

Our Mission in relation to the Church

By Rev. Dr. Lee B. Spitzer

The existence and journey of Yachad BeYeshua is a fascinating and important spiritual experiment. Yachad BeYeshua strives to unite Jewish disciples of Jesus in loving fellowship as a witness to God's faithfulness to Israel and the Church. Our core values are 1) Love for Jesus our Lord; 2) Love for our Jewish brothers and sisters, the people of Israel; and 3) Love for the Body of Messiah – including the Gentile-majority church.

Some of us who participate in Yachad BeYeshua conversations, like my friend, Mark Kinzer (who presented on Tuesday), are Messianic Jews who see their journeys as working out primarily within the wider context of the Jewish people. Many of us, like Judith Wolfe (who presented yesterday) and myself, however, have sensed God's call to live amongst and serve within the context of the now Gentile-majority Christian Church. We still identify as Jews, who live and work in a non-Jewish ecclesiastical context, and accept the term "Christian" as an accurate descriptor of our faith allegiance. In this regard, I often have explained to others that when I became a Jesus-follower, I did not become a Gentile – I became a Jewish Christian.

The key milestone in my personal journey with Jesus occurred when I was 14 years old. Up until that time, I had never attended a church or spoken about religious matters with a Christian believer. On December 24, 1971, through what I can only describe as an "auditory" encounter with the actuality of God's presence, I was led to find a Christian Bible in the possession of my older brother and for the first time read both Revelation 19:11-21, the account of the mysterious Rider on the White Horse and Matthew 1, a Jewish-centric account of Jesus' birth. The former corresponded to a recurring dream I had experienced during my childhood and kept secret from others; the latter helped me to identify Jesus as the Messianic Rider of my dream. That night, I irrevocably pledged my life to Jesus as my Messiah and King.

If this numinous encounter reminds you of Paul's Damascus Road experience, as described in Acts 9, you'd be spot-on. I discovered that encounter story about a month after mine took place, and since that time Paul's journey, theological concerns, pastoral heart and call to the Gentiles have served as role model and a source of never-ending wisdom for my own life

narrative and ministry as a Baptist pastor and denominational leader. Like Paul, I identify as a Jew who serves Jesus, my Messiah. And also like Paul, I have heard and accepted a divine call to live amongst and pastorally serve within an overwhelmingly Gentile social and spiritual context.

For many Jewish followers of Jesus, there is a chronic cost we pay for remaining faithful to our calling – whether we are Messianic or Jewish-Christians. At the inaugural conversation of our network in Dallas in August 2018, we gave names to this cost, and our founding charter describes it well:

While empowering Jewish Christians and Messianic Jews to fulfil their calling as Jewish disciples of Yeshua, this global identity [Yachad BeYeshua] can also meet needs which some of them feel deeply. It can enable Jews in the churches to overcome the *existential loneliness* which sometimes affects Jews living as an isolated minority among Gentiles. It can likewise enable Messianic Jews to overcome the *communal marginalization* which some experience as part of a community whose legitimacy is regularly called into question in both the Jewish and Christian worlds.

Yachad BeYeshua functions precisely at this spiritual intersection of Jewish-Christian *existential loneliness* and Messianic *communal marginalization*. From that singularity of weakness and vulnerability, we receive as a gift of divine grace a deepened sense of love for both the Jewish people and Gentile Christians. And this love inherently compels us to serve, leading us to the question posed by the topic assigned to me – **“What is Our Mission in relation to the Church?”**.

I propose that Jewish disciples of Jesus, especially in the twenty-first century, are called to serve and minister to the Gentile Church in three ways that are directly tied to our Jewish identity and heritage. These three ways are TESTIMONY, TEACHING and PROPHECY.

1) TESTIMONY – the Living God’s Covenant Faithfulness (*hesed*)

It took me several years to discover a satisfactory link between my personal spiritual journey and theological convictions and the life and witness of the Christian Church. After largely positive experiences within Assemblies of God, charismatic, evangelical, Presbyterian, Episcopalian and Baptist church settings, my wife and I joined an American Baptist church, where I was ordained on May 31, 1981. Since then, I have pastored Baptist congregations in

Rhode Island, New Jersey and Nebraska, and then served on a regional level in New Jersey and national level, as General Secretary, of the American Baptist Churches USA. Now retired, I serve as the Historian of the Baptist World Alliance and an affiliate professor at an ABC-related seminary.

Throughout all my ministry settings, the most requested presentation I have been asked to share is my personal spiritual journey **testimony**. Gentile Christians across the world have wanted to know how and why a Jewish boy from New York would dedicate his life to Jesus and the Christian church. Over time, I have come to appreciate how my personal religious odyssey opens conversational doors to explore such themes as God's covenant faithfulness (*hesed*) and the reality of the divine presence within human history and spirituality.

2) TEACHING (*Zakar* and *Hokmah*)

The testimonies of Jewish Christians contribute more to the life and witness of the Christian Church than just exciting stories that affirm the power and awe of God's living reality. Undergirding each of our journey narratives are two foundational insights that are often forgotten or neglected by the Gentile Church when it forsakes its historical and spiritual Jewish heritage. I would like to suggest that Jewish Christians (and by extension, Yachad BeYeshua), have a responsibility (and privilege) to **teach** the Gentile Church to **remember** (Hebrew *zakar*) its Jewish roots, and by affirming its Jewish legacy, to receive the gift of Jewish **wisdom** (Hebrew *hokmah*), especially as recorded in the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible (the Christian's Old Testament).

In 1935, the Baptist World Alliance's General Secretary, James Henry Rushbrooke, a Gentile, "extended the hand of sincere friendship" to the Jewish world before a large gathering of British Jews in London. Noting that Baptists had passed an historic resolution condemning Nazi antisemitism at its World Congress in Berlin the year before, the *Jewish Chronicle* of London affirmed that Rushbrooke "had a profound respect for the Jewish race" and went on to share his thoughts:

It was indeed amazing that any professed Christian should be able to ignore or question or deny the vast debt which his religion owed to that unique people. The larger section of the Christian canonical scripture was a possession they held in common with Jews. In a somewhat different sense from theirs, "We have Abraham our father." The intimate historical association of Christianity with the older Revelation – to them also divine –

compelled the close study of the Old Testament as an indispensable means to the complete understanding of the New Testament; and whatever their differences in the interpretation of the outstanding personality from whom their name of “Christian” derived, they saw in him a man of Jewish blood.

It is simply an amazing but sad fact that most Gentile Christians have little awareness and appreciation of the Jewish roots of Christianity. Yet, in most Christian denominational traditions there is at least a faint memory that Jesus himself was Jewish and that the Hebrew Scriptures were divinely inspired and as spiritually authoritative as the New Testament writings. Jewish Christians, in particular, are called to bear witness to these truths.

For example, Julius Köbner, a nineteenth century Jew and the son of a rabbi, was one of the earliest converts to the Baptist movement on the European continent. In fact, he was one of the three most important founding apostles of that movement. A brilliant and multi-talented person, he wrote dozens of hymns that were sung in European churches for decades, helped establish Baptist mission and churches in several countries, and was the primary author of the first German Baptist statement of faith (1847), adopted by many Baptist national entities throughout Europe and in effect in Germany itself until 1943. Unlike almost every other Baptist (and indeed Christian) confession, his version overtly embraces Christianity’s indebtedness to Jewish history, theology and practice in many ways. Just one example – in article 1, all 39 books of the Tanakh are individually listed as divinely inspired and worthy of study by Baptists.

During all of my pastorates and denominational ministries, I have sought to promote an appreciative awareness of Christianity’s indebtedness to Judaism and the Jewish people. A few of the most significant teaching themes have been:

First, we may encourage Christians to consider the Relationship Between the Tanakh (Jewish Bible) and the New Testament (Apostolic Era Writings). It is common in some Christian circles to assert that because Christians are Christ-centered, we should read the Old Testament in light of the teachings of the New Testament. There is value in this approach, but it is only one arrow in our exegetical quiver. The Tanakh can also be read in light of ancient Israel’s spiritual journey, prior to Jesus. Furthermore, Jesus’ Messianic journey and the Apostolic writings may be read in light of the Tanakh. Jewish Christians, and Yachad BeYeshua, can advocate for a balanced dialogue between the two covenant documents. And finally, both the Tanakh and

the Apostolic writings can be read in conversation with later movements, such as the Rabbinic commentaries (the Talmud, etc.) and Christian tradition.

Second, we may advocate for a comprehensive literacy of the entire Bible, from cover to cover. When I became a local church pastor, it did not take long for me to realize that most of the members and attendees of the church did not possess a well-rounded understanding of the entire Bible and in fact, had never read through it even once. How can we grow spiritually if we are unfamiliar with the Bible's texts? In response, I began to offer courses based on a "through the Bible" approach (usually one book per week, with extra weeks for the lengthier books) that could be completed in roughly one year. These courses became my most well-attended sessions outside of morning worship services. I also made sure that my sermons were based on a wide variety of texts, from as many Biblical books as possible.

Third, we may emphasize the Jewish Foundation of Christian Faith, Practice and Spirituality. I have sought to apply Jewish experience, history and spiritual wisdom as I address the challenges of Christian Discipleship. In particular, Jewish wisdom is essential for Christians who wish to serve Jesus through spiritual disciplines and spiritual journeying. The Gentile Church has made many mistakes through the ages because they have forgotten the lessons of the Jews as Covenant people who possess God's wisdom and guiding light.

3) PROPHECY – Righteousness, Justice and Peace (*shalom*)

It can be argued that Israel invented **prophecy** – speaking on behalf of the Almighty – not to effect magic, but to promote righteousness and justice in society. The voice of the Jewish prophets still has the power to shake the human soul, inspiring us to new heights of individual sanctification and communal holiness. Reaching to the very climax of human history, the prophetic spirit dreams of the realization of peace – *shalom* – and the healing of all creation (*tikkun olam*). Both Judaism and Christianity share an essentially optimistic vision of the future, due in no small part to the prophetic imagination of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah and the other seers of Israel's history. Jewish Christians honor Jesus as the apex of the prophetic line, and proclaim that he is the Messianic key to the unfolding of salvation history for both Jew and Gentile.

As James said, "Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you" (James 1:27; NLT). Centuries of Jewish concern for the poor, economic justice and human rights compels

Jewish Christians to echo James' understanding of righteousness and justice within the community of faith and beyond, into every society in which we find ourselves.

Although each individual Jewish Christian does not have the capacity, resources or time to advocate for every social justice cause, it seems to me that there is one special justice concern that we must make a priority – the struggle to oppose and eradicate antisemitism. Jewish Christians, as representatives of the Jewish people WITHIN the Christian Church, have no choice but to be leading voices for philosemitism. This is precisely what Jacob Gartenhaus, the highest ranking Southern Baptist Jewish leader, did, in the 1930s and 1940s. Throughout the Nazi era, Gartenhaus raised his voice and used his denominational position to urge Southern Baptists to oppose antisemitism, fight against Hitler and aid Jewish refugees.

Today, we must prophetically oppose all ancient, historical and current manifestations of antisemitism. Gentile Christians – the Church – have often fallen for the temptation to speak and act in an antisemitic fashion, and must be held accountable. Along with its Jewish Christian members, Yachad BeYeshua should prophetically remind Gentiles that antisemitism is an evil, a sin. This prophetic stance will also serve as a witness to the Jewish community we also seek to bless, by being an ally and a friend to them.

Conclusion

Yachad BeYeshua exists in a luminous space, between Israel, the Jewish people still in diaspora, and the overwhelmingly Gentile Christian Church. How Messianic and Jewish-Christians live, witness and share will determine whether our voice will be heard, and whether the Spirit will speak through us in a powerful and positive way. In the power of the Holy Spirit, may we be open and faithful to the journeys that lie before us!