

JEWISH AND GENTILE DISTINCTION IN MESSIANIC CONGREGATIONS

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In the early days of the Messianic Jewish movement, great debate ensued concerning the participation and place of Gentiles in the movement. Some debated the idea that full congregational membership should only be open to Jews. Others argued that congregations should not have head leaders or elders that were not Jewish. Others argued that Messianic Congregations were New Covenant Congregations and that Gentile membership was essential to showing the meaning of the unity of Jew and Gentile. The issue of Gentile membership in Messianic Congregations was debated in the formation meetings before the incorporation of the UMJC. The UMJC recognized the importance of Jewish membership as a standard for authenticity of such congregations as Jewish and required 10 Jewish members for full membership. However, the UMJC also accepted gentiles as members of its congregations and as leaders. Some even played prominent roles in the executive and steering committees.

Yet we today face a new phenomenon. It is that the majority of our congregations are no longer congregations with majority Jewish membership. While we always expected gentiles to join us, we fathers of the movement expected that our efforts to reach our people would be successful and that a majority Jewish constituency would ensue in most of our congregations. This new reality has come as a surprise. The majority of Jews in Messianic Congregations are now in congregations with a majority of gentiles. I speak of America here, for the situation in Israel is not at all like this.

Several issues have been raised in the movement with regard to the question of the place of gentiles in Messianic Congregations. We as a movement have generally affirmed the legitimacy of the churches and their traditions as long as they are not really pagan or contrary to Scripture. We seek to have Christians in all Churches have appreciation for the Jewish roots of their faith, support the Messianic movement, Israel and more. Such roots understanding implies study, understanding and respect and even aspects of confessional affirmation, but this does not imply turning these churches into Messianic Synagogues. Our question in this essay is not with the Church and its Jewish roots and stance. Rather, it is with Messianic Congregations of Jew and gentile. In approaching this question, it is crucial to not marginalize our gentile members or cause unnecessary hurt. We should remember that most of our Jewish members have become followers of Yeshua through the witness of gentiles, some of whom are in our congregations! The gentiles have been effective in their witness.

Two views are prevalent in the Messianic Congregations in America. One view holds that when a gentile joins a Messianic Congregation, he takes up the same common life. Other than circumcision, all practices are open to the gentile. The gentile should at least practice as Jewish members in Feasts, Sabbath, food laws, and in all gatherings. In this view, no distinctions are to be made. The only distinction would be that the gentile would say, if asked, that he or she is a gentile and the Jews would say they are Jews.

(Even this distinction has not been always maintained, but it is commonly maintained in many groups. Some say, “I am a spiritual Jew, which is unhelpful). In the MJAA a gentile can not be a full voting member of the Alliance, but can be a member or leader of an IAMCS congregation (as is the case in the UMJC) and a gentile leader can be a recognized leader as part of the IAMCS. So while covenant circumcision of males would be a Jewish distinctive in most of these groups, there would be no distinction in most other practices. Sometimes a person who seems obviously Gentile by cultural markers would be doing Jewish practice. This would cause some strange reactions in Jewish visitors. However, other gentiles are so assimilated, that one forgets that they are gentile unless one is reminded.

Other congregations have made a stronger distinction between Jew and gentile. One can find such groups in the UMJC and MJAA. They have come up with distinctions that preclude gentiles from practices deemed as only for Jews. What is the rationale for this. Basically, it is argued that if Jews are to be a unique people and culture, then there must be practices that are only theirs. If all practice the same things, then there is no longer a distinction between Jew and gentile. There is, in such groups, a seeking, a searching, for a way for Jews and gentiles to practice with sufficient distinction to maintain the distinction of Jew and gentile, since they both have distinct callings. Here are some standards that congregations have adopted to maintain distinctions. There is no unity among congregations that are seeking such distinctions.

1. Only Jews should be given covenant circumcision. This is agreed upon as a distinction in most of the movement world wide. Some few do accept conversion to Judaism for some Gentiles who truly want to become Jews. All also accept that only Jews have a *pidyon ha ben* where a cohen receives money in symbolic representation of his replacing the first born through the choice of the Levites.
2. Only Jews should wear a tallit in services. Why? Here we find both Biblical and traditional Jewish answers. First, a tallit includes fringes that tell us that we are to remember the Torah and to do God’s commandments. (Numbers 15) Cyrus Gordon argued that the fringes were a symbol of royalty. So the Israelites were being told to keep the commandments as fitting to their royal calling. Since only Jews are called to keep the whole Torah, and the fringes are a testimony of this, Gentiles should not wear a tallit, for they would then violate the teaching of Galatians and Acts 15. Gentiles are only called to universal Torah in Yeshua. In addition, some argue that synagogue usage should guide us if it is not contrary to Scripture. In synagogues, only Bar Mitzvah Jews can wear a tallit. Even Gentiles married to Jewish spouses, who are allowed to be members of the synagogue (this does happen in Reform Judaism) do not wear a tallit. This can be argued against. Some years ago, the Lord led us, at Beth Messiah, to declare that the tallit was to be a symbol of Priesthood for Jews and Gentiles in a Messianic Congregation, for all were called to faithfulness to the Torah of Yeshua and were a priesthood. I have no doubt that the Lord led us this way. However, I do not claim that this was forever.

3. Some say that it is judicious that Gentiles not be called to Torah, for the call to Torah reflects a responsibility to do the whole Torah (I would ask in New Covenant application?). In addition, the blessing says that God has given us the Torah. The us is the Jews, so it is not appropriate for Gentiles to say this. On the other hand, it has been argued in response that Gentiles have been given the Torah through Yeshua though it is applied differently. In II Timothy 3:16-17, Paul argues that all (he is writing to Gentiles in context) are to be instructed by all of the Bible and trained in righteousness thereby. This includes the Torah. So as the Torah is Scripture for Gentiles, how can they be precluded?

4. While no one has suggested that Gentiles not keep the Feasts when they are part of Messianic Congregations (or not in such congregations too) some have argued that there are practices and confessions in these feasts that should only be spoken by Jews, or at least not spoken by Gentiles unless in echo support of the Jews who speak. This would include many parts of the Passover liturgy, “who brought us out of Egypt” the “four questions and the answers these are questions about Jewish history and the answers which are about Jewish history.” Indeed, this would include “Next year in Jerusalem,” for the promise of the land of Israel is a Jewish promise. Reform Jews may have Gentiles at their seder, but they are more as observers than the primary participants. On the other hand, one can say that Gentiles have the Patriarchs as their spiritual forefathers, and in a spiritual sense the Exodus was for their sake. Haggadah’s have been written for Churches that do eliminate these problems and rewrite confessions and prayers so that Gentiles are not saying that they were in Egypt, delivered etc. They pray in specific ways that support Jewish calling. It should be noted that all feasts include practices that are of the nature of national Jewish profession and confession. How do we deal with this?

5. Lastly comes all of the practices that are post Biblical and unique to our people. This includes Jewish prayers, some based on the Bible. It includes praying in Hebrew and davening with swaying. Should this be open to all? There are many other Jewish practices from Rabbinical Kashrut, Marriage under a Hupah, Wedding contracts not to mention all the traditions, some of which are of great joy, that have creatively grown up around the feasts.

Well, even raising these questions shows the depth of the divide that could come into the Messianic Movement over these questions. To raise them is to risk division. It is crucial that we allow different opinions among us. First, Gentiles are called to Messianic Congregations, and how we live out our callings together as Jew and Gentile is not subject to easy answers, especially after 1900 years of little example and teaching. We know that Jews have covenant responsibilities to the application of parts of Torah that Gentiles do not have. However, this does not solve the question of Gentile calling and voluntary participation.

Here are further complicating factors.

1. There are Gentiles who believe they are called to a lifetime identification with the Jews. They believe they are called to assimilate into Jewish life and culture just as Hudson Taylor assimilated into Chinese culture. It is a calling, a choice. What are we to say to them? We have always affirmed that Gentiles may have a lifetime calling to the Jewish people as their primary calling. Taylor did not claim to be a Chinese man.
2. These Gentiles marry our Jewish members. How does this effect the situation?
3. There are also people who have a grandparent who is Jewish and who desire to recover Jewish identity. How do they fit in this equation?
4. Lastly, there are marranos who seek to recover their Jewish identity. There are those who are part of a continuity of tradition transmission and some who do not have this. There are some who have clear evidence of Jewish descent and some who do not. How does this fit?

As I have reflected on these difficult questions, I have begun to wonder if the difficulty is in the way we phrase the question. The first question is the question to any Gentile as to why they join a Messianic Congregation. To date myself a bit, I think the right answer to this is answer to the \$64,000 question. As we will see, this also leads to approaches to identity beyond the important shared identity that all believers share in Yeshua. The second question is the self identification/self description which gentile members put forth. What is professed here is very important. It is their story.

I think it is important to say that there are many wrong reasons to be in a Messianic Jewish congregation. Some of these wrong answers show a wrong theology. This is a major discipleship issue for Messianic congregations. Let us note some of the wrong reasons and give brief reasons why they are wrong.

Many Gentiles who are in Messianic congregations are there because they believe that the Messianic congregations are the truest expression of the Body of Believers. It is said that these congregations celebrate the Biblical feasts, not the feasts invented by men. They keep the Sabbath which is seen as a continuing command for all. Some of these folks are “One Law” people who believe that Jew and gentile are called to keep the same Torah except for circumcision itself. The more rigid of these folks believe that this is absolutely incumbent upon Gentiles. Others say that it is voluntary, but better if gentiles keep the Torah. Of course, *if something is better, one ought to do it*. One can not escape an “ought” if the behavior is better. Acts 15, which relieves gentiles of the responsibilities to keep the whole Torah is never the less quoted to indicate that Gentile are called to grow into keeping it all. These folks say that Acts 15 is only talking about initial requirements to be part of the community, not the ultimate ideal of practice. This is really a stretch, for the text itself does not say this is only a matter minimal entrance requirements. The verse that speaks of Moses being read in the synagogues weekly, even

since ancient times, is used to say that Jacob's words mean that gentiles will eventually learn more and more until they keep the whole Law. This is certainly a wrong interpretation. Indeed, we would have expected a very different letter than the one that was taken to the churches if the statement of James was to be so interpreted. Indeed, it would have stated, "while you do not have to be circumcised and keep the whole Torah to be saved and be received in the community, we do believe and expect that as you study and learn the Torah, you will progressively keep more and more of it. However, there is no pressure on you to do so quickly." This is almost the opposite of the letter that was sent. The letter indicates what would be the long term norm of gentile practice. Jacob's statement on Moses being read in the synagogues from ancient times has been credibly interpreted as referring to the fact that the knowledge of morality in the Greco-Roman world was partly influenced by the Mosaic revelation. This was a common understanding among the first century Jews and is put forth by Josephus and others. This was a way of explaining the moral norms in the Greco-Roman world that were common to Jews and gentiles. In addition, there is the interpretation that the more accommodating synagogues already taught the basic norms necessary for Jewish and gentile interaction.

The basic standards of Acts 15 were additions to an assumed basic morality which was common in the Roman world. The teachings of the epistles fully affirm Biblical morality in general as a norm for all.

What is really happening in Acts and Galatians 5 is that the gospel is being freed from all unnecessary ties to practices that could hinder its spread in different cultures. As the seven day week was not known in other cultures, keeping Sabbaths and Feasts was not possible in such cultures. Most people were slaves or employees and could in no way observe Torah life in this way. One may find such practices enriching and embrace them, but the gospel could also be the source of creative expressions that enabled it to take root in other cultures. It should not be forgotten that Israel's ability to keep the whole Torah was because Israel was self governing as a nation and later Jewish practice for Jews was given special legal protection in the Roman empire. Circumcision brings one into responsibility for the whole Torah. Paul very strongly urges that this not be done. One is therefore free to be led of the Spirit to bring forth expressions of life and worship according to cultural patterns in different societies. As the Church developed it did observe some of the Biblical Feasts; Resurrection-Firstfruits, and Pentecost. However, this was in the context of a Solar Calendar and new calculations. The decision of Acts 15 therefore was not just for initial acceptance but looked toward planting congregations rooted in different cultures that were freed from Jewish life, and this would be the ongoing form of these congregations. This would make them culturally effective.

While the Church was called to always respect its Jewish roots and the Jewish people, it was not called to live the life of the Jewish people. Teaching on the Feasts and respecting those who keep them, should have been a Church foundation. However, the New Covenant Scriptures never urge keeping them by gentiles during this transitional age. There are indications in Isaiah and Zechariah that in the Age to Come the nations will connect to Sabbath and Tabernacles and perhaps to more. We are not told of the nature of the observance. So one is left with a sole primary reason for gentiles to keep the

Feasts and that is the leading of the Holy Spirit. There may be many secondary reasons from love for Jewish people, enjoying and preferring the enriching dimensions of Jewish practice. Those who keep them are not to think that they have a better practice than those who do not. None is to judge the other, which Romans makes clear. However, Jewish people have a covenant responsibility for Jewish life!

As the Gospel takes root in different cultures, new insights are added from new languages, including new metaphors, idioms and more. These new language insights have to be in accord with the original language and context. However, I believe that translations into new languages really enrich spiritual insight. The great translator Eugene Nida gives many such examples in his excellent books on the theory of bible translation. The best form of the Church is not a Messianic Congregation, but that form that while respecting Jewish roots, is rightly adapted to the soil of the culture in which they are planted to the Kingdom can best flourish in that culture. This does include avoiding real paganism.

Messianic congregations are not the truest and best form of the Church. Such arrogance is like replacement theology in reverse. They do have an important function in keeping alive the context of the Gospel. They do enrich understanding.

One of the reasons for misunderstanding is that members of Messianic Congregations simply do not have knowledge of and understanding of the awesome riches in the traditions of the different church streams. The content of liturgies, the amazing hymnology, the practices of the Church year and so much more are deep and enriching. I am glad that I came to know some of this richness before becoming a Messianic Jew. There are great traditions of prayer, depth of understanding and appropriation of the sacrifice of Yeshua in the communion and so much more. The vacuum of tradition in many fellowships today has left a sense of rootless drifting in many Christians. They discover Jewish tradition and do not realize that there is a parallel and deep Christian tradition.

The primary reason to be in a Messianic Congregation is commitment to the Jewish people and their salvation. This was the foundational reason for the movement. Whenever we stray from this reason, we get off center. There are secondary reasons. A person might simply prefer a Jewish context of New Covenant life. It is indeed enriching. A person might prefer such even when in touch with the riches of the Christian tradition. However, I do not think these reasons alone will produce the right orientation unless a heart felt burden for the Jewish people is also attained. The Gentile who has a right understanding and calling to Messianic Congregations is committed to see Israel, even the Jewish people, fulfill their destiny for the sake of the whole world. This leads to life from the dead. Indeed, such gentiles know that the Jewish embrace of Yeshua is central to the purposes of God.

So in summary, I believe that the most important reason for gentile participation in a Messianic Congregation is a call to primary commitment to the Jewish people and their salvation. They are committed to Jews fulfilling their divine purpose on earth.

Then secondarily, there may be a preference for Jewish life as a context for New Covenant life and understanding.

I would here mention other reasons given that are not helpful including professing that one is a spiritual Jew and therefore is called to live a Jewish life and assertions that one is really Jewish. This confusion is not helpful at all. Other such misidentifications are not helpful either. This includes that one is a lost tribe Ephraimite (as in the Ephraimite movement).

Now we have not yet sought to answer the thorny question of what a Gentile can and can not do in a Messianic context. However, before addressing this, we need to deal with Gentile self identification. When Don Finto says he is a gentile, there is something of a healthy self affirmation. He is a gentile with probable Jewish ancestry who has now embraced a primary call to the Jews. However, for a gentile to embrace this calling and join a Messianic Congregation is to leave the primary expressions of the Church and there should be some sense of sacrifice in doing so. Yes one gains much., but one gives up as well. Though I am a Messianic Jew, leaving much of the Church tradition which I love was a sacrifice for me, and I am Jewish! .

This now leads to the issue of self identification. There are two crucial dimensions in such self identification. One is that God desires to preserve the distinctive peoples of the earth which will bring distinctive glories or splendors into the New Jerusalem. Second is the importance of ancestry and honoring ones fathers and mothers, which goes beyond just one's immediate parents. When we deal with these points of identification, it is well to note that all is to be valued in God's order of priority. All points of worth and identity are to be subsumed under the two most important aspects of our identity. One is that we are created in the image of God and secondly that we are now born again sons and daughters of God in the New Covenant. In these points of worth and identity there is full equality and there is neither male for female, Jew or Greek.

I believe that it is helpful for gentiles in the Messianic movement to discover their ethnic roots and to respect those roots. If Patty and I have so respected our Norwegian and English roots as a family, though we are Messianic Jews, how much more should gentiles respect the good things in their own ethnic backgrounds. Understanding and appreciation of the good things in ones ethnic ancestry is an important part of identity. That which is not good should be discarded with forgiveness. All is filtered through the cross so to speak. Secondly, many in our society have roots in Christian traditions. Instead of vilifying such traditions, the proper honoring should lead gentiles to search out and affirm the good things in the Christian heritage of their ancestors. One then has a stronger sense of his roots while embracing a call to the Jewish people. Indeed, such a study could confirm one's calling. To say, "I am a gentile called to the Messianic Movement," is strong and honest statement. It is the same as saying, "I am one from the nations." One could say, "I am a Frenchmen, Russian, or Japanese." These identities are to be respected and passed down. My friend Peter Tsukahera does this so well with regard to his Japanese heritage while being called to our people in Israel. This means some study, some research, and even testing the call to the Messianic congregational world.

Our dear friends John and Arlene Stuke in Chicago, came from a background in the Evangelical Free Church. They fully gave themselves to a life time calling to the Jewish people. They always respected their own church roots and continued to connect to the ECFA in their work of Church influence. However, they led a Messianic Congregation. One time Arlene was buying a Hanukah Menorah. When asked by the store clerk if she was Jewish, she said, “No, I am a gentile, but I have come to so love the Jewish people and their traditions that I seek to honor them by lighting the menorah at Hanukah.” The clerk was in tears and said something like, “You wonderful woman.” She did not violate principle by being a gentile lighting a menorah, but was too sensitive to say in doing so that she was commanded to do so and was a descendant of these ancient Jews. When John and Arlene planted a Messianic Congregation they asked my council of what do with a significant handful of Jews that had not yet accepted Yeshua, but wanted to be in their congregation and saw them as their leaders!” This was the level of sensitive ministry and identification that John and Arlene came to represent. John and Arlene came to love Jewish traditions, but never lost their love for their own Church background or taught that the life of their Church was somehow illicit.

The identification we are describing leads to the fact that the gentile can not always say the same thing as a Jew in liturgical practice. This is the first issue of practice distinction. So for example, when a Jew puts on a Tallit, he can validly say the blessing, “and commanded us to wear fringes.” The gentile is not so commanded, and he can not say this with integrity. At Beth Messiah we came to a distinction of Jews and Gentiles in the right of passage at the age of 13. Both learned Hebrew and could read the Scriptures in Hebrew. However, the Jew professed his responsibility to Jewish life and to keep the whole Torah in New Covenant application (Bar Mitzvah) and the gentile professed his responsibility to live out the New Covenant and be an instrument of the salvation of Israel and the nations (Ben Brit Hadasha). Of course, both were part of the New Covenant, but the Jew has a different calling to the whole Torah (Romans 11:29 and Acts 21) which the gentile is not given. There are many other points where this can be extended. However, one clear principle is hereby derived. **The gentile does not use language in liturgical practices at home or in the Messianic synagogue that professes that he or she is responsible to Jewish life as a calling by birth.** Instead, he or she professes to be joined to this life by special calling and identification. In this way the Messianic Congregation shows that is a New Covenant fellowship of Jew and gentile. The Jew can say, “who brought us up out of the land of Egypt,” in its full national sense. The gentile professes to participate in an analogous exodus from sin and death though Yeshua. This can be reflected in new liturgies. This is important for God’s word indicates that there has been and will be exoduses for other peoples in his great deliverance. Today, Koreans practice a Korean Passover giving thanks for their deliverance from Japanese domination!

I think that to fully make a place for gentiles and Jews, we should have liturgical expressions that are appropriate for gentiles. The whole congregation can thereby be thankful that God has called Jew and gentile together in Messianic Congregations.

What about practices that we began to speak about in the beginning of this paper. This is very dicey. Let's take Passover for example. We with much of the Jewish community accept gentile participants in the Passover Seder. Our authenticity in doing so is greater than the larger Jewish community, for the command against the uncircumcised participation is really a manifestation of their not taking Scripture seriously. In our case, we have a broken down wall of partition (Eph. 2), a declaration that Gentiles are clean (Acts 10) and the declaration that there is a circumcision of water immersion and by the Spirit that is part of this new status. So halakah changes and gentiles can participate. However, there are questions of liturgy and participation. Generic blessings are no problem, for all can say, "Who created the fruit of the vine." However, can all say, "Who brought us up out of the land of Egypt?" The meaning of this text is affirming literal ancestry. Yes, there is an exodus from sin and death, and yes, the Jews are the spiritual ancestors of the gentile believers. Some years ago, I worked on a liturgy for the Church during Passover which went through the elements of the seder and produced a very different liturgical profession. This was used for a mass seder at Rock City Church in Baltimore. This leads me to think that a new liturgy is needed for Seders that include Jew and gentile where there are statements read by Jews, statements read by gentiles and statements read by all. However, the idea of preserving Jewish identity by gentiles not doing a seder would be too much of a separation and would be exclusionary in a negative way.

Here is another example, the call to Torah. As stated above, there is no biblical guidance for this. A congregation could reserve the Torah reading and blessings as a profession of Jewish responsibility and not call gentiles to so read. Would they call gentiles to read the prophets or only the New Covenant which is the basis of covenant inclusion? This is why some congregations only call Jews to the Torah. Some do not make a public statement of it, but call only those who can read the Torah who happen to be Jews!. These same say the blessing. The issue is never raised, but if one looks more deeply, he will note that gentiles are not called. The blessing says, "Who has given us the Torah." Again this is perceived as a profession of literal Jewish history. God gave the Torah in history to the Jews. Again, this reinforces distinction in being called to Torah. However, as a good Rabbi would, I can well give an opposite argument.

I Timothy 3 says "All Scripture is God breathed and is profitable ... for instruction in righteousness." So with the coming of Yeshua, the whole Bible, including the Torah has been given to all." So in thinking of Yeshua, a gentile can say, "Who has given us the Torah." The Torah is now part of the Bible for all believers.

Let us look at another practice, the wearing of the Tallit. We already noted that God did not command the gentiles to wear fringes. It therefore would be inappropriate for the gentile to say the blessing who has commanded us to wear fringes. The synagogue only gives the Tallit to Bar Mitzvah Jews. So in the light of this, one may conclude that the Tallit is a Jewish distinctive that enables the proper profession of one new man, unity in distinction, whereby Jews wear this and Gentiles do not. Synagogues do expect gentile visitors to wear a kippah out of reverence in their house of worship. In addition, the

fringe reminds Jews of their responsibility to keep all the commandments while gentiles are not in the same way responsible for all the commandments.

I have puzzled over this. Years ago in prayer, I believe God spoke to me that the Tallit was to be offered to Jews and Gentiles at Beth Messiah Congregation. The sense of that was that the Tallit was to represent the priestly garments worn by the redeemed in the book of revelation. There was also a further rationale. Cyrus Gordon, the great Jewish archeologist from Brandeis University argued that the fringe was symbol of royal priesthood. Peter notes that New Covenant believers are now a royal priesthood. He uses the language of the Hebrew Bible which describes Jews to describe all believers. Could the fringe represent this reality for all in a Messianic congregation? Could the gentile thereby remember his responsibility for all the commands of Yeshua and the Biblical commands applying to him? Well this was my sense of things in the Spirit in 1990. However, it was a word for then. I do not profess that this settles the issue for all times. We certainly never encouraged gentiles to say the blessing”who commanded us to wear fringes.”

What of the Bar Mitzvah? Again as we wrestled with this in the late 80s and early 90s, we came to the conclusion that the right of passage and training was important for all young people and parents who desired such training. For us this was a discipling time, not just a time to learn how to chant the blessings and read the Torah. However, we did have a different liturgical profession for Jewish children and gentile children. The gentiles were training in identification and professed their unique call as gentiles in a Messianic context. We called it ben or bat b’rit Chadasha. .

One of the issues that has been raised is whether or not we should be more akin to synagogues in this. Synagogues do honor gentiles in their midst. They are permitted to participate in most of the prayers, hymns etc. but some practices are reserved for Jews. The problem with this approach is that the traditional Jews do not have covenant unity with gentiles based on the work of Yeshua. Our approach can not therefore be just like the synagogue, for we are New Covenant Congregations. We should learn from synagogue practice and ask questions. That the non Yeshua centered synagogues would determine what righteous gentiles do in the midst can not be our standard, though we can reference their practice and ask if this is good usage in a New Covenant Messianic Congregation.

What about weddings and funerals? While the symbolism the Jewish wedding service is indeed culturally Jewish, I know of no historical example where gentiles who married (even with both parties to the marriage being gentiles) were refused marriage under a Chupah. This was simply the way the community celebrated weddings for all couples unless they desired something else (which some do). The liturgies for the wedding are usually adapted creatively according the desires of the couple. While the service does put forth the hope for the redemption of Jerusalem, Israel and the world, there is no profession to my mind that contradicts the calling of the gentiles. Most couples do make the ceremony more New Covenantal in content.

Jewish funeral practices are simply more human and biblical than western practices. This again has been a matter for the choice of the surviving family.

How about dwelling in a Sukkah? Some families do this and some do not. Again, the liturgy about dwelling in the wilderness has historical reference to Jews. So like Passover, liturgical statements need to be added and adjusted. I know of no one who has ever said a gentile should not build a Sukkah. However, we should be clear that they are not commanded to do so. Often the issue is the reason; knowing the heritage of Judaism, the bible and having informed reasons for what one does.

In general, it is good to have distinctions in practice between Jews and Gentiles, but beyond liturgical content, it is difficult to come up with many practices from which gentiles are clearly precluded. It would seem that little in the way of rules can be derived. *Indeed, it would seem that the leadership with the whole community needs to prayerfully consider the various possibilities of maintaining distinction in unity. There will be different senses of rightness in different communities.* In addition, it would seem that only the leading of the Holy Spirit can bring us to conclusions that fit our community and circumstances. This can be prayed over in Tikkun. There may be prophetic input to help. However, they may be different responses within these broad principles in different communities. And over time we may develop to greater consistency in this or we may not.

One ceremony that fits only Jews is the Pidyon Ha Ben. In this ceremony, the first born son's parents give redemptive money to the cohen in honor of the ancient practice from the Torah where the first born is replaced by the tribe of Levi. This is a ceremony that only fits Jews.

There are two more issues to add before summary.

Those Who Make a Life Time Commitment

There are some gentiles in Messianic Congregations who are making a life time commitment to the Jewish people. They are not only showing this as their primary calling for a season. In this case, with full awareness, and valuing the other traditions and cultures of Christianity, and with a positive appreciation of their own ethnic background, they are saying they want to be primarily connected to the Jewish people for the rest of their lives. Is the call of Ruth still possible, "Your people shall be my people?" I can not see how this can be precluded. I have called this a Ruth II commitment, not to contrast it with the story in the Bible, but to contrast it with the contemporary teaching that the Church is to a like Ruth to the Jewish people. This is true in the sense of service and love, but not in the sense of joining Israel and embracing full Jewish practice like Ruth. I think that when a person makes such a profession they are no longer in the same status and perhaps they should be permitted more in the way of practice. This could be a solution to Marraonos with unclear identity returning. They can marry Jews in our midst and the children are considered Jewish. At least before marriage, an uncircumcised man would be circumcised. When we think who are so committed people like Hans Vanderwerf, Irv

Horseman, Richard Freeman, and Ray Gannon, for example, it is hard to conceive of them not wearing a Tallit or reading the Torah. These people have made enormous contributions to the Messianic movement. This may be an emotional and not rational argument, or it may be an intuitive sense of that which is fitting for folks who have made such a life commitment. Again, I would note that a parallel process could be the answer for returning Morranos whose Jewish descent is not proven.

I am quite open to the idea of a special education process to prove this calling and a special ceremony of profession. This could be an important advance. Such a proven person would not say that he or she is a Jew, but they could say they have as fully as possible joined their lives to the people.

Some have taken us beyond the above to conversion. I think conversion is a dangerous matter and have written this before. It could be misunderstood by the larger Body of Believers, would be the desire of so many gentiles for the wrong reasons. It does not seem to be necessary since a special Ruth inclusion would be a part way step that would be adequate. I do understand clarifying identity for those with Jewish grandparents who desire to clarify their place as Jews. I would think that for those of us that believe in restoration, that any move to conversion would have to be very carefully done with very strong standards. Major halakhic direction should come out of the restored apostolic and prophetic leadership in our movement. We are believing for more such leadership to be restored. There needs to be strong prophetic confirmation for such a move. So I leave small open crack in the doorway to conversion. However, I also note that most gentiles in our midst are just called to be gentiles or to enter Ruth II professions and still identity as Ruth II gentiles where the oneness of Jew and gentile is still reflected. At this point, however, the Jews are their people.

CONCLUSIONS AND GUIDELINES

Our movement did not anticipate the large gentile influx into our communities. This produces a wholly different situation than in Israel where Jewish majority is the rule. Perhaps a number of these gentiles are in our midst for the wrong reasons (one law people, superior form of the church, pagan Christianity etc.). Perhaps with the right discipleship our gentile members would be more effectively a part of our communities and perhaps some would leave. I do not say this harshly, for I love the people who have come through our doors. I think of one dear family whose children were close to our children. They were convinced by the Ephraimite arguments. They were permitted to spread their views or teach that celebrating Christmas is pagan.

In general the role of the gentile is very much like the relationship of Frodo and Sam in Lord of the Rings. Only Frodo could take the ring to Mordor and destroy it. However, if Sam did not carry him, it never would have happened. The gentile believer carries Israel to fulfill its destiny. In many situations, gentiles are more effective witnesses to Yeshua than Messianic Jews. When they show genuine love and support and do not profess that

they are Jews in some way, the Jewish person is often very touched. Their depth of relationship with God can truly draw Jews into the Kingdom. I think there is some real design to this situation from God himself. Imagine if gentiles in our midst trained and became more effective. Imagine if each gentile member won one Jew! We would not longer be a majority gentile movement. What could an outpouring of the Spirit do to this end.

We should note as we enter this dicey subject, that the Messianic movement simply has not developed liturgy and practice that adequately expresses our reality of Jew and gentile that have unity in the Messiah and distinctions in identity and calling as well. We have not shown our in our liturgy and practice an adequate projection of meaning for being one new man of Jew and Gentile in a Messianic congregational context (ultimately one new man is the whole Body universal and means one new humanity).

Here are some guidelines.

1. Treat the gentiles in your midst with love, acceptance and understanding. Value them as persons.
2. Teach in a loving way the right reasons and wrong reasons for being a gentile in a Messianic Congregation. Disciple them to be effective witnesses. They need to understand Jews and Judaism at a basic solid level. It may well be that these will be your most effective outreach people. Jew and gentile both need to understand the identity description of the other. Each has a unique story.
3. Prayerfully develop liturgical distinctions in your gatherings where Jews and gentiles profess their callings accurately according to Biblical teaching. Prayerfully note those parts of liturgy that are for Jews, those for gentiles and those for both. I can imagine some prayers like responsive readings where men and women alternate. Imagine some professions where Jew and gentile alternate.
4. Consider the debates and arguments about what practices are appropriate to Jew and gentile. Prayerfully consider the practice of the synagogue and ask if it is fitting to either embrace their practice as helpful to distinguish Jewish calling or to not embrace it for transcending New Covenant reasons. Try as we might, a clear rule is not to be found. Some have said that the rule is to not depart from Synagogue practice unless it violates Biblical commands. This is just not a good standard, for beyond the letter, the spirit of the New Covenant needs to guide us with a sense of what is fitting. I believe that it is wisdom by the leading of the Spirit that is most important. Eventually there may be greater prophetic input from prophets who will arise from within or come from without.
5. Prayerfully develop distinctions of practice that are for Jews and other practices that are for gentiles. A congregation may be led to use the Tallit as a Jewish distinction. Or it may not be so led. The traditional blessing is another matter. So also the call to Torah and all of those debated things.
6. Consider developing special programs and profession ceremonies upon graduation from such programs for Ruth II gentiles and returning Morranos. Also, make sure that such programs are rigorous. Perhaps this is a network wide matter.

I have hope that when gentiles and Jews understand their unity with distinction and the reasons for their calling together in a Messianic Congregation, that the Spirit will over time lead us in these matters in ways that please God.

ADDENDUM: RECENT DISCUSSION ON THE TERM MESSIANIC CONGREGATION AND MESSIANIC JEWISH CONGREGATION

Recently discussion has ensued among Tikkun leaders and some in the larger movement about the terminology we use to describe ourselves. Some have thought that the term Messianic *Jewish* Congregation should be reserved for congregations that have a majority of Jews in their membership and are led by a Jew. This is a potentially divisive issue and if not carefully handled could bring decline and hurt in the movement. The usage in the movement is so established; change would be by gradual development and can not be imposed. This is a crucial beginning point.

First a little history. In the early days of the movement, the Messianic Jewish Alliance claimed to represent the Messianic Jewish movement as a Jewish only membership organization. Only Jews could be full voting members. The UMJC thought it was wrong for the MJAA to represent congregations in the New Covenant, for despite Jewish calling and population issues, we are New Covenant congregations of Jew and Gentile. The UMJC defined Messianic Jewish congregations as congregations as having such a clear mixed population as an intended good. However, because the UMJC was concerned for a degree of Jewish authenticity, to be a Union of Messianic *Jewish* congregations, the UMJC limited full membership to congregations with ten Jews (a minion). Hence in the UMJC the term Messianic Jewish congregation was not defined by proportion, but only in terms of full membership congregations. A congregation could have 90 gentiles and 10 Jews and would be a full member. The idea was that the 90 gentiles as well could be called and trained as effective witnesses. The UMJC firmly rejected the idea of some that MJ congregations should limit membership to Jews and at best have associate membership for gentiles. The UMJC gave full membership to congregations with gentile leaders, some of whom were very important leaders in the movement and the Union.

The MJAA approach was quite different. When they formed their association of congregations, they amazingly called it The International Alliance of Messianic Congregations and Synagogues. Note that the term Jewish was left out. A congregation could be a member of IAMCS with few or even no Jews. Yet this was not considered a problem since only Jewish members of the Alliance voted for the MJAA board whose president appointed the steering committee of the IAMCS. This skirted the problem and kept ultimate government in the hands of Jewish only membership and the Jewish only board of the MJAA. The UMJC desired to reflect more the reality of Jew and gentile in the Messiah.

Out of this, our tradition, world wide is that most congregations call themselves Messianic Jewish congregations who have a majority of gentiles. So also the UMJC calls itself the Union of Messianic *Jewish* congregations though the majority of members of

most congregations are gentiles. This is now world wide usage in the U. S., Russia, Ukraine, Europe, and South America. I do not include Israel where majority Jewish membership is the usual situation.

Years ago, I noted that the terminology of our movement was problematic because we defined terms in ways that were only usages within the sub-culture of our movement. For example, we use the term *Messianic* with a sub-cultural meaning that is not used outside of our movement. We use the term to imply “Jewish.” For everyone else the term is used to mean having to do with the Messiah or having a large redemptive purpose. This meaning is included in our usage, but the sub-meaning Jewish is there. We often refer to something as messianic when we mean Jewish.

In the same way, the term Jewish congregation is used with such a sub-meaning as well. The larger world uses the term *Jewish congregation* to mean a congregation of Jewish people led by a Jewish rabbi. We use the term to mean a group that senses a Jewish calling, celebrates the feasts, and expresses a Jewish style of worship, either in modern messianic worship and praise or including traditional liturgy. It also is a group that incorporates Jewish theology.

Therefore if one opts to call congregations without a majority or significant plurality of Jews a *Messianic Congregation* he is using a term with a meaning problem. By the same token, if a person uses the term Messianic Jewish for a group that has few Jews there is also a terminology problem. Those who suggest using the term Messianic Congregation when there are few Jews, is a more authentic representation to the larger Jewish world so a Jewish person who comes in is not surprised to find out that there are few Jews or that something is being called Jewish congregation when his gut response would be that it is not.

Two significant congregations outside of Tikkun have determined to use Messianic Congregation for just these reasons. One is Kurt Landry who was with us last year and who has some 30 Jews in a congregation of 200. The other is Marty Waldman who has some 100 Jews in a congregation of 400. He has made this choice for the reasons stated and it has worked well for him.

However, my concern is that we not make this a pivotal issue of such conviction that those on either side are alienated. This is to me a judgment call issue for which different responses can be given. For example, the one who things the term Messianic does not adequately describe the Jewish biblical and post biblical expression could believe that without the term Jewish, Messianic gives not sense of what is being done.

The success or failure of our congregations and movements will not be determined by our usage. Our success is based on whether or not we and our people live our lives before the Jewish people with grace, maturity and demonstrated power. Only major doctrinal issues are ultimately determinative and the dictum “in non-essentials liberty” should guide this discussion. A congregation using what one would think is wrong in some terminology that lifts up Yeshua well and has victorious and empowered people will be much more

successful than one with more correct terminology that does not access the power of the Spirit and show the reality of Yeshua. This was a very important lesson for me in the 1980s, where I saw the more successful people making all sorts of mistakes in terminology and immaturity in theology though they were not violating essential biblical doctrine. The more careful definers were less successful. I will be glad to give examples, but it is best to not include them in this paper. . If only we could grasp the importance of centering on Yeshua and pursuing the power of his Spirit. When movements become overly concerned in defining they are often in decline.

Secondly, I do believe that though majority Jewish congregations may exist in our movement in some cities of high Jewish population, in the Diaspora, they will be exceptional. Yes, we should have a goal to foster these, but most congregations in the Diaspora by demographics and by the fact of gentiles sensing a call will be majority gentile. Could something of the last days preparation of 10 gentiles wanting to go with a Jew be part of this?

There are good reasons to call congregations Messianic Jewish who have a minority of Jews and good reasons to not do so. There are four components to a Messianic Jewish congregation. One is Messianic Jewish Theology; two is Messianic Jewish practice; three is primary Jewish outreach focus; and four is Jewish constituency. Some believe that all four must be present to use the term Messianic Jewish congregation and that the Jewish constituency must be a majority. I think unless we see both sides we are not in balance here. This is the most important point: **Whether or not one uses the term *Messianic Jewish* for congregations with a minority of Jews or not, a visitor to our congregations need an explanation of our congregation and its membership proportions so they are not taken by surprise though the Spirit can overcome this. Let's make it easier. The right terms do not relieve us of this problem. So I do not see this decision making a big difference, for our congregations are so unique anyway that explanations are in order. Some Jews can really appreciate that we have congregations with many gentiles who love Jews, Israel and Jewish traditions!**

The term *Messianic Jewish Movement* can be used with different meanings. It can be limited to all Jews in our congregations and even in the churches that live a serious in Jewish commitment. In this sense it is being used as if it is the Movement of Messianic Jews. It can be used of all our all congregations s in the UMJC, for the union is the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations even though most of the UMJC congregations have majority gentile constituencies. It could also be used of all Jews and Ruth II gentiles in our movement who in some way want to join themselves to the Jewish people forever.

As I have listened I have come to the conclusion that the less problematic term for congregations with few or a small proportion of Jews is Messianic Congregation. I do not see this preference as a problem free choice. It is not the movement's usage yet, but a small number in our midst like Marty and Kurt. I would rather a Jewish person who does not know Yeshua be puzzled about the usage of "messianic": than to conclude that we have misrepresented ourselves in-authentically. So on this basis I chose. However, a

Jew may still be offended that we do Jewish liturgy and are not Jews even if the material is strictly biblical, or a Jew may be deeply touched. I have seen both responses. Again, if there is good explanation before the visit the problem can be over blown. If the power of God is experienced, it overcomes more. This is not the kind of decision to be imposed.

Note that a congregation that chooses to call itself a *Messianic Congregation* to better represent its constituency still uses the term Messianic Jewish for its theology, many of its practices etc. This theology and practice is the reason some might choose *Messianic Jewish* for the congregation's description. I think it is crucial that we allow leaders in the movement to come to their own conclusions though dialogue. Sometimes we project our responses to the response of Jews when their responses are quite varied. Prayerful seeking of the Spirit in each leadership is the best course on this issue.

With regard to the UMJC and the MJAA, I do not expect any significant change on these matters.