



# *Rabbis & Synagogues*



## **A Letter from an Israeli Jewish Pastor**

Written by PFI Founder  
Ken Burnett

# Rabbis & Synagogues or the 'Ecclesia'

## LETTER FROM AN ISRAELI JEWISH PASTOR

*(These papers are a slightly adapted version of the reply sent to a correspondent in N. America by an Israeli Pastor of former strict Orthodox background)*

Dear Stephen,

### **First we need to cleanse the terminology!**

When I read that a Messianic pastor or elder calls himself 'Rabbi', I wonder if Matt. 23:7-8 is obeyed. Sometimes we need to take the word of God as it is, without trying to give an interpretation, which at the end becomes exactly the opposite of what has been written; it is a question of our respect for the scriptures.

Much the same thing needs to be stated concerning the word 'synagogue'. There might have been synagogues in Jesus' time but they belonged to the Jews who didn't believe in Jesus. Later John described these synagogues as 'the synagogue of Satan.' (Rev. 2:9)

In the book of Acts the meeting place of the Messianic Jews was called 'Ecclesia'. There are many important differences between a synagogue and an ecclesia. The Greek uses two different words to describe two different places; so should the translation. The ecclesia is the place of the bride and the church of the living God, and it was supposed to be spiritually built according to a certain pattern that we can study in the book of Acts (and it would be too long to expound here).

For example:

- The five ministries didn't exist in the synagogues but were present in the ecclesia (Ephesians 4:11);
- There was a certain way to worship in the ecclesia that was not requested in the synagogues;
  
- There is a certain order to be respected because of the gifts of the spirit and Paul mentions an order in taking the Lord's Supper;
- There is a way to choose the elders and the deacons, and the tasks of these ministries are explained as well as the requirements to function as such.

Therefore, today as believers we cannot speak of synagogue any more because it doesn't reflect the reality of our meeting place but something that is obsolete and doesn't correspond to our faith. The fact that the church has had a bad reputation in the Jews' eyes is not a reason to dismiss the word, because 'the church' is a biblical term.

In the same way, Yeshua doesn't have a good reputation for the Jews; so what? Yeshua is right and they are wrong! We cannot compromise with the Jews on such important issues. The Jews need to come to a point of repentance in their lives where they say 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord'; and what will they do when they look upon Him whom we all pierced? They cannot reject Him just because Christians did bad things in His name!

The heart of the matter is not only that the Gentiles need to repent of their attitudes toward the Jews but also that the Jews need to repent of their attitude toward Jesus (whom they curse every day by calling Him 'Yeshu' in Hebrew), whom they crucified; and to repent of their lack of forgiveness toward the Gentiles and, more precisely, the Christians.

## THE CROSS

Also, it is a disaster that the word 'cross' is not used and is replaced by 'the tree of sacrifice' in the vocabulary of [certain Messianic leaders]. What remains in our faith without the cross? The cross is not a tree and if this word 'cross' is used in the New Testament it's because it symbolises the horizontal and vertical love of the Christian and so much more. The Jews need to understand the cross and rediscover its true meaning; it is wrong to substitute it with something else. We are not allowed to change, substitute or hide the truth.

'For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the Gospel - not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power'.

'For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God' (1 Cor. 1:17 - 18)

'May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world' (Gal 6: 14-15)

By the way, this was said by the Apostle Paul and not by Rabbi Paul! Again there is a big difference between a Rabbi and an Apostle and we would lose a great deal by camouflaging the precious ministry of 'Apostle'. Here again Joel Chernoff uses wrong terminology.

## TRADITIONS

In addition it is sad that some Messianic Jews need to use some traditions that were invented by the Rabbis but have no scriptural basis. The kippa is one of them, as well as some practices used at the feasts which are seen nowhere in the Bible. Even the talith is not found in the scriptures. Let us be precise: the Bible mentions the fringes that were attached to the garments but nowhere do we see a shawl that is supposed to be worn on the garments.

Even if I were wrong, the talith should be worn all the time...but the fact is that the Messianic believers who use the talith and the kippa wear them only during the services. It is for the same reasons that Jesus called the Pharisees hypocrites. They used big phylacteries and were very keen on traditions:

Jesus replied, 'And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?' (Matt. 15:3)

In general, what [certain Messianic leaders] are doing is that they base their Jewishness on the Jewish culture. This is exactly what is being done in a great part of conventional, Reform and Conservative Judaism. I am afraid that it takes much more than this to be Jewish.

Again this topic is too wide to be treated here but Paul, although he was at war with those who were into the observance of the law, said that he was a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin. He knew that he had a Jewish descent and that he belonged to Israel. He also writes that 'not all those who are descendants of Israel are Israel' (Rom. 9:6), and the rest of the text is rather clear. In other words he never linked his Jewishness to his culture. On the contrary, he said:

'What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ - the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.' (Phil. 3: 8-9)

## **NEW DOCTRINE AND OLD**

We need to say first that no-one can build a new doctrine on the basis of the fact that the Church misunderstood Israel and persecuted the Jews. The key to the whole matter is to remain scriptural. Paul said, 'I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ'- which means that he was not ashamed of the cross, or of Jesus, of pastors, of being an Apostle, or of being a Christian (a follower of the Messiah), etc. It is asked concerning the Hebrew Roots movement: 'How much error is required before we reject a teaching?' I personally found very good teachings with Buddhism and some famous gurus. Does it mean that I can retain some of their teaching? My answer is that the word of God is enough for me and I don't need anything else!

'Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough?' (1 Cor. 5:6, NIV)

How much yeast do we need for the whole dough to be affected? How many rotten fruits do we need in a basket of apples for the whole batch to rot? I think we have here already the answer. I am not ready to swallow the bad part of the doctrine just because there is a certain amount of truth in it, unless the doctrine is reconsidered and rectified; but there is a need of humility for this.

Yes, I feel that the 'Hebrew Roots' movement builds walls because I know fellowships with Jews and Gentiles in their midst and there is complete unity. Our unity is in Jesus and not in some culture features.

This movement is definitely the modern equivalent of the Judaisers of Paul's days (the Galatians). They practice circumcision as if they have to: This should be free for everyone to decide. (1 Cor. 7:19, Col.2:11)

## **NOW, CONCERNING THE FEASTS**

As for Passover, I understand that the Christians celebrate Easter and that it is wrong because of its pagan roots; but this should not encourage us to borrow anything from conventional Judaism and its liturgy, unless it is scriptural.

Do we have to celebrate the Biblical Feasts? Jesus is the fulfilment of the law. Why? For the simple reason that it is impossible today to observe the Biblical Feasts. How can we practice?

'Then celebrate the Feast of Weeks to the LORD your God by giving a freewill offering in proportion to the blessings the LORD your God has given you.' (Deut. 16:10) 'For seven days present offerings made to the LORD by fire, and on the eighth day hold a sacred assembly and present an offering made to the LORD by fire. It is the closing assembly; do no regular work.' (Lev.23:36)

All the Feasts were centred on the Temple; today they are centred on Jesus and our intimate relation with Him. If the Lord had wanted us to celebrate the Feasts today as they were celebrated in the Old Testament then why did He allow Titus to destroy the Temple and deprive us of the very place where we were supposed to observe the Feasts?

Now this said, it doesn't mean that we cannot have the Feasts, but we need to be balanced, centred on Jesus, and not borrowing anything that belongs to the synagogue of Satan.

For instance, in our Fellowship we had Passover as a simple celebration in which all the Old Testament story of the Feast was revealed in Jesus. We had a whole lamb that we grilled on the fire as our forefathers did when they came out of Egypt and we did not add any symbol that is not in the Bible; but it was done in a free way and the goal was to point at Jesus. No kippa, no talith, no seder plate, no 5 glasses of wine but only the fellowship of the brethren and our fellowship with our Saviour: again.... the cross!

Concerning people who are into the Hebrew Roots movement, I have nothing to say because my point here is not at all personal. What we are looking at is the doctrine. If their doctrine is good, then praise the Lord! But if there are many 'traditions' and added things, then: Do you know the numerical value of the Greek word 'tradition'? The answer is 666!

As for our day of worship, the Bible doesn't give any strict rule about it and if Sunday is the national day off in your country then worship on Sunday. Of course it is more symbolic to worship on Saturday but I don't think that worshipping on Sunday will deprive us of our salvation!

As for the term 'Messianic believers', it is fine; but once I spoke to an Orthodox Jew at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem and shared that I was a Messianic Jew. He said: 'Your term is not specific and doesn't describe your faith because we are also Messianic Jews since we believe in the Messiah. Yet there is a very significant difference between us and it is that we refute your Messiah!' He was right. That is why I don't mind calling myself a Messianic Jew but I prefer to call myself by the name that God Himself gave me:

'How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know Him.'(1 Jn. 3:1)

Concerning the interpretation of Peter's vision in Acts 10, I have a strong reservation. It is true that the animals symbolise the Gentiles but the Lord would not have chosen the non-kosher animals and would not have said to Peter 'kill and eat' if the physical meaning was disregarded. The dietary laws died when Jesus went to this cross, and the curtain was torn from top to bottom. When the Son sets you free you are free indeed, and especially free from the curse of the law!

### **WE NEED TO CONTINUE TO TEACH THE CHURCHES TO LOVE THE JEWS**

To pray for Israel, but without concessions on either side. Let us not forget that we will win the victory by the blood of the Lamb and the word of our testimony; but what will be the outcome if the word has been diluted? Of course it is easier for the devil to hear the word 'tree' than the word 'cross'! The cross speaks of blood and love, and he hates it! So we should not be surprised if his goal will be to change our terminology and tell us to adopt his.

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