

Mapping the Messianic Movement

H Bruce Stokes, Ph.D.

Introduction

Anyone who has been to Jerusalem is familiar with the “Jewish Quarter”. The term “quarter” is used to map out a vicinity of the city that is historically or presently dominated by a particular group or identity. This is not to say that everyone and everything in the Jewish quarter is Jewish, but it does identify the pattern most likely to be encountered in that area.

Distinctions among Messianic Believers

The Messianic Movement, like a city, has several identifiable patterns of identity groups that can be found within its borders. These patterns address the implications of two separating structures within the movement itself – Ethnicity and Religion. I use ethnicity here to address the distinction between Jew and Gentile within the movement. I use religion to address the theological and behavioral distinctions separating Judaism and Christianity as they influence the movement. These ethnic and religious differences are not clear and distinct boundaries that allow each person in the movement to simply answer two questions and find ones place. If that were the case, one could make a simple diagram as follows.

Jew Practicing Judaism	Gentile Practicing Judaism
Jew Practicing Christianity	Gentile Practicing Christianity

Obviously, this oversimplifies the issue. Who among us fits neatly into this structure? Participants in the messianic movement vary a great deal with regard to identity and observance issues. Some Gentiles are more oriented to Judaism than some Jews. Some Jews are more theologically oriented to Christianity than Judaism. And so it goes. Each person in the movement is, in some manner, struggling with their own identity and observance while also attempting to relate appropriately with others who are struggling with the same issues. And because most have not completely settled with respect to one or both of these issues, though the Jew/Gentile issue is more certain, it remains that both conflict and cooperation can come out of this struggle. The purpose of this article is to identify the patterns (quarters) of the “messianic city” at the present time and give some understanding about the struggle in different quarters. Time will not allow for a full explanation, so this will serve as an introduction of coming to terms with the messianic believers among us.

As stated above, the simple diagram doesn’t tell where a given individual lives in the Messianic movement, but it does establish some identifiable patterns that actually exist to some extent in the Messianic movement. By describing each of these quarters, I hope to

further the discussion among us and to help newcomers to find the best place for their settling within the Messianic city.

Identity – Jew or Gentile

The issue of identity is the starting place. One must determine, with the help of the movement if one is a Jew or a Gentile. Generally the movement is open to several options regarding the claim of Jewish heritage. Usually, persons who have a Jewish grandparent (matrilineal or patrilineal) are accepted by most in the movement as being Jewish. There are exceptions to this from some organizations and congregations, but it serves as a general rule. The issue of one's actual experience with that Jewish heritage is a different matter. Some Messianic Jews have discovered that they are Jewish by the above definition and have no socialization or religious training as a Jew. Others have cultural or religious life experience which informs their Jewish identity. This must be worked out by the Jews in the movement. Remediation of cultural and religious heritage for those who discover their heritage will add to the struggle, not clarify it. This issue of being a Gentile in the movement is also problematic. Gentiles are often puzzled by their reception in congregations and organizations. In some cases, if a Gentile is married to a Jew, they are a full member but if not, they may be an associate member. Part of these distinctions is to make the Jewish identity of the movement clear and demonstrable. This can be frustrating to Gentiles within the movement, but it has a very important function, both practically and theologically. So, the first question to consider is one's identity as a Jew or Gentile.

Religious Observance – Judaism or Christianity

The second issue is one of theology and observance. This is the question of religion. Today, Judaism and Christianity are distinct religions. For most Jews and Christians, there is little overlap. But for the Messianic movement, there is an awkward and uncomfortable relationship with one or the other. Some within the messianic movement find their greatest conflict with Christianity, some with Judaism. This is true of both Jews and Gentiles. So it is not a simple matter of identity. Religious observance must also determine the quarter of the messianic city to which you most likely belong.

Hebrew Christianity and Messianic Judaism

The theological issues tend to divide messianic Jews into two camps. The first camp is those who observe the Torah as a Messianic Jewish Lifestyle. The second is those who observe Jewish ritual as a part of cultural heritage rather than religion. This shows up in the movement as a general distinction between those who have been called "Hebrew Christians" and those whose religious expression is "Messianic Judaism". While the term "Messianic Jew" applies to both, the real difference is between those who see their Jewish identity as heritage AND religion, over and against those who see it as heritage alone. Around the world, Messianic Jews are likely to be divided by this distinction, that is, those who practice Hebrew Christianity, and those who practice Messianic Judaism. This is not a simple distinction. It is more of a continuum with Observance to Torah and Rabbinic influence on one end and replacement (or more likely redefinition or reform) of

Torah and Christian Theology influence on the other. Even this is not fully correct, for observance is debated within these circles as well. But it serves to identify a clear difference among the Jews within the movement.

Messianic Gentiles

Among Gentiles, this problem also exists. For many Gentiles in the movement (and this is particularly true for those in Messianic congregations) the desire for a Biblical lifestyle has great appeal. Many Messianic Gentiles seek to observe Torah in a manner that often blurs the identity distinction between Jew and Gentile. They enjoy the Holy Days, the traditional or adapted liturgy, Davidic dancing, Kosher foods, and the use of kippahs and tallit. The problem is that for many Jews within the movement, this becomes confusing, or offensive and is deemed inappropriate. For some Messianic Jews, the issue of Gentile observance is filled with frustration and concern. For others, it manifests a support and love of Israel that is welcome against a background of Christian anti-Semitism. For still others, a need for conversion is contemplated to resolve this issue. But there are other Gentiles in the movement who seek some level of observance and Biblical Lifestyle that parallels but doesn't copy basic Jewish observance. They attempt to participate in a limited, selective and partial observance that shows a support of the movement and yet maintains Jew/Gentile distinctions. As the movement influences the churches, this issue for (Gentile) Christians will become even more difficult to address.

Four Quarters

From the discussion above, we can identify four distinct patterns within the messianic movement. First there are Jews, who see their primary identity and religion as Messianic Judaism. They tend to be Torah Observant and worship in Messianic synagogues with an increasing move toward Liturgy taken in whole or in part from traditional Judaism. Second are Jews who see their identity as Jews but their religious expression is more orientated toward Christianity. They are often in churches or para-church organizations but may be found in Messianic synagogues and Jewish evangelistic organizations. They enjoy the cultural aspects of being Jewish but do not see a necessity for the more strict Torah observance. The third group is Messianic Gentiles who see, in Messianic Judaism, a link to the Hebrew roots of their faith. They tend to participate in Messianic synagogues, are sometimes married to Messianic Jews, and engage in Torah Observance at a level that reaches close to their Jewish counterparts. Finally, there are Gentile Christians with a love of Israel and Messianic Jews who want a Messianic world view foundation for their Christianity. They are in Messianic synagogues and Churches, participate in some level of Torah observance (Holy Days) and Messianic expressions (David dancing) but are not likely to give up their affiliation with Christianity to the extent that Messianic Gentiles in Messianic synagogues do. The result is the following categories or quarters within the Messianic community.

1. Messianic Jews whose religion is Messianic Judaism
2. Messianic Jews whose religion is Hebrew Christianity

3. Messianic Gentiles whose religion is Messianic Judaism
4. Messianic Gentiles whose religion is Judeo-Christianity

Each of these expressions is part of the present Messianic movement. Each has an important voice in the struggle of Jews and Gentiles united in the Body of the Messiah. Each must respect the struggle and issues of the others. It is important and necessary for us to live in somewhat distinct quarters of the city we call the Messianic movement. But we must remember that the city is one. We are members of one another. We may differ, but we may not divide.

Churches and Synagogues

Each of the above Messianic categories exists in both Christian Churches and Messianic Synagogues. As the movement continues, congregations of each type will develop and thrive. But there will never be a one to one relationship between identity and religious expression. It is important to allow members of our congregations to find the best fit for them regarding congregational participation. Some congregations will be clearly one of these types. Others will be adaptations or composites of more than one. Our unity need not be uniformity. But we must recognize each other as an authentic expression of the common faith and hope in Yeshua (Jesus). One day we will have a city – the New Jerusalem. And perhaps there will be quarters even there - or maybe not.