 and other Messianic-Christian encounters, as well as representatives of the wider academic theological world. The event took place under the official patronage of Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, Archbishop of Vienna.

Over the years, I have become quite used to colloquia and seminars, but in retrospect I am still amazed at the pace, organization, multiplicity and diversity of topics of this symposium: 25 papers at a solid scientific level presented by top theologians, most of them delivered in pairs with one speaker reacting to another, plus the rounds of questions and some plenary discussions, all condensed into just over two days. (See the list of papers in the appendix to this article.) There was no time to see any of beautiful Vienna during those two days. We never wandered further than the restaurant across the road in front of the university!

We received a heart-warming reception at the Archbishop's Palace, where Cardinal Schönborn surprised the participants with a moving personal retrospective on the role of the Catholic Church in Austria with respect to persecuted Jews during the Second World War.

The heart of the matter for Messianic Jews

What was the essence of this series of studies? I asked that question not only to myself but also during a plenary discussion, if only to clarify what was at stake. The answer is not the same for Jewish believers as for Gentile believers in Jesus the Messiah/Christ.

'Messianic' Jewish believers

A growing proportion of Jesus-believing Jews consider themselves the visible Jewish presence in the church, in continuity with the Jewish assemblies of Jesus-followers in Jerusalem and Judea at the very beginning of church history. Much like the first followers of Jesus in the New Testament, they remain attached to their Jewish ethnic and sociocultural identity. For them, Jewish identity is not only essential with respect to their faith in Jesus as the Messiah of Israel, but also existential. 'We simply cannot deny who we are. We are Jews, it is in our veins', exclaimed Antoine Levy, one of the speakers, at an emotional moment in the plenary discussion.

These Jesus-believers want to remain part of the Jewish people and be recognized as such in both the Christian and the Jewish communities at large. That is why they call themselves 'Messianic' rather than 'Christian'. The two terms have the same etymological meaning; 'Christian' comes from the Greek *christianos*, meaning a follower of Christ, and Christ comes from *christos*, which is simply the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *mashiah* or Messiah. But the two have very different connotations, especially in the Jewish world, where anything 'Christian' is considered non-Jewish by definition, or even anti-Jewish.

These Jesus-believers have developed a deliberately Jewish expression of their faith in Jesus Messiah, although they are far from agreeing among themselves as to exactly how this should be given form or to what extent they should observe the commandments of Torah, which are so central to the practice of Judaism. And to what extent should they adopt rites and customs that have developed in rabbinic Judaism? Those who emphasize the need for Torah observance sometimes speak of the Messianic Jewish movement as Messianic Judaism, treating it as in fact a branch

of Judaism alongside the other branches (Orthodox, Reform/Liberal, Conservative/Massorti, Haredi).³

Jesus-believing Jews also have different views on whether they wish to live out and shape their Jewish identity within existing churches or in distinct Messianic congregations. 'Only about 10 per cent of them choose the second option', according to well-known theologian Richard Harvey. That would be around 15,000 of the total of about 150,000 Messianic Jews worldwide.⁴

On the basis of the latest available statistical data, Harvey and other researchers have proposed this conservative global estimate of 150,000 Jesus-believing Jews who identify as 'Messianic'. This would represent 1 percent of the total Jewish world population (over 15 million). This figure excludes those others who identify as Hebrew Catholics, Jews in the Orthodox Churches, or Israeli Christians of uncertain Jewish status from the former Soviet Union.⁵ Harvey deliberately uses this conservative estimate to counter the exaggerated numbers sometimes put forward in publications about the Messianic movement.

Moreover, he uses the halachic, orthodox Jewish criterion of who is a Jew, i.e. a person born of a Jewish mother or who is a recognized convert to Judaism. If one uses the broader criterion of the Law of Return of the State of Israel, i.e. a person who has at least one Jewish grandparent, the numbers are much higher. Harvey estimates that there are approximately 715,000 Jesus-believers 'with a Jewish background', or almost 3 percent of the world Jewish population (estimated at over 24 million according to this broader criterion). But significantly, in Harvey's statistics the number of Jewish members of Messianic congregations does not rise above the already-mentioned figure of 15,000. In other words, believers who are Jewish according to the broader criterion of 'having a Jewish background' almost always affiliate with existing Christian churches.

Unity and distinction

At any rate, these figures are tiny relative to the overall Christian population. In purely quantitative terms, the Messianic Jewish movement is quite insignificant. It can therefore be easily overlooked by those who concentrate on the mainstream of church populations. But in qualitative terms, it is of paramount importance, at least according to the 'Messianics' themselves, because it represents the visible presence of the Jewish church without which the church of Jesus Christ would not be complete. And this brings us to what is at stake for them in the dialogue with Christianity.

For these believers, Jewish identity is not only an existential matter but also theologically significant. The reasoning is as follows. Through the eternal God's covenant with Abraham, his offspring the people of Israel were destined to be a channel of blessing for all nations. Since this covenant has been neither annulled nor replaced by the New Covenant, it is still valid, which means that the people of Israel are still chosen to play a role in God's plan for the salvation of the world. This makes

3 See e.g. David Rudolph and Joel Willits (eds.), *Introduction to Messianic Judaism: Its Ecclesial Context and Biblical Foundation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013).

4 Richard Harvey, 'Introducing the Messianic Reality', symposium paper of 11 July 2022.

5 Harvey, 'Introducing the Messianic Reality'.

Jewish survival not only an existential but also a theological necessity, including for those who believe in Jesus as the Messiah. That is why 'Messianic' Jewish believers insist that they should not be assimilated into the mass of Gentile believers, because that would surely lead in due time to the disappearance of a recognizable Jewish identity—through intermarriage, lack of Jewish education for the next generation, and loss of connection with the living Jewish community. On the contrary, they value their ethnic and cultural-religious identity alongside that of the believers from other nations, and they seek to express this in practical ways.

Mutual recognition

Moreover, Messianic Jewish believers are keen that the churches officially recognize the enduring calling of the people of Israel and the need for Jesus-believing Jews to maintain and express their identity as part of that people. When it comes to salvation by grace, there is no distinction between Jews and Gentiles (Gal 3:27), but with regard to living out that faith, believers will always express it in accordance with a particular cultural and ethnic context. This applies to all Christians in general, and particularly to Jewish believers. So they want the churches to make room, theologically and practically, for a Jewish expression of faith in Jesus.

Just as Gentile believers are not required to become Jews to belong to the people of God, the Messianic movement contends, Jewish believers should not be pressured to become like the Gentiles. Even as the first Jerusalem council (Acts 15) dispensed Gentile believers from fully observing all the laws of the Torah, except four basic laws that were made obligatory, so Gentile believers should recognize that this decision did not concern the Jewish followers of Jesus, and that the latter should maintain their Jewish identity through a Jewish liturgical expression and a Jewish way of life. Hence the idea of a so-called Second Council of Jerusalem, which means that church leaders should somehow—through a kind of synod or council or common declaration—officially take a position in favour of the Jewish Church.

The heart of the matter: key questions for churches from the nations

Marginalization of Jewish believers in Jesus

There is a long history of marginalization of Jesus-believing Jews and of their assimilation to a Gentile Christian environment, often by force. In the early centuries, several historical church councils explicitly forbade 'Jewish practices'. This contributed to the marginalization and even extinction of the Judeo-Christian communities at that time. Living a Jewish life became ecclesiastically illegal. The disappearance of Jewish believers *as Jews* also had repercussions for the development of Christian doctrine. The Jewish perspective was lost. Significantly, there were no Jewish participants at the ecumenical councils of the fourth and fifth centuries where epoch-making doctrinal decisions were made. Gentile Christian theologians developed their ideas of the 'new Israel', their catechisms and their eschatology, their liturgy and their calendar, their church structure and their pastoral practices—all without reckoning with any form of Jewish presence in the church.

Return of the Jewish voice

For a long time, the churches got away with this, because the Jewish voice had been almost totally silenced. Since the end of the 18th century, this voice has begun to be heard again, first among some isolated groups of Jewish believers here and there, then through the movement of Hebrew Christians in England and many other countries, and since the 1970s through the Messianic Jewish movement, which is steadily growing.

Since the early centuries, the recognizable Jewish presence in the universal church has been marginalized more and more and finally virtually excluded. The return of this forgotten part of the church, through the Messianic Jewish movement and Jesus-believing Jews in general, means that a Jewish voice can again be heard in the church.

When the movement of Hebrew Christians emerged within the wider Protestant-Evangelical stream, theologians and church leaders, including many Evangelicals, had a problem with their practice of circumcision and other Jewish festivals, rites and customs, condemning it as 'legalism', a return to 'being under the law', or a way to obtain salvation through 'works of the law'. The same critique is still voiced sometimes with respect to the current Messianic Jewish movement. Jewish believers consider this a serious misunderstanding of their motives.

The key question is whether the Jewish voice will be not only heard but also understood and taken seriously. Can Jewish believers have a voice in discussions of Christian theology, church administration, the renewal of liturgy, or the practice of evangelism and mission? Are other Christian participants in the current Jewish-Christian dialogue prepared to adjust their thinking and practice in the light of their encounter with the Messianic Jewish movement? These are crucial questions for Gentile Christian theologians and church leaders today; they constitute the heart of the matter for churches from the nations, and they have far-reaching consequences for all areas of church and theology, as was amply demonstrated at the symposium in Vienna.

Church of Jews and church of Gentiles

Jan Heiner Tück, Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Vienna, invited the participants and their respective churches to make amends and to take up these challenging questions as he summarized the principles of the symposium:

We assume that the Jew Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah of Israel and the Nations. He has come—and will come again—in order to unite what is separated and to establish the Kingdom in its final fullness.

We assume that the church was from the beginning a church of Jews and Gentiles. But already in the first centuries, the *ecclesia ex gentibus* has been more and more pushed aside by the *ecclesia ex circumcissione*, which has finally completely forgotten her. The return of the excluded church of the Jews through Jesus-believing Jews in the 19th century and the Messianic Jewish movement in the 20th century has to be interpreted as a sign for the churches. It should be

recognized as such in the conversation between Messianic Jews and Christian theologians.⁶

The organizers of the symposium realized very well that such a position has considerable consequences. It calls on the churches to critically re-examine their theology—especially their Christology, church doctrine, eschatology and liturgy—in the light of this sign.

Versus 'two ways of salvation' theology and replacement theology

The symposium title, 'Jesus—Also the Messiah for Israel?', was deliberately chosen to clarify the position of its organizers within the broader field of the relationship between the church and Israel, and in particular the Jewish-Christian dialogue. First, it alludes to the 'two ways' theology of two parallel paths to salvation, which holds that the people of Israel come to salvation through the way of the Torah while the Gentiles find salvation through Jesus Christ. An example of this view is a recent document from the Conversation Group of Jews and Christians, of the Central Committee of German Catholics, which affirms, 'We confess that God's covenant with the Jewish people means a way of salvation to God—even without acknowledging Jesus Christ.'⁷ But this would imply that there are two peoples of God, one Jewish and the other Christian. How could that be? Doesn't this view make God into a bigamist, as Robert Spaemann put it? The symposium organizers shared this critique and wanted to steer away from the doctrine of two ways of salvation.

Second, the title alludes to the doctrine of replacement, which posits the rejection of Israel in God's plan and its replacement by the church, the new Israel. Several speakers argued that this doctrine is 'in need of revision'. In the words of Dieter Böhler, the replacement doctrine makes of God 'someone who has divorced his first wife to marry a new partner'.

The title of the symposium was applied to three specific areas, bringing to light its theological implications for Christology, ecclesiology and eschatology, respectively.

The Jewish Jesus, King of the Jews

The first major theme was that Jesus was and still is the King of the Jews. The Messianic movement emphasizes the Jewish identity of Jesus and his faithfulness to the Torah. This is for them an affirmation and an appreciation of their own Jewish identity and an example to follow.

This emphasis on the Jewishness of Jesus corresponds to the trend in Christian theology in general, in its endeavour to bring to light the historical Jesus. For Christology, this means that the doctrine of incarnation—the Word become flesh in Jesus of Nazareth—is concretized: the eternal Word has become a Jew. But this is generally speaking a matter of history. The question of what this implies for the

6 Jan Heiner Tück, 'Introduction to the Theme and Subthemes of the Symposium', symposium paper of 11 July 2022.

7 Quoted by Tück, 'Introduction to the Theme'. The subsequent quotations from Spaemann and Böhler were also cited in Tück's paper.

relation between Jesus and the present Jewish people remains unanswered. For Christians, ‘Christ’ has become a sort of surname of Jesus, without realizing that it means Messiah, King of the Jews.

At the same time, Jewish authors have paid much attention to Jesus as a Jew, who practised the Torah and lived a Jewish life. As such, the historical Jesus is fully part of Jewish history. His person and his message are part of Second Temple Judaism. But this reappraisal of the figure of Jesus does not include a recognition of his messiahship.

The conviction that Jesus was, and therefore still is, the King of the Jews is at the heart of the Messianic Jewish movement. This belief of course distinguishes them from their wider Jewish environment, the vast majority of whom do not share this conviction. It also corrects the image that many Christians have of Jesus.

In a fascinating talk, the well-known Messianic theologian Mark Kinzer showed that Jesus was not only King of the Jews until his crucifixion—as Christians would generally agree—but also a Jewish king in his resurrection, ascension and glorification, and that He will return as the Jewish King of the Jews, something which Christians often forget. His Jewish humanity and his kingship over the Jews are not the temporal clothes of the first coming of the Messiah, but his enduring characteristics. This means not only that there was a special relationship between Jesus and the Jewish people of his day—a point on which Jews and Christians agree—but that he remains uniquely related to Israel, the Jewish people, throughout history. Therefore, he is also related to the Jewish people of today. In a way that we cannot fathom, he is still connected to this people as King of the Jews, including to that portion who does not believe in him as Messiah. Consequently, the whole church which confesses him as Messiah is also connected to that people. ‘Built in the conviction that Jesus still is the King of the Jews is the connection between Christianity on the one hand and Judaism and the Jews on the other.’⁸

Unity and distinction: Jewish church and Gentile church

The second major theme of the symposium was ecclesiology. Christian thinking is traditionally dominated by a universalistic ecclesiology which capitalizes on Galatians 3:27: ‘In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free.’ In so doing, it tends to downplay concerns about identity.

One and two: bilateral ecclesiology

Messianic authors, on the contrary, insist that the body of Christ/Messiah is composed of two basic categories: the church of the Jews (*ecclesia ex circumcisione*) and the church of the nations (*ecclesia ex gentibus*). Their main New Testament reference is Ephesians 2, which develops the principle of ‘the one new man’, composed of Jews and Gentiles. They argue that this unity precisely presupposes the specific identity of each of the two groups.

Behind the Greek text, we should understand the Hebrew thinking that underlies it. The concept of ‘one’ in this passage should be understood against the background

⁸ Mark Kinzer, ‘Jesus, King of the Jews: A Messianic Jewish Perspective’, symposium paper of 12 July 2022.

of the Hebrew *echad*, which means 'one' not in the sense of uniformity or singularity, but in the sense of a conjunction, connection or covenant of two separate entities. Viewed from this angle, the Church is not complete when one of the two components is missing.

Messianic authors often quote 1 Corinthians 7:17–19, where Paul teaches as 'a rule for all churches' that 'each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them.' They argue that this rule not only summarizes the preceding section on married life (7:1–16) but applies in an analogous way to Jews and Gentiles in the church, because Paul continues, 'Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised.' According to the Messianic Jewish reading of this passage, Jewish and Gentile believers should remain in the state or life condition in which they were when they came to faith in Jesus. In a detailed exegetical study of this passage, David Rudolph concludes that 'this situation, this setting-in-life in which the call of God has reached one, is now (by extension) itself described as a "call".' Therefore, Jewish believers have a calling to live out their faith 'as Jews', i.e. in a Jewish way.⁹

Mark Kinzer has called this Jewish-Gentile variegation the 'bilateral ecclesiology in solidarity with Israel'—a label that has caught on in recent years among Messianic authors and Christian theologians sympathetic to their cause. During the symposium, this was a catch phrase that dominated the discussions of ecclesiology.

Restored catholicity

This view of the church as a bi-unity of the *ecclesia ex circumcisione* and the *ecclesia ex gentibus* sheds new light on the catholicity or universality of the church. In fact, this catholicity was lost with the disappearance of the Judeo-Christian communities in the first centuries of the common era. 'The Catholic Church needs Messianic Judaism to restore the fulness of catholicity', affirmed the Messianic Dominican Antoine Levy and the German dogmatist Ursula Schumacher in their respective presentations. What they said with respect to the Catholic Church applies in fact to all churches which profess the universality of the church through the Apostles' Creed.

The 'church of the Jews' is not only a theoretical, theological concept; it also has very practical implications as the Jewish expression of the faith takes form within the historical, socio-cultural and religious context of this particular people.

Messianic Christian dialogue, in several streams

Closely linked to the second theme is the conversation between the Messianic Jewish movement and Christian churches, the two branches of the church according to 'bilateral ecclesiology'. That conversation is now possible again, after so many centuries of separation between the Christian and Jewish worlds. This symposium was a fine example.

9 David Rudolph, 'Paul's "Rule in all the Churches" (1 Cor 7:17–24) and Torah-Defined Ecclesiological Variegation', *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 5 (2010): 3.

Dialogue: intra-Christian, Jewish-Christian and intra-Jewish

This symposium was a form of intra-Christian dialogue, about the place of the Messianic Jewish movement, or rather all Jesus-believing Jews in the church at large. This is quite different from a dialogue between Jesus-believing Jews and representatives of the various streams of Judaism. To date, this intra-Jewish dialogue is not taking place. We can only hope that this will come to pass, because Messianic Jews are situated not only within the Christian tradition but also within the Jewish people.

Even an intra-Christian dialogue with Messianic Jews is not at all a simple matter for the historical churches. Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed and other ecumenical Protestant churches, which are engaged in some way or another in Jewish-Christian dialogue, fear that their relations with Jews will be jeopardized by also having an official conversation with the Messianic movement. Particularly complicating the matter is the fact that Messianic Jews are no longer recognized as Jews by other forms of Judaism, because (1) they have joined ‘another religion’ (i.e. Christianity) and (2) they have a reputation for wanting to evangelize and ‘convert’ other Jews.

But churches cannot avoid this conversation, because all Christians share with Messianic Jews the same fundamental conviction that Jesus is the Messiah/Christ. This binds them together as brothers and sisters in the faith. Moreover, the growing Messianic Jewish movement can no longer be ignored, as it has been all too often until now.

The remarkable role of the Catholic Church

In this respect, it is noteworthy that the Catholic Church has indeed changed its course. In 2004, a year before he became Pope Benedict XVI, Joseph Ratzinger met with representatives of TJC2. On that occasion, he spoke of an ‘eschatological sign’, namely that more and more Jews were coming to faith in Jesus, the Messiah of Israel and the nations, ‘without the influence of the church’—that is, independent of any organized Christian evangelization.¹⁰

Benedict’s predecessor Pope John Paul II had already recognized the significance of the Messianic Jewish movement. For this reason, he established a theological study group in 2000, which began its work under Cardinal Georges Cottier and continued under Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, who led it until 2020. No wonder, then, that the symposium took place in Vienna, the home city not only of Cardinal Schönborn but also of his close associate Johannes Fichtenbauer, who coordinated the organization of the symposium, and the late Father Peter Hocken who had done valuable preparatory work for many years.

As for Pope Francis, he has expressed an explicit desire to deepen the dialogue between Christian theology and the Messianic Jewish movement.

Ecumenical Protestants: hardly any attention

Such a rapprochement is almost completely lacking in ecumenical Protestant churches and in the circles of the World Council of Churches. They do not seem to

¹⁰ Johannes Fichtenbauer, one of the organizers of the symposium who was present at that meeting, reported this in his welcoming address on 11 July 2022.

see the 'sign', nor do they recognize the need for dialogue. The same observation can be made concerning the vast majority of conservative national Protestant churches. Messianic Jews are systematically excluded from theological reflections, even when the topic concerns the relationship between the church and Israel. Their views and experiences are rarely taken into consideration.

From my own experience, I know how this works in the French Protestant Federation, where I am a member of the Commission for Relations with Judaism. We are engaged in all sorts of activities of Jewish-Christian dialogue. Recently, we prepared for publication a *Compendium* of all major declarations of representative Protestant bodies on the relationship between the (Protestant) churches and Israel, in France and surrounding countries.¹¹ The introductory chapter explicitly states that the Messianic Jewish movement was left out of the picture, even though the *Compendium* does include the 'Willowbank Declaration' of a group of non-Jewish Evangelical theologians sympathetic to the cause of Jewish believers.¹² My insistence on including texts from representative Messianic Jewish bodies did not carry enough weight to convince the commission.

Another recent example: in 2019, the Anglican Church published the declaration *God's Unfailing Word*, its first official document on the relationship between Jews and Christians.¹³ It recognizes that the Anglican Church has had a long history of Jewish evangelism. But even though there has always been a considerable presence of Hebrew Christians and Messianic Jews, representatives of the latter group were not involved in the writing process and their concerns were left out of the picture. The document honestly recognizes this fact: "The emergence over the last fifty years of the movement known as "Messianic Judaism" raises some difficult questions for the historic churches ... addressing them does not fall within the scope of this chapter."¹⁴

Many individual Protestant theologians and pastors take an interest in the Messianic movement and meet with Messianic Jews on a personal level, but their actions have had no implications for the official policies of their churches. Rather, they are a minority in their own context.

The challenges of the dialogue

But let us suppose that an official dialogue takes place between Messianic and Protestant church leaders, and that the dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church also becomes more official. What, then, are the challenges?

First, creating better understanding from both sides; getting to know more about the Messianic movement and helping Jewish believers to better understand church traditions.

11 Serge Wüthrich (ed.), *Les relations entre chrétiens et juifs. Compendium de textes protestants* (Paris and Lyon: Fédération Protestante de France and Olivétan, 2022).

12 'Willowbank Declaration on the Christian Gospel and the Jewish People', Lausanne Committee on World Evangelisation, 1988. See <https://worldidea.org/yourls/47103>.

13 Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England, *God's Unfailing Word: Theological and Practical Perspectives on Christian-Jewish Relations* (London, Church House, 2019).

14 Faith and Order Commission, *God's Unfailing Word*, 59, in the section on 'Mission and Evangelism'.

Also, recognizing the wrongs of the past with respect to Jesus-believing Jews, which can lead to reconciliation.

And then, identifying points of theological discussion in the areas of Christology, (bilateral) ecclesiology and eschatology, so as to arrive at a proper recognition of the Jewish church.

As stated above, the idea of a two-fold church is not just a nice doctrine but has tremendous practical implications. Messianic Jews will ask the church to make room for Jewish–Gentile diversity on all levels. Messianic leaders will ask churches to allow Jewish believers to express their faith in Jesus in a Jewish way. This implies liturgical forms and texts related to Jewish tradition, celebration of biblical and Jewish festivals and commemorations, creeds and catechisms that include the place of Israel in God’s plan, teaching material on Jewish history and heritage alongside Christian history and heritage, and so on. They might also ask to have distinct Messianic congregations within the larger denominational structure.

All this is necessary from a Messianic Jewish point of view, but problematic from the church’s point of view, because they are used to a uniformity of liturgy, doctrine and teaching.

But is this really so difficult as it seems at first sight? The Roman Catholic Church already has a number of Hebrew-speaking parishes in Israel, where the liturgy is adapted to the Israeli context. Some Protestant churches have developed a diversity in doctrine, teaching material and liturgical formats, to make room for different streams within their midst. Why not extend this diversity to groups of Messianic Jewish believers?

The Evangelical world: different attitudes

In the Evangelical stream of Christianity, things work differently because of its specific character. It is composed of Evangelical church denominations of the ‘free-church type’, as well as an Evangelical or Charismatic cross-section of the membership of historic churches (Catholic, Anglican, Reformed, Lutheran). So who can speak on behalf of Evangelicals? Surely, there are Evangelical Alliances, national and worldwide, overarching the two components of the stream, but their representative status is limited to those denominations and individuals who are members. Their representatives can express, by extension, the views and concerns of all Evangelicals in certain matters, but this does not necessarily engage all Evangelicals in actuality. And it would be difficult for them to ask Evangelical churches to make room in their teaching and worship practice for Messianic Jewish concerns.

There have been numerous contacts between Evangelical and Messianic Jewish pastors and theologians, but these have usually taken the form of personal meetings or incidental conferences. Dialogue on the level of leaders of Evangelical denominations and Messianic Jewish organizations, let alone on the level of Evangelical Alliances, is quite another matter and very rare indeed, to the best of my knowledge. I would be happy to learn about any such examples.

Local autonomy

Evangelicals value, almost by definition, the autonomy of the local congregation. Given this congregationalist mindset in the Evangelical world, it is understandable

that the idea of an overriding national church order is not popular, and even congregations affiliated with a national union or federation generally attach great importance to a maximum level of latitude for the local congregation to decide how things should be done at the congregational level. In practice, this often means complete independence. There are national bodies, but they serve to define common doctrinal positions, coordinate joint activities, discuss general theological matters, organize pastoral training, recognize ministries and provide special services to all congregations. They can also draw up general guidelines for preaching and dealing with ethical issues, for example. But this does not develop into substantial top-down authority over local churches. At any rate, when a local church disagrees with the national direction, it often feels free to opt out, or dissatisfied individuals feel free to start a new congregation.

The net result of this congregationalist outlook is a wide variety of practices and views, albeit within the framework of a certain number of common convictions to which all Evangelicals are attached.

The Messianic movement is also to a large extent a cross-section of existing churches, like the Evangelicals in historical churches. Moreover, Messianic congregations correspond to the free-church model and the congregationalist outlook. As a result, the movement is a mosaic of organizations and congregations, different theological views, different ways of expressing Jewishness, and a host of leadership figures, each with a distinct following. There are several unions of Messianic congregations, as well as numerous training institutes and publishers of Messianic Jewish publications. This picture is much the same as that of the Evangelical movement.

Consequently, there is the same problem of representation: who speaks on behalf of whom? Here we have a complicating factor when trying to develop a Messianic Evangelical dialogue.

Israel and Messianic-minded Evangelicals

This is not to say that nothing is happening. On the contrary, an important part of the Evangelical movement is very much in favour of Messianic Jews, and all the more so because most Messianic Jewish believers have an Evangelical theological outlook and because the worship style of Messianic congregations is a blend of Evangelical, Charismatic and traditional Jewish elements. So there is a great deal of affinity between the two movements.

Moreover, Evangelicals have a long tradition of interest in the fulfilment of prophecy, including those prophecies that concern the restoration of Israel and the second coming of Christ. The emergence of the Messianic movement corresponds to these expectations. Often, Messianic Jewish practice is viewed as exemplifying the Jewish roots of Christianity, or the original Hebrew thinking of the Bible versus the Greek thinking of the later Christian churches. These considerations have led some Gentile Evangelical believers to join a Messianic congregation. In the Diaspora, many of these congregations have a large number of Gentile members, sometimes more than half of all members.

We also see a great interest among Christians in the biblical and Jewish festivals, Hebrew songs from the Messianic movement, the Hebrew language, Jewish religious

symbolism, and the Jewish context of Jesus, the apostles and the earliest churches. This creates a strong sense of affinity with the Messianic Jewish movement.

In some places, this sense of affinity can go so far as to uncritically extol all that is Jewish, and especially all that is Messianic Jewish. Where that happens, I think we need to step on the brakes and emphasize that believers from the nations do not have to become or behave like Jews to be authentic disciples of Jesus. This idealization of all things Jewish and of Messianic Jews in particular can also be embarrassing for Jewish people themselves. Moreover, such an attitude does no good for the Messianic-Christian conversation, because it erases rather than clarifies the distinction between the church of the nations and the church of the Jews.

Little attention at the institutional level and in theological institutes

Despite all the ‘Messianic enthusiasm’ in Evangelical circles, we find that at the same time, national church bodies, theological institutions and many pastors are rather indifferent towards the Messianic Jewish movement. This is either because they think in terms of the paradigm of the replacement doctrine, in which there is no place for a special way for the Jewish people, or because they view the interest of Christians in the Jewish people and their attitudes towards the state of Israel as a potentially divisive factor, causing them to avoid the issue so as to prevent turmoil. Whatever the motivation, the result of this lack of interest in Israel and/or the Messianic Jewish movement is that there is no attempt to understand their concerns, let alone engage in serious dialogue.

Land and end times

The third major theme of the symposium was eschatology. Messianic Jews, along with many Christians who live in the joyful expectation that Jesus the Messiah will come again soon, see the return of many Jews to the land of Israel and the growing presence of Messianic Jews in Jerusalem as eschatological signs pointing to the *parousia* of Christ, his glorious appearance as King of Israel and the world. This concrete, historic hope is a source of irritation to those churches in which the cry of ‘maranatha’ (O Lord, come!) has been almost or completely silenced.

The papers and discussions in this part of the symposium focused on the connection between Jesus’ return and the people and land of Israel. Several speakers emphasized the biblical promise that the Messiah will appear on the Mount of Olives. Speaking to ‘Jerusalem’, i.e. the spiritual leaders of Israel of his day, Jesus promised that ‘Jerusalem’ would see him ‘again’, one day, when He will be welcomed by ‘Jerusalem’ as the One who comes in the name of the Lord (Mt 23:27ff; Lk 13:33ff). ‘That clearly refers to the leaders of the then living Jewish people’, explained Mark Kinzer, adding that ‘such a welcome presupposes a Jewish presence in the land.’¹⁵

Such considerations naturally lead to the question of how the promises about the land relate to the contemporary state of Israel. In academic theological circles, this question is usually avoided, either because the land promises are spiritualized and applied to the universal church, in the framework of some kind of replacement doctrine, or because they are considered a tricky subject that only sows discord. On

15 Mark Kinzer, ‘Jerusalem and the Return of Jesus’, symposium message of 13 July 2022.

the other hand, there is the parallel circuit of pro-Israel Christians and organizations, also referred to as 'Christian Zionists', in which Evangelical believers actively support the Jewish return to the land and the development of a Jewish national existence in that land.

Theologians who dismiss the land promises as no longer applicable to the Jewish people, and who are critical of the so-called Israel-minded Christians, can get away with that as long as they argue as Gentile Christians among themselves. But as soon as Messianic Jews join the discussion, things change, because for them, the land of Israel is not a matter of 'interest in prophecy' or a 'hobby horse', but is intrinsically linked to the existence and survival of the nation to which they themselves belong. They strongly reject replacement theology. They generally see the return of Jews to the land from the perspective of the land promises in the Bible, even though they usually take a nuanced view of the political reality of the state of Israel and of the policies of certain politicians. They are also keen to show solidarity with their Arab brothers and sisters in the faith. This is precisely why it is so interesting to include Messianic Jews in the conversation about, for example, the attitude of Christians towards the state of Israel.

For the Messianic Jewish movement, a safe and independent Jewish existence in Israel is of existential importance. Anyone who enters into dialogue with them has to acknowledge this fact. During the symposium, not much was said about the political issues in Israel and the Middle East. Rather, discussions centred on the eschatological meaning of the Jewish return. Several papers brought to light how the development of modern Zionism and the rise of the Hebrew Christian/Messianic Jewish movement took place simultaneously in history, from the 19th century onwards. These two movements combined have led to the situation today, where there is an independent Jewish presence in the land (Zionism), which includes a Jesus-believing presence (Messianic Jews). In this situation, the promised return of Jesus to Jerusalem, to be welcomed by the leaders of the Jewish people, has become conceivable and realistic.

Mission missing

For all the good that the symposium offered, I did miss one thing. The conversation was not extended to the field of missiology, even though it has significant impact on how Christians think about mission. It affects not only views of Jewish evangelization—which is very sensitive in both Christian and Jewish circles—but also the mission of the people of Israel, the joint mission of Jews and Christians, and the special mission, perhaps, of Jesus-believing Jews. But it could be that the organizers have saved discussions of missiology for another time. I hope with all my heart that there will be a next time soon.

The contents of the symposium are too rich to summarize in this short article. I hope that the lectures and summaries of the discussions will be published soon. This will greatly help theologians, church leaders and Messianic leaders.

Appendix: Papers presented at the symposium

General introductions

- Jan-Heiner Tück, Professor of Dogmatics, Theological Faculty, University of Vienna: 'Introduction to the Theme and Subthemes of the Symposium'
- Richard Harvey, Professor of Hebrew Bible and Jewish Studies, All Nations Christian College, UK: 'Introducing the Messianic-Jewish Reality'
- David Neuhaus, SJ, Former Patriarchal Vicar of Hebrew-Speaking Catholics in the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem: 'Who Are the Hebrew Catholics Today?'
- Christian Rutishauser SJ, Delegate for Schools and Universities of the Central European Province of the Jesuit Order, Rome: 'The Place of Encounter with Jews Believing in Jesus in the History of Jewish-Catholic Dialogue'
- Hanna Rucks, Minister in the Protestant Reformed Church, Basel: 'The Place of Encounter with Messianic Jews in the History of Jewish-Protestant Dialogue'
- Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, Professor of Old Testament, Theological Faculty, University of Vienna: 'Post-Supersessionist Theology as a Challenge for Biblical Hermeneutics'
- R. Kendall Soulen, Professor of Systematic Theology, Candler School of Theology, Emory University, USA: 'Post-Supersessionist Theology: *Ekklesia ex circumcisione* and *ex gentibus*'

Christology: The Jewish Jesus

- Michael Theobald, University of Tübingen, Germany: 'Jesus, Messiah from Israel and Messiah for Israel'; response by Henk Bakker, Baptist Seminary, Free University Amsterdam
- Helmut Hoping, Professor of Dogmatics and Liturgical Studies, University Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany: 'The Jewish Jesus and Its Implications for Systematic Christology'; response by Jonathan Kaplan, Associate Professor of Hebrew Bible and Ancient Judaism, University of Texas at Austin
- Mark Kinzer, Moderator of Yachad BeYeshua, Messianic Jewish rabbi in Ann Arbor, Michigan: 'Jesus, King of the Jews: A Messianic Jewish Perspective'; response by Bernard Mallmann, Postdoctoral Assistant, Theological Faculty, University of Vienna

Bilateral ecclesiology

- Thomas Schumacher, Professor of New Testament, University of Fribourg, Switzerland: 'Important Differentiation between Christians with Jewish and Non-Jewish Background in NT Ecclesiology? Annotations on the *ekkklesia ex circumcisione* and the *ekkklesia ex gentibus*'; response by Markus Tiwald, Professor of New Testament, Theological Faculty, University of Vienna
- Etienne Vetö SJ, Director of Jewish Studies, Cardinal Bea Institute, Rome: 'Partings of the Ways'; response by Mariusz Rosik, Professor of New Testament, Pontifical Theological Faculty, Wrocław, Poland

Ursula Schumacher, Professor of Catholic Theology and Religious Education, Pädagogische Hochschule, Karlsruhe: 'Post-Supersessionism and Messianic Judaism as a Challenge and Enrichment of the Understanding of the Church: Scope for Thought, Potential for Development and Need for Revision in Ecclesiology'

Antoine Levy OP, Professor, University of Helsinki and University of Eastern Finland: 'The Restoration of the *ecclesia ex circumcissione*'

The land and people of Israel, Jesus, and eschatology

Mark Kinzer: 'Jerusalem and the Return of Jesus'; response by Piotr Okta, Superior of the Institute of Religious Studies of St Thomas Aquinas, Kiev

Gavin D'Costa, Professor of Catholic Theology, University of Bristol: 'Catholic Minimalist Zionism'; response by Marianne Moyaert, Professor of Comparative Theology and Interreligious Dialogue, Free University of Amsterdam

Jan-Heiner Tück: 'Wiederkehr des Chiliasmus: Soll Augustins ekklesiologische Domestizierung des Millenarismus zurückgenommen werden?' (Return of Chiliasm: Should Augustine's Ecclesiological Domestication of Millennialism be Disavowed?); response by Ulrich Laepple, Assistant to the Chair of New Testament, Kirchliche Hochschule Wuppertal