

Bilateral Ecclesiology is Not Biblical

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During the recent presidential campaign in the States, now President Obama utilized one primary word to focus his message: Change. The mantra was “Change you can believe in.” Now that he is the new president, his victory slogan is: “Change can Happen” and “Change has Come.” The well-worn adage is true: “Nothing is as sure as change.”

But some things should never change, and when they do, it brings sorrow. Robert Frost wrote a small poem bemoaning the inevitability of change:

*Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.*

Indeed, our own dependent existence is likened to grass by the prophet Isaiah: “All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades . . .” (Is 40:6–7). In absolute contrast to the inevitability of change among mortals, Isaiah goes on in the next verse to affirm: “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever.” In a world where nothing is quite as certain as change, we long for that which is unchanging—that which remains the same from generation to generation. So we cling to the Holy One of Israel and to His infallible, unchanging revelation, the Bible. “For I, Adonai, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed” (Mal 3:6).

Some change is good. If we discover, for instance, that some darling belief of ours is not founded upon the truth, we must jettison the falsehood and commit ourselves to changing in line with the truth. But when change occurs because standing firm on the truth becomes too uncomfortable or is patently unpopular, or when changing our message will broaden the circle of those who accept us, such change is devastating. It may be likened to a person building a rock wall who, coming to the very end finds himself short two or three stones. He decides to take a few from the foundation row to finish the top course. After all, hardly anyone would notice that a couple of stones from the bottom row are missing. Then comes the winter rains that wash through the lower gaps and the whole wall collapses.

I guess it should come as no surprise that we continue to hear Messianic leaders pushing the Jewishness of the Torah and teaching that Messianic Judaism should be reserved primarily for ethnic Jews—that the Gentiles (by-and-large) should remain in the Christian Church and find their connection to Israel in their mystical, spiritual connection with Messianic Judaism. This is Kinzer’s point when he opts for a “bilateral ecclesiology in solidarity with Israel.”¹ He likes the idea of two separate entities that make up the *ekklesia* of Messiah: one Jewish and the other Gentile, remaining separate in their leadership, ecclesiastical government, and traditions, but affirming each other as valid expressions of the one *ekklesia* of Messiah.

Kinzer’s well written and hard hitting book has had its due effect upon current Messianic Judaism. In

¹ Mark Kinzer, *Post-Missionary Messianic Judaism* (Brazos, 2005); see particularly Chapter 4 and pp. 152, 160f.

the perspective of some of the mainline Messianic denominations and ministries (UMJC, HaShivenu, etc.), Kinzer’s work has offered the necessary theological foundation to pursue their goal of being recognized by “wider Israel” as a *bona fide* Judaism of our day. They know, of course, that to attain this goal, they must prove (among other things) that they are thoroughly Jewish, which means that their synagogues and communities are not overpopulated with Gentiles. To teach that the Apostles held the same “bilateral ecclesiology” helps them explain why the Gentiles would be better situated elsewhere—that even God would be pleased by such an arrangement.

Some of us, who openly and strongly oppose such a “bilateral ecclesiology,” have had our teaching labeled as “One Law,” being charged with dissolving the distinction between Jew and Gentile and even teaching supersessionism or replacement theology. We’ve been called “judiazers,” judged as mishandling the biblical text, and labeled as divisive.

Under this barrage of criticism, some who have previously championed the One Law position are changing their message. While they now readily affirm that there is a “Torah mandate” for Jews, they are backing away from teaching that there is an obligation for Gentile believers to obey Torah. This allows far greater rapprochement with both the Christian Church and the dominant Messianic ministries. The message of Torah that so offends the Church, namely, that obeying God means keeping His commandments, is softened, because Gentile believers have no *divine obligation* to keep Torah. Even if this centrist message “encourages” Gentiles to keep Torah, and shows them what benefit it would be for their spiritual lives, the bottom line is this: if Gentile believers opt not to espouse Torah, they’ve done nothing amiss. On the other hand, the fact that this perspective affirms a “Torah mandate” for Jews is far less offensive to the Church and at the same time pleases the dominant Messianic denominations who teach that Torah observance is foundational to Jewish identity and therefore not for Gentiles.

But at TorahResource, we are not changing our message. We remain firmly committed to the “One Law” message of the Scriptures, being entirely unconvinced by the exegesis (and eisegesis) of our detractors. We have no intention of adopting their contextualized or culturalized hermeneutic, and we’re not clamoring for acceptance by the dominant voices within the mainline Messianic denominations. Nor do we think that our message of Torah-equality for Jew and Gentile is divisive. By its very nature, truth creates distinctions because it is the opposite of non-truth (in spite of the fact that post-modernity denies the existence of propositional truth). Yeshua Himself proclaimed that His message of truth would bring division (Matt 10:34). It is not the message of truth that is divisive but the unwillingness to accept that truth. Our duty is to proclaim what the Scriptures teach and implore people to accept its eternal, unchanging message. And while we greatly appreciate the wisdom of the Rabbis and the wealth of knowledge contained in rabbinic literature and other non-canonical texts, we affirm without reservation that the Scriptures (ordered in our times as 66 books) remain our sole authority in matters of faith and *halachah*. This means that we will continue to use the Scriptures as the rule against which all other literature is judged worthy or unworthy.

It is on the basis of Scripture, then, that we remain firm in teaching that there there is one *kehilah* (congregation) of Messiah Yeshua, comprised of Jew and Gentile who are eternally chosen by God for salvation, all of whom are equal covenant members and therefore participate equally in the privileges and responsibilities of Torah. We reject the teaching that some of the commandments of the Torah are “uniquely Jewish” and are to be observed by Jewish people only. And we equally reject the idea that the commandments of God contained in the Torah are to be offered to Gentiles as available but not obligatory. Did not Yeshua teach us that even the smallest stroke of the Torah is eternal, and that those who would be called great in the Kingdom would be those who live by the commandments of the Torah and teach others to do so as well (Matt 5:17–20)? And did not our Master and Savior command His disciples to make disciples of the nations (Gentiles) “teaching them to observe all that I commanded you” (Matt 28:19–20)? Yes, He did!

Did not Paul declare the Gentile believers to be part of the commonwealth of Israel, that they are no longer strangers and aliens but fellow citizens and true children of God's household (Eph 2:11–22)? And did he not also proclaim the Gentile believers to be fellow heirs and fellow members of the body of Messiah, who now participate in the covenants of promise (Eph 2:12; 3:6)? Did he not make it clear that Gentiles, whom he characterizes as wild branches grafted into the olive tree of God's covenant promises, share in the richness of the root which produces the same fruit of righteousness in all the branches (Rom 11:17)? Yes, he did!

Did not the author of Hebrews teach that all who are called to salvation are members of the new covenant through the work of the mediator of the new covenant Who is Yeshua (Heb 9:15)? Is not one of the primary characteristics of the new covenant that all who are members of it have the Torah written upon their hearts (Jer 31:31–34)? Yes, all of this is true!

So then, all true believers, whether Jew or Gentile, have the Torah written upon their hearts, which means that the Torah forms the matrix from which they live out their lives of righteousness in Yeshua. It is pure theological manipulation to conclude that when the Spirit writes the Torah upon the heart of a Gentile believer, He uses an edited version! God is not interested in a "Readers Digest" version of the Torah.

The unified message of the Torah, the Prophets, Yeshua, and His Apostles is that God intends to save a host of people from every people group upon the earth and to unite them as one under the rule of His Messiah, Yeshua. The present day expression of this one people is not some ethereal, theological idea that lauds the unity of the body of Messiah in some mystical expression of oneness that has no physical reality in our world. No. The reign of Messiah is manifest in living, breathing communities in which Jew and Gentile together live out a life of righteousness in accordance with God's own holiness as revealed in His commandments, displaying to a watching world the shalom that will find its full consummation in the world to come.

God promised Abraham that in him—in his seed—all the families of the earth would be blessed. This grand promise finds its fulfillment in the person of Yeshua and the communities that claim Him as their Chief Shepherd. As Jewish and Gentile believers in Yeshua, we are not complete without each other because only when we are living and working together within a community of faith is that promise manifest. It is the sincere purpose of TorahResource to encourage and strengthen just such communities.

In the Introduction to *FellowHeirs* I wrote:

So here is the primary question before us: *What is the relationship of Jew and Gentile within the body of Messiah?* Do we all have the same status, the same obligations, the same responsibilities, and the same privileges? As distinctly Jew and non-Jew, do we share a singular identity that manifests itself in a singular lifestyle of holiness unto God? I hope you will see that the Bible answers these questions with a resounding "Yes!" (p. xiii)

Today, nearly seven years later, we affirm this same, biblically based message. We haven't changed and we don't intend to. By God's grace and by His strength, we are determined to continue teaching, training, and producing materials that will help establish and strengthen Torah communities throughout the world. *Chazaq, chazaq, v'nitchazeiq!*