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Root and Branch?

Exploring relationship models between the
Messianic Jewish Movement
and the wider
Church community

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Introduction

The Gospel of God is centred in the reality of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:11-21). Within and between any community seeking to live out the implications of this gospel, the desire for and the expressing of reconciliation and unity within diversity (1 Corinthians 12:12-26) is a high calling. With sadness and shame it is noted that much of the history of the Church shows a significant 'falling short' in response to this high calling. Such falling short has grieved the Spirit and has hindered the Church in terms of her life and witness.

In recent years many aspects of the wider Church community has gradually become aware of the Messianic Jewish Movement (MJM) with its intention to establish and sustain vibrant congregations. How does this new current affect the quest for unity within the Church? What model(s) of co-operation should be employed? What are the implications for ministry, authority and submission? These and many other related questions have impacted many within the wider Church community and such questions have a particular resonance for us within the Church's Ministry among Jewish People (CMJ) and for others in similar ministry and mission contexts.

Defining terms-

The MJM is far from uniform and is still in somewhat of an embryonic stage in its current expression, yet the following five definitions and descriptions are hopefully helpful in giving a useful overview.

Messianic Judaism is a Biblically based movement of people who as committed Jews, believe in Yeshua (Jesus) as the Jewish Messiah of whom the Jewish Law and prophets spoke¹.

¹ Messianic Jewish Alliance of America – from website – mjaa.org 2005

Messianic Judaism is a movement of Jewish congregations and congregational groupings committed to Yeshua the Messiah that embrace the covenantal responsibility of Jewish life and identity rooted in Torah, expressed in tradition, and renewed and applied in the context of the New Covenant².

Messianic Judaism is an important and sovereign work of God in which he is not only grafting back some of the original branches but more significantly, restoring the whole Church onto its Jewish roots³.

Messianic Jews for present purposes may be considered to be those who believe in Jesus as Messiah and Lord, in traditional Christological categories, yet who work to maintain their Jewish identity⁴.

Messianic Judaism is the movement of Jewish Believers in Jesus who affirm that their Jewish identity comes alive in Jesus rather than is terminated by faith in Jesus. Such believers seek to live out their faith in ways which honour their Jewish identity and seek to serve fully as part of the wider body of Christ while seeking to uphold and develop wherever possible special links to the wider Jewish community⁵.

The key point from the above definitions is that the MJM is seeking to establish Messianic Jewish congregations⁶ in which authentic Jewish worship, community life and the proclamation of Jesus can flourish. This mark clearly distinguishes the movement from previous 'Hebrew-Christian expressions of Jewish belief in Jesus. The previously dominant 'Hebrew-Christian' position would be that of encouraging and expecting Jewish Believers in Jesus to be fully absorbed into the life of a Church congregation. Such a process of absorption would not necessarily be understood as assimilation, yet frequently assimilation became the reality, if not within the first generation then certainly in subsequent generations. The result of such 'assimilation' was that a vibrant and

² Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations – Keshet Journal Issue 17 2004

³ John Fieldsend – Messianic Jews, Monarch Publications 1993 :25

⁴ John Kelly – Gotteslehre and Israellehre in the Theology of Jurgen Moltmann, unpublished PHD thesis – University of Sheffield :322

⁵ – My own working definition

⁶ Other terms such as Fellowships or Synagogues are also frequently used

distinctive Jewish witness to Jesus was never able to become fully established within sustainable trans-generational structures. The simple conviction of the emerging MJM is that vibrant and distinctive witness to Jesus is dependent upon the building up and on-going development of Messianic Jewish congregations which are trans-generational.

Exploring different models

In exploring the following four models it is worth noting that there are many nuances within and between the various models. My four models are far from being comprehensive or definitive yet hopefully they do give a useful structure for discussion and further reflection. Also it is worth pointing out that how such models are perceived and implemented in various contexts is highly dependent on leadership personalities and local relational networks.

The first model is what I am calling the Church absorption model. Here Jewish people who become believers in Jesus are free to prayerfully discern which historic Church denomination or new expression of 'church life to join. Advocates of this model would argue that in joining such a Church congregation the Jewish Believer is proclaiming his or her commitment to stand with other believers both Jewish and Gentile in seeking to build up the congregation in which God lives by his Spirit. While any one single expression or denomination structure of Church life will fail to convey full the richness of God's purposes, each church member nevertheless seeks to give of their best in helping the local Church to grow and to be continually renewed and reformed. Jewish involvement within these congregations will hopefully enrich such congregations in many areas, especially in terms of the insights and heritage which only Jewish believers can bring. Clearly, how such insights and heritage are received and applied is dependent on many factors but perhaps most significantly upon the receptiveness of the local church leadership. In some cases within this model, Jewish Believers in Jesus did find their insights and heritage welcomed and affirmed, yet this was not implicit within the model and often the Church was highly antagonistic towards such identity and heritage.

In terms of the issue of visible unity supporters of the absorption model would see that with Jewish People joining and serving within historic Church denominations or new expressions of Church life there is an

implicit expression of unity. Any fear of re-establishing the “wall of partition” (Eph 2:14) is removed and the “oneness in Christ” (Galatians 3:26-28) takes on a clear and visible expression.

This Church absorption model is most in keeping with the general history of Jewish mission and reflects the experience of the vast majority of Jewish Believers in Jesus/Hebrew Christians over the centuries. This is certainly the way in which ministries such as the ministry of CMJ have generally worked⁷. However, such a working out of the model would often have taken place on a sub-conscious level based on general on prevailing assumptions. Such assumptions are now being challenged, perhaps more vigorously than at any other time in Church history. Yet, as stated earlier, for the MJM such an absorption model is seen as a weakening of Messianic Jewish life and witness. Within the MJM, there lies the fundamental conviction that authentic and sustainable expressions of Messianic Jewish spirituality equates to the need for separate Messianic Jewish congregations. The question within this conviction is namely to do with what is the degree of separation which is needed in order to allow authentic and sustainable expressions of Messianic Jewish spirituality to flourish? With this question in mind I will turn to the following three models.

The second model is what I am calling, the Church integrated model. At the heart of this model is the conviction that within the witness of the New Testament and specifically in Paul’s teaching is the understanding that in no way should Jews abandon their God given Jewish identity in becoming followers of Jesus. However, this should not necessarily lead to separate Messianic congregations. On the contrary the key identification is in Christ and one of the greatest witnesses to our fragmented world is

⁷ It is of significant note that the work of the Jewish Believer Bishop Alexander in establishing the community of Christ-Church Jerusalem was passionate in restoring to the Church an appreciation of her Jewish roots yet he remained within an Anglican/Protestant framework. At no time to my knowledge did he advocate breaking away from the Anglican models of Church life in order to form a Jewish Network or denomination. As Kelvin Crombie states – “Alexander and his movement desired to see the church divested of the false assumption that it was gentile. The real purpose of the church in Jerusalem was to be where both the Jews and gentiles in Messiah, would be living as ‘one new man”.’ Kelvin Crombie – A Jewish Bishop in Jerusalem. Jerusalem, Nicolayson’s Ltd, 2006:245

united congregations of Jew and Gentiles. This congregation which has within its membership a number of Jewish Believers in Jesus would strive to help and encourage those believers to maintain their Jewish identity both within and beyond the Church. Alongside this would be the equal commitment to help the whole congregation to value and explore the rich Jewish roots of faith. As stated earlier in some cases this may have happened within the Church absorption model, yet is not a stated aim of the absorption model as it is in the case of the Church integrated model. How such striving would take place clearly would vary from congregation to congregation but there may well be a commitment to celebrate Jewish Biblical festivals, to recognise and support leadership both from tradition Church sources and Messianic Jewish sources, to open to “Hebraic” worship styles and a commitment to stand resolutely against all strands of Replacement Theology and anti-Semitism. In drawing up an integrated model Church congregations may well be able to apply certain insights gained and good practice maintained from various ecumenical church partnerships and shared worship agreements. In commentating on the Church integrated model, Dan Juster states:

This option hardly seemed possible twenty years ago, but today, we have many examples of it. Messianic Jews must stand for and with the whole body of the Church⁸.

In terms of Dan Juster’s call for Messianic Jews to stand for and with the whole body of the Church, there must also be an equal call for the wider body of the Church to stand with and for Messianic Jews. For many people developing creative Church integrated models is the prime way of fulfilling this call.

The third model is what I am calling the separate yet open model of Messianic Jewish community life. In this model separate and distinct Messianic congregations are formed. Advocates of this model do not see this as undermining the quest for unity within the whole wider body of the Church, but rather as bringing (or restoring) into being a vital additional expression of the diversity of Church experience. Also it is stressed that Gentiles are warmly welcomed into the full life of such congregations. Such a welcome is seen by advocates of this model as a

⁸ Dan Juster, *Jewish Roots, Shippensburg, Destiny Image, 1995 :155*

clear sign of the shared unity of Jews and Gentiles in the Messiah. Yet for opponents of such Messianic congregations the very existence of such congregations regardless of their actual membership mix undermines the true quest for unity within the Church.

The issue of the legitimacy and methodology of the inclusion of Gentiles into Messianic congregations is a contentious one. This is hardly surprising, for even a brief reading of the New Testament Epistles tells of the struggles in the very early stages of Church life over issues of Gentile inclusions. Similar issues and questions can recur today. Also it is worth noting that over the centuries there have been significant tensions for Jewish Believers in Jesus entering into what became a largely Gentile Church culture.

In terms of the inclusion of Gentiles into separate Messianic Jewish congregations the key issue gathers around the question of motivation for desiring such inclusion. Russell Resnik, outlines three initial motivating factors. Firstly, the desire for Jewish evangelism. Secondly the desire for unity between Jewish and Gentile believers. Thirdly, for the return of the Torah alongside an authentic living out of the Jewish roots of faith in Jesus. However, Resnik sees weaknesses and potential dangers with these three initial motivating factors. In terms of evangelism he states:

Viewing the Messianic Jewish congregation as a mission station distorts our divine calling to build Jewish communities for Messiah⁹.

In terms of unity he states:

Jewish and Gentile congregations within the larger body of Messiah, in their on-going distinction and mutual blessing anticipate the shalom of the world to come. To attempt to anticipate this shalom within a local Jewish-Gentile congregation will diminish the “ongoing distinction” between Jew and Gentile that is necessary for “mutual blessing”. Gentiles are certainly welcome within Messianic Jewish congregations, and are often essential the task of building these congregations, but the congregations remain Jewish, not expressions of “one new man” that is neither Jew nor Greek¹⁰.

⁹ Russell Resnik, *Defining Messianic Judaism*, Keshet Journal, Issue 16 2003:68

¹⁰ As footnote 9

In terms of returning to Torah and celebrating Jewish roots, he states:

Scripture portrays Israel as a people called to remain distinct – “a people that shall dwell alone and shall not be reckoned among the nations” (Numbers 23:9, JPS). Much of the Torah is given to preserve Israel’s distinct destiny. A Jewish roots movement that is not careful to respect the distinction between Jews and Gentiles can obstruct God’s purposes for both¹¹.

In seeing weaknesses within the above three areas of primary motivation for Gentile inclusion into Messianic congregations, Resnik, presents the concept of ‘Ahavat Yisrael’ (love for Israel) as the most appropriate motivating factor. He states:

Aharvat Yisrael speaks not only of God’s love for Israel, but also of our love for Israel, for the Jewish people around us. Believers from among the Gentiles may share in this aspect of Aharvat Yisrael as well, and this share is the key to faithful Gentile participation in Messianic Judaism¹².

Within this separate yet open model of Messianic congregations there is stated earlier a welcoming of Gentile inclusion. For some congregations the ‘one new man’ understanding despite Resnik’s concerns would be a legitimate goal of fellowship and congregational life. Within this there is an important affirming that Jewish and Gentile distinctiveness is not lost but also of equal importance is the strong declaration that the shalom which the Messiah offers between Jew and Gentile can not be primarily seen as belonging to a future eschatological age as Resnik declares. Being one in the Messiah is understood as the first fruits of the greater shalom which the full consummation of the Kingdom will bring. Also, within this separate yet open model there would be a striving for congregations to maintain a both/and approach rather than an either/or approach in regards to wider relationships with Church and Jewish communities. While such a both/and approach may well be theologically and pragmatically vital to the well-being of Messianic congregations in reality such a balancing act is extremely difficult to uphold. Most congregations within this separate yet open model would see that the prime relationship of identification is with the wider Church community. This is

¹¹ As footnote 9

¹² Russell Resnik, Article, *Defining Messianic Judaism*, Keshet Journal Issue 17, 2004:88

because the wider Jewish communities have often defined themselves through their rejection of Jesus as Messiah. So it is argued the prime community of identification for Messianic Jewish Believers today must be the community which honours and proclaims Jesus as Messiah and Lord.

The fourth model is what I am calling the separate model. Advocates for this model would see that the key function of Messianic congregations is to preserve and celebrate Messianic Jewish identity. Gentiles are mostly welcomed but not within the 'one new man' framework but rather using Resnik's term of 'Ahavat Yisrael'. Also in contrast with the separate yet open model while the attempt is made for a both/and approach in reality if and when choices are made the preferred prime relationship of identification would be the wider Jewish communities. As Resnik states:

When we imagine our primary community of reference to be the viable church, we must define ourselves within that church by our Jewishness, but when our community of reference is Israel – our Jewish people and their tradition – we define ourselves within that setting by our loyalty to Messiah. It is far more compelling to the Jewish people new are called to serve and more biblically consistent, to place ourselves within Israel standing for Messiah than within the visible Church standing for Jewish routes.

Too long have we sought to distinguish ourselves within the Christian community by our Jewish emphasis. Instead, let us be recognizably Jewish, a movement within the Jewish community that distinguishes itself by our response to the spirit of Messiah in our midst¹³.

The response to Resnik could well be that he has created a false choice. For example why could Jewish Believers not stand for the Messiah within the visible Church? Clearly from the above quote Resnik feels the deep frustration of time spent by Jewish Believers trying and often failing (from his perspective) to find a distinctive and recognisable place within the Church community. Yet despite such frustration, how can one be sure that the Lord is not asking for on-going acts of patience and renewed commitment by Jewish Believers as they seek to stand, serve and share within the Christian community? Also while it is beyond the scope of this Olive Press article it is worth noting that connected with Resnik's position

¹³ Russell Resnik, Article, *Defining Messianic Judaism* Keshet Journal Issue 17, 2004:88

there are clearly significant mission and evangelistic issues at stake, especially if within the separate model one strongly affirms prime identification with the wider Jewish community. It seems that the recent work¹⁴ by Mark Kinzer addresses some of these issues and brings into focus some challenging and strongly disputed¹⁵ conclusions.

Implications

Regardless of what models¹⁶ are used the growth of Jewish Believers in Jesus is a great blessing to the whole Church community. Any local expression of church which is not 'in touch' with issues of her Jewish heritage and today's living Jewish stones will in many ways be improvised. What the Lord is doing among the Jewish people in grafting back some of the original branches is a joy of immense proportions. Yet there is also a further dimension to this. It seems to me that the whole Church is also being given the opportunity in partnership with Jewish Believers to be renewed by, united in and restored¹⁷ to her Jewish root. This is the holy root which offers true nourishment and support (Rom 11:18). This is the root into which all Gentile Believers in Jesus have been mercifully grafted into. Such grafting in is not through the process of becoming Jewish. This is not primarily an ethnic identity issue, but rather it is sharing in the blessings and promises of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob made freely to all through the death and resurrection of Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Such renewing and restoring has the potential to result in anew paradigm within Jewish-Christian relations and in part prepare the Church for the fulfilment of scripture which sees that 'all Israel will be saved' (Rom 11:26)

¹⁴ See Mark Kinzer, *Post –Missionary Messianic, Judaism*, Grand Rapids, Brazos Press 2005

¹⁵ For a full discussion and examination of Post-Missionary Messianic Judaism see the Mishkan Journal, Issue 48, 2006

¹⁶ My own background and experience would lead me to advocating as my preferred model the Church integrated model but I can appreciate how in other contexts and for other people other models have legitimacy

¹⁷ I have found the writing of Peter Hocken to be extremely helpful in developing this theme of restoration to the Jewish root in regard to the ongoing quest for unity within the Church. See for example Chapter 11 – The Pivotal role of Israel, in his book – *The Glory and the Shame*, Guildford, Eagle 1994.

As the Church longs to see this day there seems to me to be two general dangers within the outworking of the relationship between the MJM and the Church community.

The first danger is for the largely Gentile Church to romanticise and place the emerging Messianic congregations on some form of spiritual pedestal. While this may be better than years of undermining or denying the gift and calling of Jewish Believers it falls short of the mature mutual submission, co-dependency and partnership outlined in Scripture.

The second danger is for the emerging Messianic congregations¹⁸ in rightly rejoicing in seeing how God is building up their life and witness to claim some form of superiority over other expressions of Church life. Clearly the gift, callings and insights of the MJM are, as stated, a great blessing and has much to teach and give to the whole church. The Church must acknowledge, affirm and rejoice in this. However, any one congregation, network or model which wishes to claim some form of exclusivity in regards to the furtherance of God's Kingdom is in danger of seeking an authority which denies and distorts God's gifts and calling to others. Such gifts and calling which have in the past, and in the present, often been exercised with great sacrifice and faithfulness. Also, such exclusive authority claims with the accompanying status would sit uneasily with genuine notions of servant leadership (Matthew 20:26-28).

Conclusion

That which (or rather he, who) unites Jewish and Gentile Believers in Jesus is far greater than the potential forces of disunity. Clearly these four different models which present different expressions of faith community could well lead to tensions and disunity. However, the creative theological questions such models raise could well be the catalyst¹⁹ for a greater understanding and mutual affirmation of Jewish and Gentile Believers. Such a catalyst would be dependent on such questions being addressed within a spirit of humility and a desire to find a common mind, namely the mind of Messiah who unites in and through diversity. The same Messiah who called Galilean fishermen (Mark 1), a tax collector

¹⁸ I see this danger to be less likely to develop if some form of the 'Church integrated model' is used.

¹⁹ One context in which such questions are currently being creatively explored is within the movement "Towards Jerusalem Council 2" www.tjcii.org.

(Matthew 9) a Jewish scholar (John 3) an outcast Samaritan woman (John 4), an Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8), a zealous Rabbi (Acts 9) a Roman centurion (Acts 10) and continues to call the widest range of people today. People like you and me, called into fellowship with Him and with one another through Him.

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