

**The Case for Conversion:  
Welcoming non-Jews into Messianic Jewish Space  
by Rabbi Dr. Richard C. Nichol**

*This booklet is written with my deepest respect to my Messianic Jewish colleagues who, with heart and soul, are seeking to build something beautiful – modern Messianic Judaism. I also hope these thoughts will be a blessing for many in our synagogues who wonder about the many issues raised in this piece.*

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The passing of time often change a person's perspective. Several years ago I was privileged to be asked to draft a proposal for the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations Theology Committee on the subject of the conversion of gentiles to Messianic Judaism. At that time I took a strong position against the practice. Since then I have reevaluated the issues. This essay will detail why I and a growing number of Messianic Jewish leaders have come to believe that offering a formal conversion is essential for the future health and vitality of our movement, the spiritual and emotional well-being of the people in our care, and the good of the Jewish people.

**Sizing up Messianic Judaism**

In some respects the Messianic Jewish movement has made phenomenal strides. Whereas a mere thirty years ago there were very few Messianic Jewish synagogues, today there are many. Back then, nothing but a grand ideal motivated us -- our conviction that Jewish identity and belief in the Jewish Messiah, Yeshua, must come together. Today, we have our own buildings, day schools, adult education programs, and quasi-denominational structures. In our midst many Jewish people have become faithful followers of Messiah Yeshua. We have scholars in training at Harvard, Cambridge, Duke, and other world-class universities. We have found a measure of favor among a small but growing number of mainstream Jewish leaders who, sensing the sheer breadth of Jewish orientations worldwide, want to make room for us at the Jewish table. Finally, we have had a profound impact on an important segment of the Christian Church, the Evangelical community. The Lord has used Messianic Judaism to raise the consciousness of thousands of Christians to the God-ordained role of their elder brother, the Jewish people.

However, our story is not unambiguously positive. One area of great need is this: to *clarify the identities of men and women, boys and girls in our synagogues*. Identity confusion has been the hallmark of Messianic Judaism, in part because of our unique claim about Messiah. With that claim has come our union with two historically antagonistic communities,

the Church and the Jewish people. Sorting out this dual connection is immensely challenging. But if we do not resolve the ambiguities, it is hard to imagine that we can build a viable movement that will last beyond one or two generations. One thing is clear: We can no longer travel only on the enthusiasm generated by worship, dance, and a “Big Idea.” Our people are confused. They don't know who they are because we have not spoken clearly to them. Many inwardly wonder...

**"My great-grandfather was Jewish, does this make me Jewish?"**

**"I wasn't born Jewish, but at the Messianic Jewish synagogue I attend all the guys wear tallises, which makes me feel Jewish. I suppose I am, but I'm not sure. No one really talks about it much. "**

**"My name is Tommy O'Hara and I'm 10 years old. Mom and dad like to take me to a Messianic Jewish church and I like to go. I think I may be Jewish now, but I'm not sure."**

**“My name is Rachel Sandler and I'm Jewish. I like going to temple but I end up confused when I go. My Bat Mitzvah is coming up in May, but my Jewish friends at school say our congregation is all wrong and their parents won't let them come. They say our rabbi shouldn't have Bar Mitzvahs for kids who aren't Jewish, but they know that we do. I kind of agree, because Bat**

**Mitzvah is really a Jewish ceremony. But, there are more kids at our Messianic temple who aren't Jewish than kids who are. And we have Bar Mitzvahs for everyone. I don't want to act like I'm prejudiced, but it all feels weird. I'm confused about a lot of things. And I'm really sad my best friends from school won't be coming to my Bat Mitzvah."**

**"I grew up in Messianic Judaism but frankly, on reflection I think it is such a hodgepodge of confusion that I can't possibly stay in such an environment. It was nice when I was a kid, but as a young adult it really makes no sense to me at all. How can I possibly stay? I don't expect any religion to be perfect. I'm surely not perfect. But, I just cannot continue to support a faith which seems so utterly ambiguous about its very nature. Is it really a Judaism? Is it a Christianity? No one seems to offer clear answers to even such obvious questions."**

**Under the right conditions offering conversion can help solve some of the challenges facing our constituencies and enhance the staying power of our movement. In Part I of this essay we will explore several reasons we believe conversion must become part of Messianic Jewish practice. In Part II I will seek to address a number of common questions and concerns about the practical outworkings of the conversion process.**

## **Part I**

### **Why Should Messianic Judaism Offer**

## **Conversion to Gentiles in Our Midst?**

**What exactly do we mean by “conversion?” *Conversion is the means whereby a non-Jew moves fully into the status of a Jew among the community of Israel, with all the privileges and responsibilities accompanying such a fundamental change of religious identity.***

**Why is this so important to a maturing Messianic Judaism? I offer three basic reasons: *Offering conversion is a matter of integrity, a matter of love and a matter of fidelity to the overarching plan of God as revealed in Scripture.***

### **Offering Conversion is a Matter of Integrity**

**Let us begin where many Messianic Jews agree: Messianic Judaism is indeed a Judaism and not merely a primitive form of Christianity. When Messianic Jewish leaders wear tefillin and tallises we make this point. We are a Judaism. When we have Passover Seders -- an institution not specifically commanded in the Bible -- we declare ourselves a Judaism. When we perform marriages under the Huppah, we do so because we claim to be a Judaism. When we celebrate Rosh Ha Shanah and fast during Yom Kippur services, we declare ourselves to be a kind of Judaism.**

Here is where the matter of integrity becomes so central. In our congregations we have large numbers of non-Jews. In fact in many Messianic Jewish synagogues, the majority of people are not Jewish. Yet, we invite these good folks to participate in any and all aspects of our congregational life, treating them as though they were Jews. We do so in part because we don't want to hurt the feelings of people who make large contributions in our congregations. But, an unintended effect of our inclusiveness is that we trivialize our most basic claims. We inadvertently teach that being Jewish merely means participating regularly in a Messianic Jewish synagogue! Should others respect a movement which so undermines an identity which our grandparents and our ancestors often died for?

Orthodox, Conservative and Reform rabbis take an adversarial posture toward Messianic Judaism. Surely our claim that Yeshua is the Messiah accounts for part of the hostility. But are we not partly to blame for the hostility? We are at fault because we have so muddled the uniqueness of our calling as Jews that we have not deserved the respect of the larger Jewish world. Imagine this familiar scene:

A well-intentioned non-Jewish young man dances enthusiastically at a Messianic Jewish conference. He is wearing tsitsit. He had been brought up as a Pentecostal Christian, but had discovered his "Jewish roots." Are

**we not aware that the tsitsit are the quintessential symbol of Israel's fidelity to the covenant God made with us at Sinai? And yet, we say nothing to the young man. He imagines that, "since he is Messianic," he has a right to wear the fringes. Such gross misappropriation of a sacred symbol is not his fault. It is our fault. I speak particularly to fellow leaders. We have not displayed integrity in our service to the Jewish people.**

**Eventually the young man's dance will end. The room will become quiet and he will be left with his thoughts. And, if he is a reflective individual he will one day ask the question, "Who am I really? Is it this easy to become a Jew?"**

**Historically, our people have understood that premature commitments are easily broken. That is, when the music is playing it is easy to be Jewish. But the words of the Prophets and our historic experience tell us that pleasant songs will not always play for us. Through the centuries Jews have been hunted and hated. Will the young man with the tsitsit dance with us if persecution comes? Will he continue to want to be a Jew? Such questions can never be answered in advance, but a process of conversion which is challenging, slow, intentional, and symbolically rich has been the Jewish people's way of increasing the odds that those who wish to take upon themselves the responsibilities and privileges of Jewish life will make a genuine commitment.**

***Can anyone personally and privately claim to be a Jew? Who has the right to make such a determination? Consider this analogy:***

**When a person seeks to become a citizen of the United States he or she embarks on a clear and unambiguous step-by-step journey involving application, study, entry and celebration. The integrity of our nation depends on such a rigorous process. Similarly, leaders of the people of Israel are charged with establishing standards for “citizenship” among the Jewish people. No individual has the right to privately claim citizenship apart from such a communally-sanctioned process. However, some try to enter by “climbing over the fence:”**

**Messianic leaders are perplexed and disturbed by the emergence of the Ephraimite movement. A growing number of gentiles have found a way to convert themselves to complete identification with Israel. Using dubious exegesis of biblical passages they make the startling claim that they are part of historic Israel. They say they are true Jews. Beyond noting the misapplication of biblical texts and the misunderstanding of historical realities which undergird this movement, we have a deep sense of violation when we consider the Ephraimites’ claims. Out of ignorance, they have sought the unique status of the Jewish people in the world and we feel violated because something unclean has occurred in the process. This movement is merely an expression of identity confusion and borderless,**



**boundary-less Jewishness carried out one step further than we have allowed it to be carried out in our own synagogues. We don't refer to gentiles in our midst as members of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, but the net effect is not altogether different.**

**Conversion to Messianic Judaism which is**

- made available in a very limited way, primarily to those gentiles who have Jewish spouses, but also to some others under very specific circumstances (and not presented as the norm for gentiles who embrace Jesus as the Messiah...)**
- and is undergirded by halachic standards by which the new convert is expected to live...**

**can help to elevate Messianic Judaism in our own eyes, in the eyes of our children and in the eyes of a watching world. A nation with no boundaries will not be a viable nation for long. Messianic Judaism will not grow to become a vital, worthy expression of Jewish peoplehood without ameliorating this situation. It is a matter of survival and it is a matter of integrity.**

**Offering Conversion is a Matter of Love**

The appropriate home for the vast majority of gentiles who have embraced Yeshua is a local church. However, Messianic Jewish congregations have attracted many non-Jews. Among these good friends we find no small degree of ongoing low-grade anxiety and pain. They wonder, "Who exactly am I? I was not born Jewish. I want to be Jewish. But I don't know how to get there." As the Saturday morning liturgy progresses they pray the Aleinu with the rest of the congregation, "...for he has made us distinct from the nations ..."and they secretly wonder," Is this addressed to me? Am I part of Israel?"

Of course, some gentiles who worship with us are thoroughly content. They feel whole and they feel satisfied because they know who they are. They are non-Jews who do not wish to be Jewish. They attend a Messianic Jewish synagogue so they may drink deeply of the richness of the original (Jewish) olive tree. They enjoy the music. They are happy to help out where needed and to give money for the maintenance of the congregation.

But, there are others who deserve a special kind of love from us. For years they have felt a growing attachment to the Jewish people – sometimes from earliest childhood. They may have grown up in a church, but now feel this to be somewhat foreign territory. They have a passion for Hebrew prayer stretching back to their early teens and as adults have been committed

participants at the citywide Yom HaShoah services. More and more their identification with the Jewish people grows and with it a growing sense of discomfort about who exactly they are and how they fit in at our synagogues. The pain can become acute. The God of love and goodness demands that we love them properly.

We worry about their children. The super-flexible, “de facto conversion” with no beginning and no destination as currently practiced among us leaves their children in the dark as to their own identities. Are they Christians? Are they Jews? Mom and dad don't seem to know. They are Messianic gentiles, a title which has no meaning outside the walls of their synagogue. It is not loving to leave children in such a state. Outside the synagogue life is filled with confusion. Must kids stay confused while in the safe sanctuary of our congregations? Consider this real-life situation as described by a concerned Messianic Jewish rabbi. This is the story of a committed gentile family in his synagogue and their son Michael:

As Michael approached his 13th birthday he entered into Bar Mitzvah training with other Jewish kids. But while they were training for Bar Mitzvah, Michael was preparing for something else. We had no way to legitimately call him a Jew, even though he has liked the life as much as any of the other kids. I can tell you that as his spiritual leader my heart was broken every time I had to qualify his training as

a "Bar Avraham." I can only thank God that Michael was a very mature and understanding young man. But can we say the same for all our non-Jewish kids? Perhaps we might say that adults can live with the ambiguity of this kind of identity confusion. But it is too much to ask of children.

Or, consider the dilemma of Maryann H., a gentile mom in one of our Messianic Jewish synagogues:

Our need to find identity with the Jewish people came to a point when our daughter Sarah was born. She was one day old when the nurse came into the room at the hospital and needed to get some information from us for her birth records. One of the questions we were asked was, "*What is your religion?*" My husband and I looked at each other with confusion on our faces not knowing how to answer that question. We believed in Jesus but worshipped in Messianic Judaism so we couldn't call ourselves Christian. We worshipped as Jews but were not Jewish ourselves so we couldn't claim the right to say we were Jewish. We had no name or "title" to identify who we were in our faith.

Before our daughter came along we were content with the fact that we were gentiles in a Jewish world. There were times when we felt

like “outsiders looking in” and we would ask ourselves, “*What are we doing in a Jewish synagogue?*” But we could not see ourselves leaving the Messianic movement and going to a church - not after experiencing our faith in our Jewish Messiah and understanding God from a Jewish perspective.

Now we started to think of how this was going to affect our daughter as she grew up. What was she going to be? A Jewish Gentile? How were we going to explain our situation to her? It’s hard enough for us to explain to family and friends why we go to a Messianic Jewish synagogue when we’re not Jewish.

So I tried to find a link from the past that would connect us to this way of life. I researched our genealogy to find the faintest of Jewish ancestral lineage. Knowing we still would not be able to call ourselves Jewish, we would at least have that very far removed connection. Something to help us feel like we belonged.

I never found the connection I was looking for but in our hearts we know that God has a purpose for us in Messianic Judaism. So, our daughter is growing up Jewish.

If, through proper teaching, Jewish communal involvement and the work of the Spirit, this family's identification grows deeper than "understanding God from a Jewish perspective" (a good start!), we should offer them a way to achieve full enfranchisement – through conversion.

Another group of people needs some attention – the young Jewish people in our synagogues who will go to college or will otherwise enter the "real world." Once out of the house they will gain the necessary distance to question the values they learned at home. They will likely become acutely sensitive to apparent and real ambiguities in their childhood faith.

Confusing religious claims have little gripping power for thinking young people. Why should they pay the high price of continuing in a marginalized religious movement which lacks even the most basic standards or self-definition? The casual, de facto conversion characteristic in our synagogues is not loving in the long-run. Can baseball or a board game be played with ambiguous rules? Will not the players ultimately become frustrated and quit the game?

Conversion is the process whereby some of the ambiguities can be cleared up. It is an act of love as is all legitimate boundary-making and boundary-keeping. It is true in the realm of citizenship and it is true in the realm of faith.

**But there is one last love which we must consider.**

**Ahavat Yisrael -- love for Israel - should burn in the heart of every Messianic Jewish leader. I suggest that one way to love Israel is to protect her boundaries, not conferring citizenship to non-citizens in a casual or slipshod fashion. Of course, all gentiles who believe in Yeshua are already citizens of God's kingdom, but not of the Jewish nation as such.**

**According to the teaching of Scripture, they are citizens of the Greater Commonwealth of Israel. They are members of a multi-ethnic, multi-national community of those who have received the Spirit of God through faith in Messiah. But they are not Jews. They are the people from every nation and tongue who have embraced the Risen One!**

**Conversion, when done carefully, clarifies this entire situation. It does not require that all gentiles in our synagogues convert. But love demands that we meet the deepest needs of that group of non-Jewish people who, for many and varied reasons, have come to feel that they must walk with Ruth to the promised land, with the words "your people will be my people" on their lips.**

**Ahavat Yisrael – love of Israel – is protective, like a husband's love for his wife or a mother's love for her children. Loving Israel means protecting her from an overbalanced universalism. Yes, God loves all the peoples of the**

**world. He loves the gentile Church with all his heart. But he loves Israel in a unique way. Faith in Yeshua will bring any and all into the community of Yeshua, but entrée into Jewish peoplehood comes differently.**

**Ahavat Yisrael takes us a step further. Our Jewish people look at us and feel betrayed by a Messianic Judaism which treats deeply-rooted sensibilities in casual fashion. Of course, some of that sense of betrayal is beyond our control. For example, Messianic Jews can't undo the effects of seventeen centuries of overt Christian anti-Semitism. As Jews who follow Yeshua, we must bear the unavoidable reproach which comes with the territory of following Him. As the Scripture teaches, we are called to die with him so we may rise with him.**

**But, when our people have justifiable reasons for labeling Messianic Jews as betrayers, we must give heed. Though they may not even be religious themselves, Jewish people often know intuitively that a boundary-less Judaism is no Judaism at all. Their inner objection to us is not primarily a difference of opinion about "the identity of the man in Isaiah 53," but a shared gut-sense that what we have to offer is a sell-out, a Judaism that really cares little about values which have sustained us for centuries. Perpetuating such weaknesses in the inner soul of Messianic Judaism is**



not loving. Offering conversion is an act of love because our people can understand a Judaism which behaves like one.

### **Offering Conversion is a Matter of Fidelity to Scripture**

By "fidelity to Scripture" I do not mean that the Scriptures teach conversion of gentiles as a normative pattern for this age. Clearly, the intended path for non-Jews who enter the community of faith in the Messiah is not conversion at all. Why? Because with the dawning of Olam haBa in Yeshua, the non-Jewish peoples of the world are invited into Abraham's enlarged tent not by becoming Jews, but by trusting in the Risen One and by obeying the overarching ethical imperatives of the Torah. This lesson has been well learned by the Church. Despite her blind spots, the Church has correctly understood that as a non-Jewish institution it is not obligated to the specifics which are unique to Israel's covenant with God.

What I do mean by "fidelity to Scripture" is that the larger biblical picture demands that the Jewish people -- Israel -- remain a distinct people for the sake of the world. According to Messianic Jewish understanding, the destiny of the world depends on the ongoing vitality of the Jewish people because the Jewish people have always been and will always be a conduit of his blessing to the entire world. This can be seen in multiple ways. At the

highest level, both Israel and the Church are intended to be tools of God's goodness to our needy planet in a relationship which R. Kendall Soulen calls "an economy of mutual blessing."<sup>1</sup> Messianic Jews are God's partners in this great task, helping the Church to stay properly connected to its Jewish roots and helping the Jewish community take "a second look at Yeshua for the first time." At another level, we sense the vital role the Jewish people have played in many areas of civilization-building in the Western world, from medicine to principles of jurisprudence to the very concept of a single deity who loves his creation.

But, a question arises: How does such an emphasis on distinctiveness between the Jewish people and the nations fit with the New Testament's stress on the profound unity of all people in Messiah Yeshua? One key image of the Scripture is found in the Apostle Paul's (Rav Shaul's) letter to the Ephesians:

He did this in order to create in union with himself from the two groups of (Jews and the peoples of the world) a single new humanity and thus make shalom, and in order to reconcile to God both in a single body by being executed on a stake as a criminal and thus killing in himself that enmity (Ephesians 2: 15-17 JNT).

The key to a proper interpretation of this text lies in the fact that the image of "one new man" or "a single new humanity" is a corporate image. That is, the community of Israel and the larger community of the nations are brought into a profound spiritual unity in Messiah. But, the passage does not suggest that God-given distinctions between the two groups are destroyed in the process. "One new man" is a profound unity of two -- like the unity of husband and wife.

Consistent with Scripture, Israel's boundaries must be permeable, but very carefully so. Some gentiles may wish fully to identify with the Jewish people by actually joining themselves via conversion. I am arguing this is not only permissible, but an absolutely necessary option in a Messianic Jewish context (as it is among other forms of Judaism). The overarching message of the Bible with respect to the unique calling of the Jewish people, demands such an approach to the (relatively) few non Jews who seek full identification with the physical seed of Abraham.

But the important question many of our Messianic Jewish leaders ask is this:

"Can there really be any room for conversion of non-Jews in light of the New Testament's seemingly clear teaching to the contrary?"

Often, the book of Galatians is cited in arguments against the possibility of conversion. After all, the apostle Paul does state emphatically:

**"Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ: you have fallen away from grace (Galatians 5:2-4.NIV).**

How can we respond to such a strong warning? First, of all we must consider the larger context of the book of Galatians. To whom was the book written? Was it written to Jewish people? Was the apostle urging Jews to stop circumcising their children? Surely this cannot be the case because on numerous occasions the great Apostle himself claims fidelity to the Torah which is typified by the act of circumcision (Acts 21:17ff; 28:17ff). No, it is quite clear that the book of Galatians is directed to non-Jewish people (2:7,8,9; 3:8;14) who, as a group, believed that entrance into the kingdom of God was predicated on their full identification with the Jewish people via conversion (i.e., taking upon themselves the yoke of the Torah). It seems likely that they were being pressured by Jewish community leaders in their area to enter Abraham's tent through the

normative pattern of conversion. Such large-scale conversion would result in normal social relationships with the Jewish community as well as with local pagan authorities, since Judaism was granted special privileges under Roman law. However, Paul explains that this approach, though seemingly beneficial, is actually profoundly misguided. We might express his argument in Galatians this way:

**“To my frustratingly obtuse gentile children in Galatia,  
Don’t you know that through faith in Messiah and your receiving the Spirit you are already fully accepted by God. You need go no further. You must not go further.**

**Don’t you understand that in an ultimate sense, not even we Messianic Jews, who are obligated to all that Moses taught, place our confidence in our level of Torah observance? No, as privileged as we are as Jews to have been given the Torah at Sinai, we know that the revelation of the living Torah, Yeshua, is the ultimate source of our *devekut* (heart connection) with Ha Shem- just like you!**

**If accepting these truths results in your marginalized status among your neighbors, that’s the way it goes. At least you are in good company. Messiah himself was marginalized – and so am I, for teaching that non Jews should not imagine they need to convert to be right with Ha Shem!"**

Paul's outrage at the Galatians' plan to convert seems energized by his awareness that the very relationship of Jew and gentile in this age was at stake. The community of Messiah is made up of Jews who live fully as Jews and gentiles who live within their cultural framework, informed by the Spirit and the overarching teachings of the Torah which are applicable to non-Jews.

But how far should we carry his argument? Did he intend to completely eliminate the possibility of any conversion at any time, under any circumstances? I suggest that the great Apostle did not intend such an airtight understanding of circumcision i.e. conversion. In fact, in another situation Paul actually circumcised his close associate Timothy and, I would argue, made him a full-fledged Jew. We read:

Shaul came down to Derbe and went on to Lystra, where there lived a *talmid* named Timothy. He was the son of a Jewish woman who had come to trust, and a Greek father. All the brothers in Lystra and Iconium spoke well of Timothy. Shaul wanted Timothy to accompany him; so he took him and did a *B'rit Milah* because of the Jews living in those areas; for they all knew that his father had been a Greek (Acts 16: 1-4 JNT).

Shaye Cohen in his important work, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*<sup>2</sup> argues that in the period before the codification of the Mishnah, Timothy would have been viewed as a gentile and that his circumcision represented a formal conversion to Judaism. Matrilineal descent, according to Cohen, though the normative criteria for determining Jewish identity today, was not the standard in the time of Rav Shaul and Timothy.

According to Cohen, evidence for Timothy's non-Jewish status prior to his circumcision rests on three observations:

1. The natural reading of the Acts passage (above) where Timothy's non-Jewish father is specifically mentioned as the reason for the B'rit Milah.
2. The fact that in the dozen times the B'rit Chadashah mentions Timothy aside from Acts 16: 1-4, "not a single passage implies that he was a Jew by birth." (Cohen, 376).
3. The fact that the majority of Patristic commentators from the earliest days of the Church have viewed Timothy as a gentile whom Paul circumcised.

Thus, it seems clear that when he performed the B'rit Milah, he was performing a conversion. Paul was welcoming Timothy into full

identification with the Jewish people. And by doing so, he was giving Timothy the right to full entrance into the community of Israel – and solving a huge practical problem as well. The Apostle wanted Timothy to accompany him into Jewish settings so they might speak compellingly about the Jewish Messiah. Timothy's ambiguous status would have made a tough job even tougher.

But, how could the great Apostle pull his parental hair out over those Galatians who sought circumcision while personally performing the very same for Timothy? In the book of Galatians he specifically mentions that he refused to circumcise Titus, another member of his entourage (Gal. 2:3). Yet, with Timothy he seems to break his own rule. How can we put all this together?

A simple answer is all that is required here: *one situation is not another situation.*

In the former case, a principal of God's fundamental relationship with the nations was at stake. In the latter situation the issue was the very practical problem of taking a gentile (or half-gentile!) into Jewish space. Formalizing Timothy's Jewish identity was necessary and desirable. Different situation; different solution. Thus, the strong exhortations of Galatians need not be taken as the last word on the subject of conversion for modern Messianic



**Jews seeking to walk in integrity and love with respect to non-Jews in our midst. As we shall see shortly, exceptions really do prove the rule.**

**Fidelity to the larger picture of Scripture means our responsiveness to the needs of the people of Israel long after the writing of the book of Galatians. Our great need is to end the painful identity confusion, while maintaining the biblical truth that most gentiles are not called to become Jews-by-choice.**

**True, there is no explicit teaching in the New Testament suggesting conversion as an option for a minority of gentiles. But an argument from silence must be handled very carefully since there are many things we believe to be important or true which are not explicitly on the pages of Scripture. Consider a humorous but relevant example:**

**Eighteen year-old daughter: "Mom, Mark and I want to move in together."**

**Mother: "that would be wrong. We like Mark, but you need to get married first."**

**Daughter: "Mother, why is living together wrong?"**

**Mother: "because God says it's wrong."**

**Daughter: "where does it say that the Bible?"**

**Mother: "I'm sure it's there somewhere."**

**Daughter: "No it's not, mom. I looked carefully and there is no command to have a wedding in the Bible. In fact people just decided to live with each other back then."**

**Mother: "You're not shacking up with Mark and that settles it. I don't care if it's not in the Bible."**

**I agree with mom. And I don't think we need a specific text of Scripture to prove the point because an argument from silence (about weddings) is not all that must be factored in to the marriage mix. Still, we have to concede the 18-year-old's point: there is no air-tight command to have a wedding in Scripture.**

**By analogy, the world is a very different place now than it was in the days of the Apostles. The dangers are not the same. Whereas in the days of the Roman Empire, one tenth of the population may have been Jewish, today there remain merely thirteen million Jews in the world -- one tiny fraction of the world's population of five-plus billion. In Paul's day the gentile Church barely existed. Today, the Church is one and one half billion strong and, except for occasional groups like the Ephraimites, most non-Jews are not in danger of thinking they should convert to Judaism, as the Galatians imagined. Further, in Paul's day the (gentile) body was an insignificant, marginalized community of former pagans. But over the centuries it has grown into a powerful positive shaping force in Western Civilization. The**

**Church's very existence is not threatened, but the very existence of the Jewish people has even recently hung in the balance as the Holocaust and the current unrelenting Arab hostility demonstrate.**

**So, different situations require different solutions and exceptions to general principles are often built-in. There can be no true fidelity to Scripture without awareness of these facts.**

**Here is another example of spiritual flexibility from his first letter to the Corinthians. He writes:**

**Was someone already circumcised when he was called? Then he should not try to remove the marks of his circumcision. Was someone uncircumcised when he was called? He shouldn't undergo B'rit Milah. Being circumcised means nothing and being uncircumcised means nothing. What does mean something is keeping God's commandments. Each person should remain in the condition he was in when he was called (I Corinthians 7: 18-20. JNT).**

**Circumcision doesn't mean anything! Being Jewish or non-Jewish is just fluff, style, a non-issue? Surely the great Apostle could not mean this in any absolute sense. No, his entire personal life testimony plus numerous passages clearly indicate otherwise. From our vantage point twenty**

centuries later, we might wish he would have not used such unvarnished language in I Corinthians. Listen to Paul's heart throb of passion for Jewish life expressed in another passage. Longing for his Jewish people to embrace the revelation of Yeshua, he catalogues the fabulous privilege Israel continues to enjoy as God's uniquely chosen people:

They were made God's children. The Sh'khinah has been with them, the covenants are theirs, likewise the giving of the Torah, the Temple services and the promises; the Patriarchs are theirs and from them, as far as his physical descent is concerned, came the Messiah...

(Romans 9: 3-5).

Paul's rhetoric throughout I Corinthians 7 has a very specific and limited purpose. Anticipating that the end of the age would come very soon, he simply wanted to help his readers put their focus where he believed it needed to be – on happily serving God without excessive concern about changing one's status or identity – “because the present scheme of things in this world won't last much longer” (I Cor. 7: 31b).

Even this principle had its exceptions, for he writes in the same passage:

**Were you a slave when you were called? Well, don't let it bother you, although if you can gain your freedom, take advantage of the opportunity (I Cor. 7:21).**

**Paul typically lays down principles in strong language, but as we see here, we can often discover important nuances. He is a wise and experienced leader who knows what we all know intuitively: real life requires creative solutions to difficult problems. Believing slaves should be content to live as slaves. But, if the opportunity arises, suspend the principle. Try to gain your freedom. Such exceptions give life to the general principle.**

**So, the general picture in the B'rit Chadashah is this: gentiles should be happy to be who they are --fully accepted, totally loved members of "the expanded commonwealth of Israel." But, there may be exceptions to the rule. In Messianic Jewish synagogues we have some gentiles who should have the freedom to alter their status. We think particularly of intermarried couples, who according to some estimates, make up one-half of all marriages involving Jewish people in America. Fidelity to Scripture requires sensitivity to flexibility of form and function in the text! We might call this the biblical writers' impulse toward a holy pragmatism.**

**Fidelity to Scripture has additional meaning. It requires our placing a high premium on teachings repeated again and again in the Bible. The theme of**

**God's great, un-ending love and commitment to the Jewish people requires that Messianic Judaism must factor in a means of gentile inclusion which is good for the Jews. Conversion, when done well, can meet this need. But, questions remain. We must consider some of the practical outworkings of Messianic Jewish conversion. Here is a list of some common questions about the practice.**

## **Part II**

### **Important questions and answers**

**Q: What about gentiles in our midst who don't want to convert? What specifically Jewish acts would be off limits to them? What would their status be?**

**First, conversion done properly should become an option in our synagogues for those non-Jews who, by the demonstration of a pattern of life and a passion of soul, indicate to us that they would like to be fully joined to the Jewish people. They should be able to do so after a period of formal preparation, appearance before a Bet Din which has the authority to investigate the applicant's level of commitment and understanding, a mikveh and a joyful welcoming among the community.**

**Second, our trajectory should include disallowing those few practices which are emblematic of Jewish covenant obligation to non-Jews who do not wish to convert. These would include things like wearing of the talit, coming up to the Bema to read Torah, becoming Bar Mitzvah, serving as rabbis and cantors. But, in implementing all these specifics, practical wisdom and patience must prevail. Changing the rules in the middle of the game is a very sensitive business. A heavy-handed approach must be avoided even if it means a more gradual shift to a position of Jewish integrity.**

**Finally, we should welcome non-Jews among us who do not wish to convert and who are happy to take their place in the synagogue under the kinds of legitimate guidelines described above. There are many such people and, as mentioned earlier in this pamphlet, these often serve with great enthusiasm and effectiveness among the Messianic Jewish community.**

**Pastoral wisdom and human kindness require that these principles be inculcated gradually. A non-Jewish leader or cantor in a Messianic Jewish synagogue should not fear losing his position as we move ahead in these areas. However, the long term health of Messianic Judaism demands we adhere to more rigorous standards as we move forward together.**

**Q.: Is conversion of gentiles conversion to Messianic Judaism or to Judaism?**

**A: More than semantics are involved here. As a Judaism we convert to Judaism. A Reform or Conservative rabbi does not convert gentiles to their specific denomination, but to Judaism. It should be the same among us. So, when the hospital attendant asks one of our converts, "what is your religion?" The natural and appropriate answer is, "Judaism."**

**This is not to suggest that we wish to play down our distinctive as Jews who embrace the risen Messiah of Israel, Yeshua. He is our Lord and King. But we seek to adopt the time-honored perspective which sees Judaism in its various forms as the religion of the Jewish people. We Messianic Jews represent a very unique, special and holy form of our ancient faith.**

**Q: Can a Messianic Jewish synagogue really function with three kinds of people present – born Jews, converts and non- converted gentiles?**

**A: Yes it can. The key is that the rules of the game must be clear to all. If people understand that Messianic Judaism is in fact a Judaism which cannot function in integrity without the above described distinctions, over time, they will be willing to accept this as normative. However, to the extent that Messianic Jewish leaders continue to understand and explain**



**the nature of Messianic Judaism as a primitive form of Christianity – a universalistic faith with Jewish overtones - and not a contemporary Judaism which honors the Risen One, the distinctions we celebrate will seem un- biblical or even racist. Clear teaching by the leadership will be key here. And love and patience must rule.**

**Q: Most Jews won't accept Messianic Jewish conversion. Why go to all the trouble of offering a status to non-Jews which will not be acknowledged in the larger world?**

**A: Acceptance or non-acceptance needs to be kept in proper perspective. At this stage of history: Messianic Judaism itself is not widely accepted as a legitimate Jewish option. Thus, any people -- Jews or non-Jews -- who identify with us are not participating in something which is widely appreciated as a mainstream expression. However, many of us believe that Messianic Judaism embodies truths which are not captured in any other form of faith. Thus, we are willing to pay the price of a marginalized status, at least for now. This will be true of our converts as well and they will need to know this up front.**

**However, the practical reality of the situation is not nearly so bleak. In social situations with other Jews or when one is asked at the hospital one's religion, all that is necessary or appropriate for the convert to say is, "I'm**

**Jewish." Usually, no questions are asked because in contemporary America we understand that there are many kinds of Jews and many branches of Judaism. It is not polite to pry and most people don't do so. (Of course, the convert may wish to say, "I am a Messianic Jew." And this may naturally lead to fruitful discussion about our Messiah.)**

**In modern, pluralistic America the problem of Messianic Jewish legitimacy is not very acute on an every day basis. After all, Orthodox rabbis do not consider the converts of any other sect of Judaism to be genuine converts.**

**More important than what others think of the convert is what she or he thinks of herself or himself. It is the psychological and spiritual pain that ambiguous status causes the gentiles in our midst that is one of the prime motivators for our invoking conversion as a legitimate option. What those outside our synagogues think is less important.**

**I can, however, imagine situations where Messianic Jewish conversion will not be accepted and the result could be hurtful. Think of the hypothetical young man who converted to Messianic Judaism and who wishes to marry a Conservative or Orthodox Jewish woman. On finding out that his conversion was in a Messianic Jewish context, her rabbi may choose not to officiate at the wedding or allow either of them future synagogue privileges because he is not a "real" Jew. We must realize that this may be the price**

which sometimes comes with the territory of following Yeshua as a Jew. Yeshua is no sidebar to our faith. He is central. And if relationships don't work out because of him or because of the community with which we identify, so be it. God has ways of turning even such difficult situations into positive ones.

**Q: Will offering conversion create an avalanche of gentiles who want to get on the bandwagon?**

**A: The possibility of large numbers of non-Jews seeking conversion presents a genuine danger to Messianic Judaism and to the Jewish people generally. We need effective safeguards. These include the following;**

**First, clear, unambiguous and high standards are essential. Only with such standards has the Jewish community been able to produce converts who will remain Jewish despite persecution and the temptation of assimilation. The same will be true among the Messianic Jewish community.**

**Second, Messianic Jewish leaders must clearly and confidently teach the general pattern established in Scripture for this age: *The normative pattern for gentile acceptance by God is not conversion.* Only a subset of gentiles in Messianic Jewish congregations should pursue conversion – and that, only after significant participation, not only in Messianic Jewish space, but**

**in the larger Jewish community. This last point is key. One does not develop a Jewish “neshuma” (soul) only by reading books and taking tours to Israel!**

**Third, rabbis who sit on a Bet Din must have the fortitude to say "no" to candidates who they deem to be insufficiently grounded in Jewish life to convert. A growing number of Messianic Jewish leaders who are beginning to understand the implications and necessity of conversion are developing the backbone necessary for making such tough calls.**

**With these safeguards in place, the likelihood of large numbers of non-Jews overwhelming the process can be dramatically reduced. Our interest here lies not only in protecting the Jewish people, but in protecting the many non-Jews in our synagogues, some of whom may convert; most of whom will not.**

**Q.: Will mainstream Jewish leaders really be more open to Messianic Judaism if we offer conversion?**

**A: Though acceptance of Messianic Judaism by the larger community should never be our prime motivation for major shifts in direction, there is good reason to believe that some fair-minded Jewish community leaders will take a positive view of the version of Messianic Judaism which makes**

**conversion possible. A few Jewish community leaders have actually indicated so. It is not hard to imagine why.**

**Unlike the days of Paul and the book of Galatians, Jewish community leaders today are concerned about the mere survival of the Jewish people. As gatekeepers of the community, they understand that a pseudo Judaism called Messianic Judaism, which makes "instant Jews" out of any gentile who comes through our doors is hurtful to the Jewish community. Sacred symbols are trivialized. A holy peoplehood is theoretically universalized out of existence. Why should they not be concerned about such a Messianic Judaism? But, a Messianic Judaism that stands tall and seeks to protect the Jewish people by creating legitimate boundaries is a Judaism worth something. The lesson will not be lost on some community leaders.**

**Q.: Who gets to set the standards for acceptable Jewish life for a convert?**

**A: Wise, experienced, and well-trained Messianic Jewish leaders working in consort with one another have the right to claim halachic authority for their communities. And, if the people in our congregations accept that authority because it is wielded in wisdom and kindness, the standards we establish**

**will be accepted. Such is the nature of all spiritual authority in the modern world.**

**To begin the process leaders who have understood the implications of all we have discussed in this booklet have begun to gather together over the past five years for the purpose of developing such Halachah, along with practical policies and procedures. The work is far from done and others are needed to complete the task.**

**Q.: Who gets to confer a new status upon a gentile seeking conversion?**

**A: A Bet Din or rabbinical court is the means whereby candidates for conversion are evaluated and accepted. Because Messianic Judaism has its recent roots in the Evangelical Protestant community, we have primarily identified the role of the rabbi as similar to that of the Protestant pastor. This has been a positive thing to the extent that the rabbi is viewed as a pastoral nurturer of his community -- a rabbinic role often missed in earlier periods of Jewish history. However, the role of rabbi as judge has not been a major feature of Messianic Jewish life to date. This needs to change. Rabbis are called to make decisions about matters of Jewish law which guide Jewish life.**

**According to common practice, a team of three Jews including one ordained rabbi, constitute a Bet Din. It is in this forum that the difficult, ambiguous and challenging cases are decided. It is here that legal precedents are set and a body of case law gradually develops. Does all this sound as challenging as it is exciting? Yes, it does. Messianic Judaism has a long way to go, but we must begin to take the first steps now.**

**Q.: “As a Messianic Jewish leader, let me be honest. I’ve got a majority of non Jews who function exactly the same as Jews in my congregation. I stand to lose much if I tell them full participation should require conversion. Is all this really worth the fuss?”**

**A: Change is never easy and all Messianic Jewish leaders must be willing to pay a price if we are to move in the direction of integrity, love and fidelity to Scripture in this matter of conversion. However, good common sense will help us here.**

**First, I hope it is abundantly clear by now that I am not asking or suggesting that all or even most gentiles in our congregations seek conversion. We are seeking changes so that worthy Jewish norms function in Messianic Jewish space. Conversion will be the right option for some. Those who wish not to convert may still participate in many or even**

most areas of congregational life, though some areas of participation would no longer be understood as appropriate. All this can be presented in positive terms as part of God's unfolding revelation of his desires for a maturing Messianic Judaism.

Second, no leader should simply announce to his congregation one Shabbat morning that major changes will be occurring over a short period of time. He must work in concentric circles. First, he must become convinced himself of the rightness of allowing for conversion to Messianic Judaism. Then, he must seek to connect with those who have already begun to travel the road. Only then is he in a position to begin discussing the idea with formal leaders and opinion shapers in his congregation. If the logic is clear and the necessity obvious, he can engage many in a new way of thinking about Messianic Judaism. Likely, he will not be able to win everyone and there may be some dissension in the congregation for a while. But patience, steadfastness and deep conviction will always result when we do the right thing.

#### **In Summary**

I have sought to make a case for conversion of a limited number of gentiles to Judaism. I have suggested that doing so is a matter of integrity, a matter of love, and a matter of fidelity to the overarching patterns of Scripture and that arguments to the contrary are ones of silence or rooted in a



**misapplication of biblical texts that have relevance for all of us who love Yeshua, but which are not air-tight in their meaning or application.**

**My hope is that this presentation will motivate both professional and lay Messianic Jewish leaders to grasp a new paradigm which can be transformative for the members of our congregations and a blessing for the Jewish people worldwide. Ken Y'hee Ratzon!**

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<sup>1</sup> Soulen, R. Kendall. *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Cohen, Shaye. *The Beginnings of Jewishness*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.