

Ephesians 4:29

How Are Messianics to Properly Communicate?

by J.K. McKee posted 02 December, 2008 www.tnnonline.net

EPHESIANS 4:29 – MULTIPLE VERSIONS

Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers (KJV).

Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such *a word* as is good for edification according to the need *of the moment*, so that it will give grace to those who hear (NASU).

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen (NIV).

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear (NRSV).

Let no harmful language come from your mouth, only good words that are helpful in meeting the need, words that will benefit those who hear them (CJB).

EPHESIANS 4:29 – GREEK

pas logos sapros ek tou stomatos humōn mē ekporeuesthō, alla ei tis agathos pros oikodomēn tēs chreias, hina dō charin tois akouousin.

πᾶς λόγος σαπρὸς ἐκ τοῦ στόματος ὑμῶν μὴ ἐκπορευέσθω, ἀλλὰ εἴ τις ἀγαθὸς πρὸς οἰκοδομὴν τῆς χρείας, ἵνα δῶ χάριν τοῖς ἀκούουσιν.

Ephesians 4:29 may not seem to be that important a verse in the Bible for some of us (at least right now), but considering some of the challenges faced by today's emerging Messianic movement, **it is a very important verse for us to examine.** Writing a diverse group of non-Jewish Believers in Asia Minor,¹ many of whom he has never met in person (1:15; 3:2; 4:21), the Apostle Paul's words about proper speech or communication appear as he substantiates what it means to "put on the new self" (4:24). Born again Believers are to have different and distinguishable behavior than those of the world, as they each function as a part of God's *corporate* Temple (2:20-22; 1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19). How do we properly apply Paul's instruction for ancient times, considering the development of our own faith community and how the Lord would have us be men and women who communicate properly to the betterment of others?²

¹ Of important note here would be how *en Ephesō* (ἐν Ἐφέσῳ) or "in Ephesus" is missing from the oldest manuscripts of the letter in (Erwin Nestle and Kurt Aland, eds., *Novum Testamentum Graece, Nestle-Aland 27th Edition* [New York: American Bible Society, 1993], 503; *Nestle-Aland Greek-English New Testament, NE27-RSV* [Stuttgart: United Bible Societies/Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1981], 503; cf. Kurt Aland, et. al., *The Greek New Testament, Fourth Revised Edition* [Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft/United Bible Societies, 1998], 655). As the 1952 Revised Standard Version rendered Ephesians 1:1,

"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus."

This gives credence to Ephesians being a general letter written to Believers in Asia Minor, and not a specific epistle written to those in Ephesus.

For a further discussion on Ephesians' intended audience (as well as its relationship to Colossians), consult the Introduction to the editor's commentary *Ephesians for the Practical Messianic*. Also consult D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, second edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), pp 488-490.

² Sections of this article have been adapted and significantly expanded from the editor's commentary *Ephesians for the Practical Messianic* (Kissimmee, FL: TNN Press, 2008).

The Significance of Ephesians 4:29: The New Self

Paul's admonishment to his audience to speak properly occurs within a series of instructions where they are to "lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit" (4:22). This old person is a reflection only of their previous way of life as former pagans, where their mind was darkened and their heart was hardened (4:17-18). This was a lifestyle marked with ignorance of the One True God and with sexual immorality (4:19; cf. Romans 1:24-28), concurrent with ancient Jewish stereotypes of the heathen (i.e., Wisdom of Solomon 14:12).³ The new self requires that Paul's readers "be renewed in the spirit of your mind" (4:23), being transformed by the Lord to think and perform actions that were contrary to the way they used to think and act prior to salvation. This new self "has been created in the righteousness and holiness of the truth" (4:24) and is to involve the full restoration of the image of God upon the individual (Colossians 3:10; Genesis 1:26), being a reflection of His perfect ethical character.

Substantiating some of the major features that constitute the new self, Paul instructs his readers to lay aside falsehood (4:25; cf. Zechariah 8:16), to not let the sun go down on one's anger (4:26; cf. Psalm 4:4), and to not give the Devil any kind of opportunity among them (4:27). He tells his audience also, "He who steals must steal no longer" (4:28a). Of all the commandments that could have been singled out here, why is the ordinance against stealing referred to? While this is certainly a reaffirmation of the Eighth Commandment (Exodus 20:15; Deuteronomy 5:19), it gives us a very important clue as to the social strata from which they originate. Peter T. O'Brien indicates, "it is likely that this exhortation informs us about the kind of people who became Christians in the first century, not least in Asia Minor."⁴ Maxie D. Dunnam further describes, that many of the early non-Jewish Believers "came from the dregs of society (cf. 1 Cor. 1:28-29; 1 Pet. 4:16). Many of them were slaves, and among slaves, stealing was regarded as normal."⁵

Slaves were commonly accused of theft (Titus 2:10; Philemon 18), and thievery was one of the high sins listed not only in the Torah, but in the Ten Commandments themselves. Knowing about this is an excellent clue for us as Messianic Believers as to why Paul's epistles seem to deal more with the ethical and moral issues of the Torah, as opposed to some of the finer points that we believe God is restoring to His people today. When we take into consideration the social circumstances of his audience(s)—especially if many of them were former slaves who were used to stealing—we do see the obvious fact that some issues are more important than others. After stealing is targeted by Paul as unacceptable behavior for the people of God, it is then that he can say "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth..." This may have been a common trait of the slave class as well, ranging from the use of profanity to speaking against others, particularly those with greater means, education, and/or social standing.

Unlike Ephesians' likely audience, most Messianics today do not come from some kind of "slave class" where stealing is the norm, but instead largely come from the varied strata of a Western middle class that is looking for greater refinement and enrichment for their Christian faith, or Jews from the same social strata who have met their Messiah and who want to rightly maintain their Jewish heritage. Yet within such people, especially in the zeal of many to recapture a Torah obedient lifestyle and live as "Israel," there has become a distinct tendency to ignore *or even disregard* key ethical and moral features of the Tanach.

One of those key ethical and moral features is the requirement for God's people to communicate properly and graciously—being a reflection of His love and who He is in the world—a love that should change sinners into saints! Not letting impure speech come forth from our lips is a significant part of being a new person in the Lord, and **Ephesians 4:29 is a significant Scripture we must pay heed to** as we consider our future development as a movement and

³ There is a mass of ancient literature on the subject which substantiates this Jewish view of the nations. Consult Andrew T. Lincoln, *Word Biblical Commentary: Ephesians*, Vol. 42 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 279.

⁴ Peter T. O'Brien, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 342.

⁵ Maxie D. Dunnam, *The Preacher's Commentary: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, Vol 31 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 214.

especially how we should try to work with others who know and serve the same Messiah that we do. How does our communication style affect how Messianics have an influence on their brothers and sisters in either the Synagogue or the Church?

“No Unwholesome Word”

The first part of Paul’s instruction in Ephesians 4:29 is *pas logos sapros ek tou stomatos humōn mē ekporeuesthō* (πᾶς λόγος σαπρὸς ἐκ τοῦ στόματος ὑμῶν μὴ ἐκπορευέσθω), “Let no corrupt word out of your mouth go forth” (YLT). Born again Believers who have put on the new self must speak properly, and what comes out of their mouths is a reflection of what is in their hearts. Yeshua Himself said, “the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man” (Mark 7:15b), a definite statement that positive things are what should be spoken by one who has taken on the new self.

The adjective to take important note of here is *sapros* (σαπρὸς), with its related verb *sēpō* (σήπω) often meaning “to cause to decay.” As an adjective “*sapros* means ‘rotting,’ either literally or figuratively, and the sense of ‘unpleasant’ (even to the ears) is also possible...In general, what is *sapros* is ‘unserviceable’ rather than ‘offensive,’ but the word may also mean ‘harmful’ or ‘notorious’ (someone’s name)” (TDNT).⁶ From one end of the spectrum *logos sapros* is “unserviceable speech,” and to the other end *logos sapros* is “notorious speech.” This would include statements that are idle and can serve no purpose for Believers, to things that not only are harmful and cause decay to them, but can actually cause Believers to have a bad reputation. Proverbs 2:21 reminds us, “A good name is to be more desired than great wealth, favor is better than silver and gold.”⁷

In his paralleling letter, Paul targets “abusive speech from your mouth” (Colossians 3:8) as needing to be put away by the Colossians. This should not be a difficult concept for any of us to understand, as the verbal speech of a born again Believer should stand in stark contrast to that of a non-Believer. Love for God emanating from a transformed heart should manifest itself in a way of speech that is noticeably different from those who are corrupted by evil, being a distinct manifestation of “all humility and gentleness” (4:2).

None of us should disagree with F.F. Bruce’s comment that “foul language of any kind is inappropriate on lips that confess Christ as Lord,” as he specifically classifies this to be “not only obscene vulgarity but slanderous and contemptuous talk, any talk that works to the detriment of persons addressed or of those spoken about.”⁸

Speaking graciously is a significant virtue seen in the Book of Proverbs:

“Anxiety in a man’s heart weighs it down, but a good word makes it glad” (Proverbs 12:25).

“A man has joy in an apt answer, and how delightful is a timely word!” (Proverbs 15:23).

“Like apples of gold in settings of silver is a word spoken in right circumstances” (Proverbs 25:11).

Proper concern for what comes out of a person’s mouth is also seen in Proverbs:

“The mouth of the righteous flows with wisdom, but the perverted tongue will be cut out. The lips of the righteous bring forth what is acceptable, but the mouth of the wicked what is perverted” (Proverbs 10:31-32).

“He who speaks truth tells what is right, but a false witness, deceit. There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

⁶ O. Bauernfeind, “*sapros*,” in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, abrid. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 1000.

⁷ Cf. Ecclesiastes 7:1a.

⁸ F.F. Bruce, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), pp 262-263.

Truthful lips will be established forever, but a lying tongue is only for a moment”
(Proverbs 12:17-19).

One of the poignant rules of the Qumran community, as seen in the DSS, was, “in cursing or as a blurt in time of trial or for any other reason, or while he is reading a book or praying, [he] is to be expelled, never again to return to the society of the *Yahad*” (1QS 7.2-11).⁹ This is how serious at least one ancient Jewish sect viewed improper speech. While today’s Messianic congregations are unlikely to expel anyone who might use a curse word, or speak improperly from time to time—are such people even censored or asked to give an apology (public or private) when *logos sapos* manifests itself? Surely in today’s Body of Messiah, individuals should be mature enough to acknowledge a mistake when it is made—especially one made with their mouths—and offer restitution. Likewise, individuals (especially leaders) should be mature enough to speak against improper attitudes and statements that find their way circulating in the midst of the *ekklēsia*, seeing to it that they are stopped.

“A Word for Edification”

The second part of Paul’s instruction in Ephesians 4:29 is *alla ei tis agathos pros oikodomēn tēn chreias* (ἀλλὰ εἴ τις ἀγαθὸς πρὸς οἰκοδομήν τῆς χρείας), “but what is good unto the needful building up” (YLT). Those things that are spoken are not to be corrupt words, but instead have the capacity “for edification” (NASU), meaning they are to be “helpful” (NIV). *Oikodomē* (οἰκοδομή) is not an unimportant term within the scope of Ephesians. As it regards v. 29, it largely concerns “spiritual strengthening...*edifying, edification, building up*” (BDAG).¹⁰ This reaffirms Paul’s statement made previously in v. 12, as those in spiritual service are “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (RSV).

For the most part *oikodomē* simply means a “**process of building, building, construction,**” or “**a building as result of a construction process, building, edifice**” (BDAG).¹¹ In the Septuagint, its related verb forms are employed to render the Hebrew *banah* (בָּנָה), in specific prophecies detailing the restoration of Israel (consult footnotes for specific Hebrew MT and Greek LXX clauses):

“For I will set My eyes on them for good, and I will bring them again to this land; and I will build them up”¹² and not overthrow them, and I will plant them and not pluck them up” (Jeremiah 24:6).

“Again I will build you and you will be rebuilt,¹³ O virgin of Israel! Again you will take up your tambourines, and go forth to the dances of the merry-makers” (Jeremiah 31:4).

“I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel and will rebuild them¹⁴ as they were at first” (Jeremiah 33:7).

The critical clause related to this expectation appears in Matthew 16:18: *oikodomēsō mou tēn ekklēsian* (οἰκοδομήσω μου τὴν ἐκκλησίαν). This is where Yeshua says “I will build my assembly” (YLT), a clear reaffirmation of the Prophet Jeremiah’s prophecies that Israel will be restored. It is not unimportant that a lexical definition of the verb *oikodomēō* (οἰκοδομέω) does

⁹ Michael Wise, Martin Abegg, Jr., and Edward Cook, trans., *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 135.

¹⁰ Frederick William Danker, ed., et. al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 696.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 696, 697.

¹² Heb. MT *u'benitim* (וּבְנִיתִים); Grk. LXX *kai anoikodomēsō autous* (καὶ ἀνοικοδομήσω αὐτοὺς).

¹³ Heb. MT *od eb'nekh v'nib'net* (וְעַד אֲבִנְךָ וְנִבְנִיתַי); Grk. LXX *eti oikodomēsō se kai oikomēthēsē* (ἔτι οἰκοδομήσω σε καὶ οἰκοδομηθήσῃ).

¹⁴ Heb. MT *u'benitim* (וּבְנִיתִים); Grk. MT *kai oikodomēsō autous* (καὶ οἰκοδομήσω αὐτοὺς).

include, “to restore by building, to rebuild, repair” (Thayer).¹⁵ So, it can be said that the Messiah of Israel came to rebuild or repair the assembly of Israel¹⁶—bringing it into its fullness (v. 13). O’Brien, somewhat surprising, notes that the language of Ephesians 4:12 describing the building up of the Body of Messiah, is appropriated from Tanach references detailing the restoration of Israel:

“According to the prophetic literature of the Old Testament, the restoration of Israel after the judgment of exile is promised in terms of God building a people for himself...and this he does by putting his words in the mouths of his prophets (Jer. 1:9-10). Matthew 16:18...expresses the idea that as the Messiah Jesus is the one who builds or establishes the renewed community of the people of God.”¹⁷

Knowing that the “building” Paul refers to in Ephesians involves more than just supernatural growth—but a specific kind of growth that relates to Israel’s restoration—should not be that surprising. As their former selves (4:22) most of Paul’s audience “were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world” (2:12, NIV). Not being a part of the Commonwealth of Israel, they were cut off from the promises of redemption. Faith in Yeshua changed this, as “you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Messiah” (2:13). This previous status of being first separated from Israel, and secondly and far more seriously of **being cut off from the One True God**, has now been reversed. Because of the redemptive work accomplished by Yeshua at Golgotha (Calvary), the one new humanity of Jewish and non-Jewish Believers can emerge (2:15). This one new humanity is to be an Israel maximized, functioning as God’s Temple in the world (2:20-22), a conduit of His presence so that all might be redeemed.

The Body of Messiah is to recognize Yeshua as its Head (4:15), meaning that He is its origin. The thoughts of Yeshua are to permeate down to the diverse parts, as “every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love” (4:16). If Yeshua is the brains of His Body, then those who compose His Body should naturally think and act like Yeshua (4:23). The way that Yeshua communicated and served others self-lessly—dying (5:25b) for the *ekklēsia*—is the same way that Believers are to communicate and serve others self-lessly. The community that is enlivened by the work of Yeshua is to be a group of people that is bound by His love, **something that is obviously contingent on proper and positive speech.**

As Messianic Believers, we need to take note of interwoven references to the restoration of all Israel within the Scriptures—especially in letters like Ephesians. The Apostle Paul surely did not expect the *ekklēsia* to accomplish its mission of being an Israel maximized unless God’s people—yes, a diverse people made up of Jewish and non-Jewish Believers united in common cause—could communicate properly. Anything that they would say to one another must be for edification and helping.

Many of us look to the Ezekiel two-stick prophecy as the cornerstone Scripture passage summarizing the future restoration of all Israel that is to take place as Yeshua’s return draws near (Ezekiel 37:15-28). I myself have done my best to deal with the whole “Two-House teaching” as Biblically as possible, focusing on it as unfulfilled prophecy within the Jewish eschatological expectation.¹⁸ There are certainly details that need to be sorted out within such an expectation, though, and with it an evaluation of opinions across the theological spectrum: Jewish, Christian, conservative, and even liberal. It is undeniable that the major thrust of this one prophecy is **unity**. Ezekiel 37:22 details,

¹⁵ Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 440.

¹⁶ This is to be contrasted with the Messiah coming to establish a second group of elect, called “the Church.” Consult the editor’s article “When Did ‘the Church’ Begin?”

¹⁷ O’Brien, pp 304-305.

¹⁸ Consult the editor’s article “The Two Houses of Israel in the End-Times.” The specific details on Ezekiel 37:15-28 are planned to be explored in a future exegetical paper, tentatively entitled “What Do These Things Mean?”

“I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king will be king for all of them; and they will no longer be two nations and no longer be divided into two kingdoms.”

Commentators on the Book of Ezekiel have noticed the theme of unity that is present within the two-stick prophecy. Joseph Blenkinsopp observes, “The use of twelve-tribal symbolism, from Chronicles and Ezra to Qumran and the New Testament, demonstrates that the idea of recovering a lost unity remained as an essential aspect of the self-understanding of the several Judaisms that emerged throughout the Second Commonwealth.”¹⁹ Leslie C. Allen also indicates, “The New Testament proclaimed a new Christ-centered...overarching unity between Jew and Gentile that created a metaphorical ‘holy people’; (Eph 2:11–22) and posited the ideal of ‘one flock, one shepherd’ (John 10:16). The ideal, like that which Ezekiel set before his Judean audience, presents a challenge to work toward.”²⁰

Interpreters like Blenkinsopp or Allen consider the Ezekiel 37:15-28 message as depicting a grand unity that today’s Christian Church should be experiencing. If God desired two disparate and separate parts of Ancient Israel to be fused back together—then surely those united by the gospel of salvation, but perhaps divided over minor issues of doctrine, can be united.

This is an important perspective of Ezekiel 37:15-28 that need not be overlooked by Messianic Believers who believe in some way, in the restoration message of Judah and scattered Israel/Ephraim. It is ultimately to be a message of unity among all of God’s people—a grand restoration of Israel affecting the entire world! Ezekiel’s prophecy also concerns various “companions” (Ezekiel 37:16), non-Israelites who join in to the process. The Prophet Isaiah’s word is even more clear: “It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations **so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth**” (Isaiah 49:6). While this may be uncomfortable for some of you to accept, the restoration message of all Israel is *partially ecumenical*. Blenkinsopp, reflecting from a liberal Christian perspective, summarizes,

“[T]he ecumenical movement...has its biblical basis in the unity of Israel acted out and proclaimed by Ezekiel after the fall of Jerusalem...beyond the issue of church unity there lies the one basic and immensely problematic issue of Christian-Jewish relations...The attainment of a lost unity may be an eschatological goal but one that no Christian body professing allegiance to the biblical tradition can afford to neglect.”²¹

What is surprising about these remarks is that perhaps liberal Christian exegetes of Ezekiel have a better handle on the type of unity that is to ensue than Messianic Believers. I am by no means an advocate of uniting with others at the expense of foundational Biblical theologies, but we as Messianic Believers should certainly be reaching out to others who claim the God of Israel as their own. This primarily includes our brethren in the Jewish Synagogue and Christian Church—the two theological and spiritual heritages that the Messianic movement has inherited.

For the most part the Messianic movement has a relatively mature attitude toward the Jewish people and the Synagogue (although this has been shifting in recent years with the growth of anti-traditional Karaitism and streaks of anti-Semitism in the Two-House movement²²). Generally speaking, how Messianic leaders and teachers communicate regarding Judaism is positive. It is regarding Christians and the Christian Church where the Messianic movement has a relatively immature attitude, and the way that it communicates is in desperate need of improvement. *If* the primary groups of people (but surely not the only groups) to be united in the future restoration of all Israel are Jews and Christians, then we have a long way to go.

¹⁹ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Interpretation, a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching: Ezekiel* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 175.

²⁰ Leslie C. Allen, *Word Biblical Commentary: Ezekiel 20-48*, Vol. 29b (Dallas: Word Books, 1998), Prolepsis database.

²¹ Blenkinsopp, 175.

²² Consult the editor’s articles “You Want to be a Pharisee” and “Anti-Semitism in the Two-House Movement.”

Ask yourself if the following quotations from two Messianic teachers serve Paul's intention of being "good words that are helpful in meeting the need" (CJB). Do they provide solutions in solving the problems of division that have plagued Jewish-Christian relations for millennia, or just add to the misunderstandings?

...Many of the traditions of the Western Gentile Christian church are merely adapted pagan worship rituals inherited from our ancestors. They were forced to compromise with the Roman Emperor Constantine, or lose their lives for refusing to bow. Most of these traditions were imported directly from Babylon. In fact, there is not a single religion practiced upon the face of the Earth today that has not been polluted by Nimrod's rebellion against the one true GOD.

Today, the teaching of Balaam is rampant in the church. It comes in the form of the following precept: Jesus Christ came with the purpose to do away with (fulfill?) the temple service, the Torah (Law), and alter the customs of Moses. The teaching of the church is to replace (at a minimum to diminish) Israel's identity as the chosen people, the teaching of Moses in the Torah, and to alter the customs of Sabbath and Biblical holidays. The church has done a pretty good job of doing this....The spiritual reality is that holding to Moses and the Torah is in direct conflict with the teaching of the church (the teaching of Balaam). It follows that the church's dispute even takes issue with the Messiah when He speaks of Moses and the Torah.

These two quotations are relatively mild compared to the ones that I could offer you, but they come from two individuals who have had a great deal of sway over the spirituality of the Messianic movement in the first decade of the 2000s.²³ Neither one of these men are known for speaking positively of the Christian Church, but instead have used a great deal of sensationalism and empty rhetoric to persuade the naïve. They do not have a very high view of engaging with Biblical scholarship, they prefer to use insulting techniques rather than targeted and respectful arguments, and both of them have failed end-time predictions associated with their ministries. Neither one of these quotes offer secondary or tertiary information to substantiate the claims presented; what it stated is just stated. No solutions to the problems are offered. I believe that this approach to Messianic ministry keeps our faith community away from fulfilling all of its potential.

None of us from evangelical Christian backgrounds would be Messianic today unless we had some problems with the mainline Church. There are traditional practices in Christendom that need to be reevaluated. Most of the Church's approach today toward the Torah of Moses, in haphazardly casting aside its instruction, is unacceptable. Further attention to the complicated relations of Jews and Christians for two millennia needs to be given. But is there a manner in which we can constructively communicate to our Christian brothers and sisters, showing them that there is a better way? *This will be the challenge of the 2010s.*

One way we can begin to do this is by examining the thoughts of Christian scholars who see some of the same problems that we see. In establishing common ground with our evangelical brethren, the Messianic movement might be able to have a greater influence than it currently has among Christians.

Consider some of these quotations from Old Testament theologian Walter C. Kaiser, as they relate to the common Christian position on the Law of Moses:

The current evangelical generation has been raised almost devoid of any teaching on the place and use of the law in the life of the believer. This has resulted in a full (or perhaps semi-) antinomian approach to life. Is it any wonder that the unbelieving society around

²³ Yet, as Paul would say of such people, "what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality" (Galatians 2:6).

us is so lawless, if those who should have been salt and light to that same society were themselves not always sure what it was that they should be doing?²⁴

Ultimately, [this teacher] is bound only by what is clearly repeated in New Testament teaching. What advice will he give on marriage to close relatives (cf. Lev. 18), involvement with forms of witchcraft and various forms of the occult (cf. Lev. 19), the case for capital punishment (cf. Gen. 9), or the proscription against abortion (cf. Ex. 21)? Did Americans not learn in 1973 that a New Testament exclusivistic ethic landed us squarely in one of the largest legalized murdering ventures in recent times—now exceeding Hitler's six million Jews sent up a chimney by four times over with some twenty-four million babies going in a bucket? What will it take to wake us up to the narrowness of our views?²⁵

For Paul, the law is explicitly “the law of God” (Rom. 7:22, 25; 8:7; cf. 1 Cor. 7:19). Therefore it continues to deserve our greatest respect, for it comes with divine authority.²⁶

Jesus came not to denigrate or replace either the law (in its narrower sense) or the Old Testament (in its wider sense); he came to fulfill the law and so to establish it. That law would stand “until heaven and earth disappear” or “until everything is accomplished” (Matt. 5:18)...So serious a matter is the law that Jesus warns that if we ignore that law (not Jesus' teachings replacing the law), or teach others to ignore parts of the law...we will meet with disapproval in the kingdom of God (Matt. 5:19)!²⁷

Kaiser, also a main editor of the *Archaeological Study Bible*, is a conservative evangelical Christian whose words carry a great deal of weight in much of today's Church. He may not be a Messianic Believer like you or me, but he certainly does have a great deal of respect for the Law of God and a love for Israel. Coming from a Reformed background, he may believe in the artificial distinction of the Torah's commandments among those that are moral, civil, and ceremonial²⁸—but he certainly believes that a great deal of the Torah is still to be followed! The issues that he rightly takes today's Church to task for, in its wide dismissal of the Old Testament, are those that deal with an ethical latitudinarianism which led us to the American holocaust of abortion. This a far more damning claim upon today's Church than the Messianic teachers quoted could offer. Abortion is a much more serious crime than not wearing *tzit-tzityot* or keeping kosher, even though some of today's Messianic leaders would have you think otherwise.

Do you think that if today's Messianic movement focused on moral issues like this, and what happens when the Torah is taken out of the equation, that Christians would begin to listen and change? Do you think if we asked intelligent, targeted questions that we would have a greater impact than we currently have? *This would be speaking a word of edification to our brothers and sisters.* Insulting Christians as lawless, bacon-eating, idolatrous pagans—as is far to commonplace among Messianics—just creates a smokescreen and encourages resentment. Nothing is achieved.

What would happen if we instead asked our Christian brethren this question? **“Has today's Church truly benefited from ignoring God's revelation in the Old Testament?”** Most Christian people I know would honestly answer, “No.” And if today's Messianic movement actually did this, rather than our current communication style, we would be able to embody Daniel 12:3: “Those who have insight will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, and those who lead the many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.”

Communication and speech that edifies other people, getting them to focus on their spirituality, is the only way Israel will be restored in the end. If we can change the way we

²⁴ Walter C. Kaiser, “Response to Willem A. VanGemeren,” in Wayne G. Strickland, ed., *Five Views on Law and Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 75.

²⁵ Walter C. Kaiser, “Response to Douglas Moo,” in *Ibid.*, 400.

²⁶ Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 309.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 311.

²⁸ Consult the FAQ entry on the TNN website “Torah, division of commandments.”

communicate and follow Paul's imperative, building bridges and focusing on common problems with others, we will be surprised to see how much more of an impact we will have. Doors will be opened to explain to others the significance of *Shabbat*, the appointed times, and the Jewishness of our Messiah. But the way to talk that today's Messianic movement so desperately needs, may only be implemented with some painful changes in store for us in the near future.

"Ministering to Others"

The third part of Paul's instruction in Ephesians 4:29 is *hina dō charin tois akouousin* (ὅπως χάριον τοῖς ἀκούουσιν), "that it may give grace to the hearers" (YLT). Those who speak to one another are to have the capacity by the Holy Spirit inside them to "benefit those who listen" (NIV).

To what degree Paul intends proper communication to be manifest among his audience was something that had both external and internal factors. Surely if one can learn to speak properly around fellow Believers, then the same person will speak properly outside of the local congregational body. Some commentators, such as PHEME PERKINS, suggest that "The concern for speech aimed at the religious edification of the hearer suggests conversation among fellow believers, not interaction with outsiders."²⁹ Even if a more internal situation within the congregations of Asia Minor is being addressed, outside behavior was surely important as well, something seen by Paul's prior instruction against stealing (v. 28).

What we say to one another—especially fellow Believers who know and love Yeshua as much as we do—is to be a reflection of the unity that we are to have. The Apostle Paul has said, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (4:3, NIV), listing some distinct things that are to unite diverse groups of Believers:

"There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all" (4:4-6).

Believers' relationship to the Father is because He is "over all and through all and in all," a likely allusion to Malachi 2:10: "Do we not all have one father? Has not one God created us?" If we are all children of the same Father, then we are certainly to be united as His people. Likewise, there is a common humanity that is to bind us all together. Each of us, whether Jewish or non-Jewish, are equalized before our Creator because of sin (Romans 3:9). Yet, the unity in Messiah that we are to have concerns not only the mission the *ekklēsia* has on this Earth in proclaiming Him, but has cosmic dimensions that are affected by Yeshua's exaltation over the universe (1:20-23). This is why Paul considers it so important that "we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Messiah" (4:13). What God has done via the Body of Messiah, in uniting Jewish and non-Jewish Believers, is a depiction of the grand redemption that will blanket all Creation in the eschaton.

The instruction "Do not use harmful words, but only helpful words, the kind that build up and provide what is needed, so that what you say will do good to those who hear you" (Good News Bible), is something that we might need to take to more serious heart as the emerging Messianic movement. How does Paul's instruction about gracious speech toward the building up of the assembly affect our development? How do we as Messianic Believers speak among ourselves? Do we—either in leadership or as Torah observant people—watch what we say, and in particular *the attitude* in which we say things? Do we encourage proper unity among all those who claim the God of Israel and His Messiah, or do we not?

There is a great deal of talk in our faith community about what Judaism calls *lashon ha'ra* (לִשְׁוֹן הָרַע) or the "evil tongue." Experience over the past ten years (1999-2008) has taught me, though, that much of what Messianics describe as "*lashon ha'ra*" is just a cosmetically Hebraic way

²⁹ PHEME PERKINS, "The Letter to the Ephesians," in Leander E. Keck, ed., et. al., *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 11 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 430.

of making ourselves feel better, with little understanding and application of what is actually being referred to. An evil tongue that speaks maliciously and spreads gossip is very much alive in the Messianic community, and few leaders have the courage to speak out against slander, mischief, and half-truths or half-falsehoods that circulate in our midst.³⁰ Perkins, addressing a Christian audience, suggests,

“Perhaps Christians could contribute to cleaning the verbal air. Christian speech does not mean verbally assaulting others with our religion at every turn. It does mean a higher standard of verbal interaction with others than many of us practice.”³¹

For a very long time I have been a strong advocate of our Messianic faith community adopting a **conversation approach** toward how we interact within the larger Judeo-Christian religious world. I believe that we should focus on the common elements of faith that unite us with our Jewish and Christian brethren, and then in reasonable dialogue work through those things where we currently see things differently or disagree. Unfortunately, over the same past ten years, a **confrontation approach** has been what has dominated a great deal of Messianic thought. Many new Messianics, entering in from varied Christian backgrounds, have not entered in out of spiritual conviction or a desire to truly mature in faith—but have instead been subjected to sensationalist teachings that deride the positive achievements of the Christian Church, and most recently have hurled gross insults at the Jewish Synagogue. There has been a great deal of spiritual hatred spewed against brothers and sisters that has not achieved a single thing except discord.

A great travesty that also corresponds to our need to change our communication style, is the widening division we see between Messianic Judaism and the Two-House sub-movement. We do see a Messianic Judaism that on the whole does not want to treat non-Jewish Believers as the full equals of Jewish Believers in the Lord, in violation of Galatians 3:28.³² But the Two-House sub-movement, on the whole, has not been that much better. Too many have failed to emphasize the restoration of all Israel as including *more than* just Judah and scattered Israel/Ephraim (i.e., Isaiah 49:6), and an over fifty-percent majority have now been responsible for a great deal of anti-Semitic and anti-Christian rhetoric. In the past month (November 2008) I was actually told by a Messianic Jewish congregational leader,

“I find the Two-House people as producing some of the most vile venom when it comes to the Christian believers—calling them pagans, idolaters, law-breakers, etc. I also encountered much antisemitic ravings within Two-House ranks, some of it in the guise of ‘criticism’ of Messianic Judaism.”

I could not, of course, deny that these sentiments are present within the Two-House Messianic sub-movement. *They stand as a stain against it.* Many in the Two-House movement have strong disagreements with Messianic Judaism’s position on the Divine Name of God, its usage of the Rabbinical calendar, and various traditions associated with *Shabbat*, the appointed times, and extra-Biblical celebrations such as *Purim* or *Chanukah*. Yet I told this gentleman that I had no issue with Messianic Judaism over these things, and I follow and agree with Messianic Judaism in these areas. I also asked him to peruse the TNN Online website and quote to me one blatantly anti-Jewish or anti-Christian statement. *He could find none.* He had to later agree that our ministry presents a more moderate form of the Two-House teaching, and confirmed that for years we had been taking on the Two-House sub-movement in those areas of communication asking for change.

I hate to say this, but far from wanting to follow a stated imperative of uniting Jews and Christians, a majority in the Two-House movement have done more to divide them and have deterred the restoration of all Israel that they seek. Messianic Judaism should rightly be taken to task for largely not believing that we all stand, whether Jewish or non-Jewish, as equal members of the Commonwealth of Israel—as opposed to being taken to task for how Messianic Jews celebrate Passover. Likewise, a Two-House teaching that is not all-inclusive to the nations, and

³⁰ Consult the editor’s article “The Top Ten Urban Myths of Today’s Messianic Movement.”

³¹ Perkins, in *NIB*, 11:432.

³² Consult the editor’s article on Galatians 3:28, “Biblical Equality and Today’s Messianic Movement.”

promotes either an I'm-Israel-because-I-feel-I'm-Israel or a pseudo-history about this tribe going here or that tribe going there, goes beyond the Biblical text and deters God's mission. A Biblical Two-House teaching that sticks with the text, and is rooted within the Jewish expectation of Israel's restoration, is what is needed.³³

The enemy has us just where he wants us, and most of it is due to a communication style that does not seek fair solutions among all of God's people. It shows no immediate signs of moderating. While Messianic Judaism need not be excused for its widescale approach toward non-Jewish Believers, the Two-House movement is not entirely innocent, either. How we learn to be those who "Say only what helps, each word a gift" (The Message) may take a while. Eliminating the man-made wall we have built (2:15) of the cult of personality and/or self-victimization, which dominates much of our faith community,³⁴ would be a good place for us to all start, as we should return to God's mission of His people being a blessing.

How can today's Messianics learn to properly communicate?

The Apostle Paul says that in order for Believers to put on the new self, proper speech or communication must be present. With this comes a severe warning: "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice" (4:30-31). Each one of us in our individual lives has said things we regret, and has not contributed to the unity of our families, the comradeship we are to have with our friends, or perhaps we have caused cracks within the *ekklēsia* itself. Yet if we are to be changed by the Holy Spirit, we are to strive to speak things that can truly help and offer solutions to other Believers with whom we share a common hope of salvation.

Has today's Messianic community learned to do this properly? *I would submit to you that it has not.* Those of us who believe that we should speak positively and edifying, trying to establish common ground with our Jewish and Christian brethren, need to be joined by many more people. We are required by Scripture to speak things edifying and constructive to fellow Believers with whom we share the same Spirit, the same Lord, and the same God and Father (4:4-6). **I challenge you to evaluate some of the pop teachers floating around our movement and ask whether some of their remarks really do pass the criteria of Ephesians 4:29.**

I do not believe that much of the communication style of the Messianic movement of the 2000s has been edifying to the Lord. If it were, then a ministry like ours would not have to spend the time it does taking on our own Messianic community, and could instead deal with more of the external challenges that face us. We cannot, as of today, be lifted up before Him as a singular living sacrifice (Romans 12:1) to be "a fragrant aroma" (5:2). While there have been people who have stood up against much of the negative talk that we have witnessed, their voices often get drowned out or are purposefully ignored. The mainline Jewish Synagogue has better relations with the mainline Christian Church than the Messianic movement *has with either of them!* I think we can all agree that this is something that needs to be fixed.

If the Messianic movement is truly something of our Heavenly Father—and I believe it is—then our communication style is bound for some significant changes up ahead. We will be focusing more on what binds us together as Messianic Believers with our brothers and sisters in either the Jewish Synagogue or the Christian Church. We will be beacons of light and understanding that radiate God's love. We will have discernment to know when we should speak and when we should keep our mouths shut. And above all, **we will not add insult to injury.** We

³³ Note that the editor is currently in the process of categorizing a number of Two-House related promises, prophecies, and Scriptures regarding Israel's mission. This will hopefully form the basis of a series of exegetical papers like this one, where the passages regarding Israel's restoration can be dissected and discussed more thoroughly.

In the meantime as this project progresses, consult the editor's articles "The Two-House Teaching in Proper Perspective" and "Revisiting the Two-House Teaching."

³⁴ Consult the Excursus "What Barriers Do Messianics Today Erect to Keep People Out?" in the editor's commentary *Ephesians for the Practical Messianic*.

will deal with sin and confront it properly and poignantly, but we will not rub such sin in the sinners' faces.

Only when we learn to communicate properly, speaking words of edification, can and will Israel be restored. Let us all work toward this objective in the new season fast approaching us!

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