

INTERMARRIAGE, PROSELYTES & THE NEXT GENERATION In Messianic Jewish Congregations

by Michael Rudolph

The title of this paper addresses the concerns – even fears of some Messianic Jews, that if the non-Jews among us were to become Jews through conversion, and our Jewish children were to marry Gentile believers, it would not be long before Messianic Judaism would become so diluted of population and purpose as to be non-effectual as the expression of God’s remnant people. Some Messianic Jewish congregations have even reacted to such fears by restricting Gentile participation, forbidding Gentile conversions, and discouraging Jew-Gentile intermarriages.

Jewish And Gentile Believers

Genetically speaking, one is a Jew who can trace his or her ancestry to the patriarchs and, if he is a man, is covenantally circumcised.. This identity of being a Jew is, therefore, inseparably linked to membership in the family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, a family which became known as Israel.

When Ruth aspired to join Israel, she covenantally professed:

“Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God.” (Ruth 1:16)

While being a Jew is primarily genetic, Ruth exemplifies the process by which one can become a Jew through covenant conversion. Notice the two components of her profession: (1) acceptance of the God of Israel as her God, and (2) acceptance of the people of Israel as her people.

The apostle Paul adds to our understanding of being a Jew in his letter to the Romans:

“For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.” (Romans 2:28-29)

“For they are not all Israel who are of Israel.” (Romans 9:6)

Some take these verses to mean that all believers in Yeshua are Jews because they are circumcised inwardly – of the heart. That would be a misinterpretation because the Scriptures are speaking about men who are already circumcised outwardly – in other words, men who already consider themselves to be Jews. The Scriptures are simply saying that outward circumcision for physical Jews is not enough.

These Scriptures notwithstanding, we must still ask: “Do Gentile believers become Jews merely by virtue of their faith in the Jewish Messiah?” Once again, we find our answer in Paul’s letter to the Romans. Speaking to Gentile believers he says:

“For if the firstfruit is holy, the lump is also holy; and if the root is holy, so are the branches. And if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree, do not boast against the branches. But if you boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you.” (Romans 11:16-18)

Clearly, then, upon coming to faith in Yeshua, Gentiles are grafted into the olive tree of Israel and become partakers of the root. They do not, however become part of the root, and so there remains a distinction between Jewish and Gentile believers.

Corrective Covenant Adoption

As in the *Tanakh*, the New Covenant considers a Jew one who is covenantally circumcised, and either traces his ancestry to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, or who accepts adoption into their family (Acts 6:5). The adoption principal is of particular importance in the Twentieth Century because few of us today can trace an unbroken Jewish ancestry past a few generations, and without the assurance of corrective adoption, none of us who call ourselves Jews can be sure that we are.

Please don't let the significance of this pass you by. When we think of conversion – becoming proselytes to Judaism – most of us envision preparation followed by some kind of formal procedure. While this may be so for some, many of us who consider ourselves genetic Jews are Jews only because somewhere in our past, God accepted the covenant intentions of ourselves or an ancestor, and unbeknown to us, we became proselytes – Jewish sons and daughters of the Most High through adoption.

Cases in point: Four circumcised men from the same congregation claim to be Jewish. The first man contends this because his mother claims to be Jewish although his father is not; the second because his father claims to be Jewish although his mother is not; the third because both of his parents claim to be Jewish, although unbeknown to him, his great grandfather on his mother's side remained uncircumcised; the fourth because he was adopted into a Jewish family who brought him up as a Jew. In addition, the first three men know nothing of their ancestry past the third generation, and the fourth man does not even know the identity of his parents. The congregation (typical of most Messianic Jewish congregations) accepts them all as being Jews. Question: Is the congregation right to do so?

I believe it is right to do so only if these men's innocent declarations that they are Jews makes it so. It is right to do so only if discontinuity of Jewish identity in their ancestry is cured by covenant adoption. I believe that Messianic Jewish congregations have stumbled onto a truth that any circumcised man who innocently and covenantally holds himself out to be a Jew is, in fact, a Jew in the eyes of God. This kind of spontaneous conversion of those who innocently declare they are Jews, repairs any discontinuity in lineage which may have occurred, and enhances, rather than diminishes, generational Jewish integrity.

Gentiles Who Want to Become Jews

Facilitating conversion for believers who know they are Gentiles but who want to become Jews is another matter entirely, and should not be approved automatically because there is a significant witness to being a Gentile believer who is regarded as an equal with, Jewish brothers.

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Messiah Yeshua¹.” (Galatians 3:28)

If a Gentile believer becomes a Jew, he gains a significant calling -- being a preserver of the oracles of God (Romans 3:1-2), but he loses a calling as well -- being a grafted-in branch who receives the oracles of God, is renewed in the spirit of his mind, and lives among and fellowships in unity with Jewish brothers (Ephesians 4:17-24; Romans 15:10). Some ask why there are Gentiles in Messianic Jewish congregations. This witness of unity and equality with Jews is the reason, and it cannot be achieved if significant numbers of Gentiles in Messianic congregations convert to become Jews.

The apostle Paul discouraged Gentile believers from converting to become Jews. Referring to circumcision and other matters, in his first letter to the Corinthians he states:

“But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk. And so I ordain in all the churches. Was anyone called while circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Was anyone called while uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but ‘keeping the commandments of God is what matters. Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called.’” (1 Corinthians 7:17-20)

“For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” (Romans 11:29)

Significantly, one does not find this desire to become a Jewish proselyte nearly as often among Gentiles who fellowship in Christian churches, as among those who fellowship in Messianic Jewish congregations. I believe that is because in their historic search for identity, Messianic Jewish congregations have emphasized the value of being a Messianic Jew, but have taught little about the value and calling of being a Messianic Gentile. As a consequence, some Gentiles in Messianic Jewish congregations are unclear about their role and value, and perceive that it is better to be a Jew.

Paul’s instruction in 1 Corinthians 7:17-20, to let each person remain in his original calling, was intended as a general, but not an absolute rule. We know this because Paul himself departed from his rule when he circumcised Timothy to legitimize Timothy’s ministry among the Jews (Acts 16:1-3). In responding to requests for Gentile conversions, congregational leaders should follow Paul’s example of generally discouraging them, but being willing to consider each case on its own merits. I will have more to say later in this presentation about one case where I believe conversion to Israel should always be allowed.

Gentiles Who Want to Marry Jews (and Visa Versa)

As an increasing number of Messianic Jews and Gentile Christians fellowship together, it is

inevitable that some of their young people will intermarry.² There is nothing in Scripture which precludes this, so long as the prospective Gentile partner is not a member of those seven evil nations who would influence Israel to idolatry (Deuteronomy 7:1-4; Exodus 34:15-16), and in the Mosaic law, there are even rules for this occurring (Deuteronomy 21:10-13).

That notwithstanding, a potential problem begins to suggest itself when one considers the following well-known Scriptures:

“And the Lord said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him.’” (Genesis 2:18)

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” (Genesis 2:24)

“Then God blessed them and God said to them, ‘be fruitful and multiply; ...’” (Genesis 1:28)

As we have already seen, Messianic Jews and Messianic Gentiles have callings which are somewhat different. How, therefore, can a husband and wife who are one flesh walk in these different callings? How can a wife who is her husband’s helper, walk in a calling which is different from his? In being fruitful and multiplying, what is to become the identity and calling of the fruit? Can a parent train up a child in the way he should go (in his calling) if that parent does not model the calling?

While it is clearly easiest when marriage partners share the same calling, it is nevertheless possible for them to fulfill their respective roles and obligations if they share a common Messianic identity. By this I mean that in their Jewish or Gentile callings, both are committed to a Biblical Jewish-rooted, thoroughly Messianic style of life. If that is so, one partner need not pull against the other any more than a husband need pull against his wife merely because he is called as a man and she as a woman.

In our society we stereotype the Gentile as being noticeably different from the Jew. Gentiles attend church on Sunday -- Jews worship on the seventh day. Gentiles eat pork -- Jews do not. Jews observe the Biblical Sabbaths – Gentiles do not – and so on. The fact is, differences such as these do not reflect the true Biblical calling of the Gentile. If, according to Romans 3:1-2, the Jew is called to preserve the oracles of God, then the Gentile response and calling must be to receive these oracles, and live according to them; for how else can the Gentile be renewed in the spirit of his or her mind as Paul commands the Gentiles in Ephesians 4:17-24? And if Jews and Gentiles conduct their lives according to the same oracles of God, must not their lives and values be very similar? It is on this level of living a disciplined life in one’s calling, that intermarriage works.

What About The Children?

Being secure in our identity is important to everyone, but it is especially important to children because they are still developing their understanding of who they are in relation to others. We

sometimes hear children of intermarriages refer to themselves as “half Jewish.” That is an unfortunate departure from reality. Biblically, there is no such status. One is either Jewish or one is not.

So how does a child born of intermarriage determine his or her status? Although intermarriage between Jews and Gentiles is Biblically allowed and has occurred through the ages, in every intermarriage portrayed favorably in Scripture, the Gentile partner joined Israel, and the children of the marriage were counted as Jews. There is not one instance of it going the other way. You may recall that earlier I said there is one case where I believe conversion to Israel should always be allowed. It is this case where, for the sake of unity of identity and calling in the marriage, the Gentile partner of an intermarriage seeks to join Israel.

The Process of Covenant Conversion

Becoming a proselyte to Israel is not unlike becoming a citizen of an adopted country. One transfers citizenship from one’s country of origin to one’s country of choice, and once it is done, it cannot be undone. Ruth did this, but she did not receive her new citizenship the moment of her covenant profession. It awaited Israel’s acceptance of her through her marriage to Boaz.

In a Twentieth Century Messianic Jewish congregation, the Jewish ruling elders stand in the place of Israel, with authority to either accept or decline the application of a Gentile believer who asks to become a Jew.³ This requires a serious exercise of judgment on the part of both the elders and the applicant for all of the reasons previously mentioned. On the elders’ part, they must discern whether or not God has truly called the applicant to transfer “citizenship” and become a Jew. They must not shrink from refusing to accept the conversion if they believe the applicant has not been so called. The applicant for covenant conversion must also discern whether or not God has truly called him or her to become a Jew. Since a Gentile believer in Yeshua has already accepted the God of Israel, all that is left is to join the nation – not the political nation, but the people nation (of course, circumcision is required in the case of a male). This change in identity is permanent, and even if it is sought to bring unity of calling to a family, it should never be done merely to accommodate the Jewish partner of the marriage. A litmus test which may be applied is for the Gentile partner seeking conversion to ask himself or herself: “If my husband (or wife) goes to be with the Lord before me, will I continue in my commitment to my adopted people, and continue to consider myself a Messianic Jew?”

Notes:

1. The Hebrew-derived word “Messiah” is used here in place of the Greek-derived word “Christ” which is used in the New King James Version. “Yeshua” is substituted for “Jesus” because “Yeshua” is Messiah’s correct Hebrew name.
2. The term “intermarry” is used here to mean marriage between Jewish and Gentile believers in Yeshua. The Rabbinic Jewish community uses this term and the term “mixed marriage” to denote marriage between persons of two religions.
3. If a congregation’s eldership has no Jewish member, it must seek the assistance of Jewish elders from another congregation.

March 3, 2000