

How European Messianic Jews Can Fulfil Their Role

Introduction

There are many books and articles written related to the role and purpose that the believers in Yeshua are to fulfil in this world. It is not our aim here to extensively deal with this general issue. The focus of our consultation rests specifically on Messianic Jews and, even more specifically, Messianic Jews in Europe. Although in many respects we, as Messianic Jews, share the same purpose with the rest of the Body of the Messiah and of the Jewish people, we clearly have our specific distinct calling, which we have agreed to discuss during this symposium. Therefore, I will concentrate on the distinct and specific role of messianic Jews that is different from those of the Jews and Christians in general.

The word “how” in the title of this discussion assumes that we are dealing with the practical implications of our role and destiny. While preparing this introduction for the discussion, I neither had a precise awareness of what the other presenters would be writing in their papers nor could I imagine where the discussion of the “theoretical” part would lead us. To discuss “practical” things is impossible without framing some “theoretical” foundations. Thus, I intermingle some of my personal understanding concerning our role and destiny with its practical implementation.

In the title of this discussion, I also see the outward dimension of messianic Jewish existence, namely, our role from the outside more than the role we are playing for ourselves. This role is related to the impact of messianic Jews in three areas: Jewish community, society, and the church/Christianity. I am going to discuss each of these three areas in turn.

Role in regards to the Jewish people

To lead the Jewish people to Yeshua

As insiders among the people, we have the very unique role of leading the Jewish people to Yeshua. We have the rights and the obligation of identifying ourselves with the people. We are part of the people. We are not preaching to “them” but speaking to “our” people. Nobody else can do it in the same way. This requires us to maintain our Jewish identity while clearly appreciating our belief and new life with the Messiah of Israel. The Jewish community in Europe needs to see us as a Jewish faith-movement that enjoys our life with the Messiah and is proud of being with him, consisting of Jews joined by some Gentiles.

On the theological level it is important to support the Jewish essence and nature of the gospel, the Messiah and the New Testament. The solid theological apologetics of our ongoing self-identification as both Jews and believers in the Messiah are not to be neglected. The theological foundations for the Jewish messianic confession of the Messiah have still to be developed. These also include messianic “Christology” and “Missiology.”

To care about the wellbeing of the people

We are called to care about the wellbeing of the other people and of the world in general. However, our direct and unique responsibility is to care about the wellbeing of our Jewish people, the people we are part of. We must do this not as a part of our “mission” activity but as fulfilment of the divine commission. This includes not just providing humanitarian aid or caring for the weak and poor but also supporting the causes of the Jewish communities, fighting anti-Semitism and supporting the existence of the state of Israel.

On a theological level, this requires a biblically based and Jewish culturally relevant position concerning humanitarian actions, which Yeshua requires of us. The theological foundations

for Jewish existence and importance in the world and the relationship between the Jewish people and the Land have yet to be developed.

To protect the people in reverting the divine wrath from them

The Bible is full of different texts emphasizing that disobedience to the God of Israel causes the wrath of God to come upon the people of Israel. Our people are in danger. Following the example of the righteous Jews of the past, we are to intercede for our people in prayer and to petition for their salvation. But intercession does not exhaust the role of the messianic Jews in this regard. The righteous remnant in the midst of the Jewish people has always been determined by God to protect the nations from the divine wrath and complete destruction because of disobedience. We have the role of this “righteous remnant.” This includes not only our strong faith in the Messiah but also our lifestyle. Our good deeds and our righteous life according to the divine desire serve as protection for our people. In this regard we are to live righteously not just for our own sake but also for the sake of the Jewish people.

On the theological level, this means that we need soteriological foundations and teachings about the communal aspect of the Jewish people.

Role in regard to society

To lead others to Yeshua

From the very beginning of the establishment of the Jewish people, one of our roles was to attract other peoples to the God of Israel. While it is a matter of debate as to how intentional and verbal this “evangelism” was, the Jewish people are to be the testimony of their God to those around them. The teaching of Yeshua only served to give his Jewish disciples additional support and “fuel” in such a mission. Also, due to our background and the specifics of our apologetics and worldview, we have a very unique picture and presentation of Yeshua that we communicate within society. In a culture where the gospel is assumed to be something so “natural” that it remains unnoticed, a culture where the majority of the population describes themselves as “Christians” without believing in the foundational biblical revelations, the messianic movement has a significant contribution to make in presenting Yeshua in the way that is completely new to that culture. It can awaken people, focusing their attention on the message we bring.

On the theological level it means that we need a Jewish missiological teaching regarding other nations, and intercultural communications studies have yet to be carried out in order to testify of the Messiah in a proper way.

To be an example

The Jewish people are usually the subject of much attention within society. The reasons for that extend over a broad spectrum – from extreme Judo-phobia to admiration of the Jews. In Germany, the attention focused on the Jewish people reaches an extreme due to the Holocaust and its related feelings of guilt. Therefore, what happens to or with the Jewish community is usually noticed within society. In these circumstances, messianic Jews are to play an exemplary role within society by presenting the godly life the Jewish people are supposed to live. If we identify ourselves as Jews (which we should), then, even if some ignorant members of the Jewish community say we are not Jews anymore, we will still be identified as such by the Gentiles among whom we live. Many of them will project their prejudices on us, but many of them will also be making up their minds about the Jewish people by observing us. The general tendency in Europe is to assume that the “Jews” are religious and believe in their God. Therefore we are to be a testimony of this God to them and provide an example of following Him.

On the theological level, this means we are to determine the general guidelines of the distinctively messianic Jewish Halacha (“the way of life”) to complement the generally accepted Christian one.

Role in regard of Christians

To be a blessing

According to the divine plan, the Jewish people are created to be a blessing for other nations. Messianic Jews seem to have this role within the Body of the Messiah. Our presence in the Church brings the Jewish blessing to others within it. The community of believers in Yeshua needs our visible and identified presence in its midst. We are to look for contacts with different Christian denominations and to identify ourselves as part of the body of the Messiah that consists of Jews and Gentiles.

On the theological level, this means we need to develop a Jewish messianic ecclesiology that is appropriate for the European Christian context (European Christianity is, in many respects, different from the forms of Christianity in other parts of the world) and complements the common Christian ecclesiology in Europe.

To be unifiers

Messianic Jews are the foundation of the unity of the Body of the Messiah. We are the essential part of it. There is no biblical unity without Jewish participation. We are to show and to promote unity with the Gentiles. This unity is a very strong evangelistic tool and has also a “sacramental” meaning in expressing the very unity of God. It belongs to the fulfilment of our role as messianic believers to seek the joint ministry and expressed community and worship with other Christian denominations. It could possibly even include the sacraments. Dialogues, joint prayer, evangelism, etc., are also counted among the ways of achieving this.

On the theological level, this means we need the messianic theology of ecumenism in the European context, including its sacramental dimension.

To present Yeshua from a different perspective

As in the case with our role within society, due to our background, we have a different perspective when looking at Yeshua than is common for European Christianity. Our perspective can tremendously compliment the Church in general. It includes the Jewish view on spirituality, the Bible and its interpretation, commandments, life, etc. We are to teach and to exemplify this perspective without arrogance or ignorance as to other views. This has to be done while also keeping in mind our previously mentioned roles in regard to the Church.

On the theological level, this means we are facing the need to developing proper materials that can present the culturally relevant messianic perspective in the European languages. This seems especially important within the context of a growing interest on the part of the Christian community and of a growing number of speculative materials written by “pseudo-messianic” authors. The challenge of theological education for messianic believers also arises in this regard.

To motivate the Church while being a new movement that is “on fire”

There is one advantage to being a new movement, namely, that of having a “neophyte” love and “fire.” In comparison to long-existing churches and movements that are well established and traditionalised, a new movement usually appreciates Yeshua and feels the need to depend on him. A new movement does not exchange excitement and conservative values for a

comfortable life and acceptance. It is possible that our role as a new movement is to become contagious for the established church denominations and historical churches in Europe, and it is possible that we can initiate revival in churches or lay foundations for that. This requires of us to attempt to keep the revival excitement as we mature, grow and stabilize. Perhaps it means that we are to remain a dynamic “movement” instead of an established “denomination.” It assumes that the messianic movement needs some structure that is probably still to be developed.

On the theological level, this requires developing structural and governmental foundations for the messianic movement in the Jewish and European contexts.

Some challenges

In conclusion, I want to mention some challenges that messianic Jews may face in fulfilling their aforementioned role and destiny.

Our small number

The number of messianic Jews or Jewish believers in Yeshua who clearly maintain their Jewish identity is a small percentage in comparison to the Jewish communities or to the number of Christians. The maximum numbers that we can get for any given country in Europe are probably no higher than 5000. This makes the messianic movement very insignificant for the European culture, which prefers to validate things by numbers.

Our marginalized place in the Jewish world, society and in the Church

Messianic Jews are considered strange and marginal, if accepted at all, by the Jewish community, Christianity and the societies of the European countries. This makes our voice less heard in the areas we could and should affect people. In many cases, we are not taken seriously. This often drives messianic Jews into isolation, a sort of messianic “ghetto.” This makes some messianic leaders feel as if the whole world is against them, and they take a defensive position toward others, which provokes a sectarian mentality.

The absence of a distinct messianic tradition of doing theology

Although we can see some groundbreaking theological work done by the Hebrew Christian theologians, by those involved in Jewish missions, and by those discovering the Jewish background of Christianity in the previous two centuries, for whatever reason, we still have done almost nothing in developing a distinct messianic theology within the European context. The lack of the messianic theologians makes this challenge even more explicit.

The novelty of our movement

The messianic movement in Europe is young, divided, and unstructured. This weakens our credibility and impact. We are still mostly unknown within society and within the church in general. The Jewish community has biased views about us and seems unable to distinguish between “messianic” and “missionary.” The overly zealous, aggressive and insensitive attempts of some of our fellow Jewish believers and Christians to bring the Jews to the Messiah, unfortunately, have only worsened the situation.

Conclusion

I hope this overview will serve as a starting point for our discussion of these issues that will bring us to the next stage in proceeding toward helping our messianic movement to fulfil its important role and destiny. Let us discuss. Let us think. Let us move forward with God’s help.

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