

The Difference Between a Church and a Messianic Synagogue

Rabbi Michael Wolf

Winter 2003

The article below was written by Rabbi Michael Wolf of Beth Messiah Synagogue in Cincinnati, Ohio. The vision and opinions expressed by the author are shared by the leadership of Tikvat Yisrael Messianic Synagogue in Cleveland, OH.

The Difference Between a Church and a Messianic Synagogue

Written by: Messianic Rabbi Michael Wolf

I can sense this common call and gifting in many Gentile church pastors I meet. We have much in common, because we are both helping to bring a body of believers into spiritual maturity. However, as we share our experiences, it becomes increasingly obvious that, just as there are similarities between our ministries and congregations, so there are differences as well. What are some of these differences?

Primary among the differences is our foundational identification with the people of Israel. Whereas Gentile churches identify with the worldwide community of believers, Messianic synagogues identify not only with that community but, equally, with the Jewish community worldwide. This is true in spite of the fact that our synagogues are not always embraced by that community. God's perspective is not man's, and He has brought forth Messianic synagogues as the first fruits of the revival and restoration of Israel which Paul speaks of in Romans 11:26.

And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written, "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob..."

Gentile churches are called to bless the Jewish people. We are part of the Jewish people they are called to bless, as well as part of the body of believers who are called to do the blessing. That is the special position of the Messianic synagogue.

Along with this special position comes a responsibility to uphold and nurture our Jewish identity and actively support our Jewish people. This includes the challenge of raising up the next generation of Messianic Jews—a dimension of our children's education programs that differs from the church. We seek to train our children in the ways of God through the rich reservoir of Biblical Jewish practice and tradition.

In addition, our congregations are called to worship God through the Jewish Shabbat, festivals, and holy days, rather than the Christian holy days most churches observe. Messianic congregational leadership meets the challenge of developing Spirit-infused models of Jewish liturgical worship in very exciting and creative ways. I've been to many Messianic synagogues in the USA and

abroad, and it's always fascinating to observe the different, original and fresh ways that Messianic worship is expressed through traditional liturgy, Davidic worship, dance and other elements. Though these expressions may vary, they all have one thing in common. They all reflect a worship model in the context of Jewish calling and identity.

Our synagogues are also called to be a beacon of light and a spiritual oasis—a place where whole Jewish families can come to understand the Messiah Yeshua within their own cultural and religious heritage. This calling to be culturally relevant to our own people must remain a priority for Messianic synagogues, though it is not a consideration in the church. We will reach many people of all backgrounds along the way, but our apostolic call is to our Jewish people, just as Peter's was two 2,000 years ago.

James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. (Galatians 2:9).

Just as there are many differences between churches and Messianic synagogues, there are also different opinions about the purpose of a Messianic synagogue. As we present the Messianic Jewish vision at Beth Messiah in Cincinnati, we often find that individuals come into our synagogue with visions that are not compatible with the vision God has given us. Some of these visions may be antithetical to Scripture while others may be scriptural but not the vision God has called us to. By listing some of these perspectives below, a clearer understanding of the Messianic synagogue and its distinctive emerges.

First, some see the Messianic synagogue as the "true Church". These individuals feel that the local church should be modeled after the Messianic synagogue and that the whole body worldwide should be keeping the Jewish Shabbat, festivals, and kosher laws, among other things. In short, for them the Messianic synagogue is living a "more authentic Christianity" that all churches should follow. We at Beth Messiah do not agree with this. Ours is a positive message about the restoration of our Jewish people, not a negative message about the Gentile church. This is true even though we understand and teach that the church has historically embraced major errors, such as Replacement Theology. Unlike those who see us as the "true church", we do not see our synagogues as superior. We are a part of the body, not above it.

Second, there are those who see our synagogues as two-tiered. In this view, there are some roles that only Jewish members can fulfill. These roles might be liturgical in nature, such as reading or carrying the Torah, or they may be governmental in nature, such as eldership positions. At Beth Messiah, all members (whether Jewish or Gentile) who are fully committed to our synagogue and to its vision, and are maturing in their call, are enfranchised into the various congregational ministries.

Third, some come with a perspective that places Rabbinic Judaism and Talmudic thought on an equal status, and perhaps on a status above the Apostolic writings of the New Covenant. At our synagogue, I make it very clear that we view only the Tanach and the New Covenant as divinely inspired. We do not view ourselves as being under the authority of the ancient rabbis, but instead under the authority of Rabbi Yeshua HaMashiach. This does not mean that we don't practice many of the traditions that have developed among our people over many centuries—we do. However, we do not view these traditions as divinely imposed.

Fourth, some see "worldwide revival" as having top priority, while Messianic Judaism is seen as a distraction at best, and a hindrance at worst. Our desire and efforts to maintain our Jewish identity is seen by those with this view as either unnecessary or, at times, divisive. While we at Beth Messiah can receive positive spiritual blessings from revivals and renewals in the Gentile Church, the call to our Jewish people and our Jewish identity is God-given and is a part of who we are, and always will be, until Yeshua comes. Without this distinctive there cannot be "one new man" between Jew and Gentile in the body, in the same way that a marriage cannot be "two who are one flesh" without a man and a woman.

Because of the many different views that abound, we at Beth Messiah felt a need to clarify our specific vision and mission as a Messianic synagogue through various practical measures. First, we have written a mission statement that we make available, and, second, we offer a sixweek course called "First Things First". This course is repeated a few times each year. It is distinct from all other discipleship courses. Its sole purpose is to explain to new attendees what makes Beth Messiah different from area churches and traditional synagogues. The course includes information on Messianic vision, history and lifestyle, as well as a discussion on the place of Gentiles in a

Messianic Jewish community. The goal of the course is to give the new attendee an idea of who we are so he or she can make an informed decision concerning commitment. During this course, we also discuss our vision and mission statement. In addition, we place the statement on our information table and on our Web site.

Our Vision

Beth Messiah Synagogue is a manifestation of G-d's present day regenerating and restoring work in the House of Israel

It is a faith community where Jews embrace and strengthen Jewish identity and heritage as believers in Messiah Yeshua

At our synagogue, Jews and Gentiles have been made echad (one) in their embrace of Yeshua as G-d's atoning Messiah who will reign on David's throne

Here Gentiles embrace Israel, prioritize a Jewish expression of their faith, and serve alongside Jewish believers.

Our Mission

Beth Messiah Synagogue, envisioning and assisting in the restoration of the people of Israel to their G-d and to their calling, will work this out in the following ways:

Commit to, and grow in a lifestyle of faith called Biblical Judaism

Reveal first to the people of Israel, and also to the world, the true identity of the Messiah Yeshua

Support Israel and the Jewish people in opposing all acts of hatred against them

Call the brothers and sisters in the Body of Messiah to the proper understanding of G-d's covenant promises to Israel and their restoration.

Taken together, along with the rest of the article above, these vision and mission concepts are what makes a Messianic Synagogue unique as a

community. They differentiate our community from Gentile churches with whom we fellowship.

First published in Spirit of Messiah, Winter 2003
by Messianic Rabbi Michael Wolf, Beth Messiah, Loveland, OH