

How Are We to Live as Modern Messianics?

by J.K. McKee posted 01 January, 2008 www.tnnonline.net

A shift has started to take place in today's Messianic community. Many attribute the year 1967 and the recapturing of Jerusalem by Israel as also being the year that the Messianic movement really got started. If this is truly the case, then last year we turned forty, *and this year we turn forty-one*. As a movement that is preparing to become middle aged, it is certainly time for us to be a mature people who are empowered by God to perform His tasks in the Earth. Yet how we are going to actually do this as Messianic members of modern society is another story and another issue altogether.

Over the past few years, I have become consciously aware that some serious challenges and tension are in store for the Messianic movement. We are going through some growing pains, and issues are on the horizon that too many are unprepared for. The world at large is certainly not getting any less complicated, and globalization and the mass market mean that old ways of doing things may not necessarily work any more in the Twenty-First Century. Both the Jewish Synagogue and Christian Church are beginning to recognize this—which means the responsibility for Messianics is *twice as high* as it is for your average Jew or Christian. We need to be a people stirred to action, and guided by the Holy Spirit as we prepare to enter into a new chapter of our development.

The most obvious element that has been missing in the emerging Messianic movement is a well-reasoned and well-considered theology. This is a theology of the Scriptures that will empower us to fulfill the mission of God's people as presented in the Torah, further explained in the Prophets and Writings, ultimately embodied in the saving work of Yeshua in the Gospels, and then declared to the world as seen in the letters of His Apostles. This theology will not only **not** avoid the issues that have been discussed in both the Synagogue and Church for centuries—appropriating the best that each has to offer—but will also be able to tackle the current challenges of Planet Earth today, making a difference for the Lord via the transforming power of the gospel.¹

A great deal of work lies ahead for this to become a reality. Too much of the Messianic theology of the past has just been cosmetically “Hebraic,” with *not enough engagement* of the actual issues of the Biblical text. Much of what we have all witnessed is people reading their English Bibles, marking out words like “Moses” or “Law,” and then replacing them with “Moshe” or “Torah.” While it is certainly not unimportant to know those Hebrew terms, if this is the extent of our discussion with the Scriptures—and we jump over or avoid the questions that the Bible actually asks us—how have we been able to achieve God's assignments to His people? When He brought Ancient Israel to Mount Sinai, He told them,

“Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel” (Exodus 19:5-6).

Whether you realize it or not, these are very missional words. They do state God's requirement of Israel to obey Him and be in covenant relationship with Him. But they also state that as His “treasured possession” (NIV) they are to be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” While we have certainly been told many times from Messianic pulpits that we are part of a kingdom of priests—what does that mean? *Priests serve as intermediaries*. God told Ancient Israel that they were a nation of priests because *ki li kol ha'erezt* (כִּי לִי כֹל הָאֶרֶץ), “because for Me (is) all the Earth” (my translation). The mission of God's people following the Exodus was that **they were to serve as intermediaries between Him and the rest of the world**.

While today's Messianic world currently sorts out critical issues such as the Divinity and Messiahship of Yeshua, the reliability and historicity of the Scriptures, and the doctrine of salvation—once smoothed over another set of challenges will be presented to us. These challenges, in no uncertain terms, regard **Messianics and modernity**. They regard the Messianic community truly moving forward and being molded into a group of people that can fully accomplish the

¹ Consult the editor's article “Some Thoughts On Our Messianic Future.”

mandate that the Lord gave to Ancient Israel, of testifying of His goodness to the world and serving as His representatives. These are not new themes by any means—as they are firmly embodied in the worldview of Yeshua and the Apostles—yet the Torah itself, believe it or not, also lays out the mission that we are to fulfill.² **We have to be prepared to meet the challenges of the world head on.**

God wants the emerging Messianic movement to be transformed into a missional community—an “Israel” if you will—that will be a holy people who fulfill priestly duties in our fallen world, by living lives changed by the power of the gospel and who follow a Torah ethic. We will be what Paul calls “ambassadors for Messiah,” urging the people of the world to “be reconciled to God” (2 Corinthians 5:20). But in order to do this, it is undeniable that we have to know a few things about the world, and we need to consider some of the issues being forced by modernity upon us that have probably gone unaddressed for far too long.

Today’s Messianic community (including, Messianic Judaism, Messianic Two-House, Messianic independents, etc.) has been largely sustained by a fundamental approach to human life for the past two decades (at least as I have witnessed it since 1995). This approach, however, is beginning to show some considerable cracks, especially as we consider our future and the general course of our world. The extremism and Puritanism that today’s Messianic movement often demonstrate will not be able to sustain us indefinitely. *It will come to an end*, and it is time for us to change. The Puritan movement in England ultimately died off after Oliver Cromwell’s English republic ended, and in fact stifled religion in much of Britain until the Eighteenth Century with the Wesleyan revivals.

In order to be a movement that can sustain a viable future, we have to shift ourselves to focusing much more highly on the personal and corporate piety of Believers. We need to focus on personal holiness, sanctification, and impacting society around us. We need to learn how to find common ground and areas of agreement among all who claim Yeshua (Jesus) as Savior, so we can effect spiritual solutions. We need to learn how to demonstrate ways to others that a life of Torah observance truly does bring great spiritual growth and positive change. History has borne out the fact that piety movements survive long after their founders pass on; puritanical movements pass away after the death of their founders.

As we turn forty-one this year, a new kind of Messianic community is preparing to emerge. It is a more moderate and considerate Messianic movement than what we have seen in the past, even though it has a very high regard for the Tanach Scriptures. It will be a movement that highly values Jewish tradition, even though it may not necessarily be Orthodox. It will be a movement that is very evangelical as it is concerned with the salvation of all human beings. It will be a movement engaged with the issues of Jewish and Christian Biblical scholarship. And it will even be prepared to meet the challenges of the modern, or even post-modern, world—with a firm Biblical ethic beginning with God’s commandments in the Torah.

Stuck in a Timewarp

In order to be an effective people for God’s service, one of the first things that today’s Messianics must understand is that as a community we are largely stuck in a “timewarp.” For the past ten years for certain, statements similar to the following have largely been used by Messianic laypersons, congregational leaders, and Bible teachers:

- The Christian Church is an evil enemy full of lies promoting paganism!

² One area of Torah study that absolutely must open up to Messianics is interpreting the text against its Ancient Near Eastern setting. When this is actually considered as a factor, one will see that the Torah’s message and commandments did *directly counter and subvert* many of the pagan religions of the day—making the God of Israel unique among the other deities worshipped at the time. **Including such factors will truly help in how we approach our world today.** How we will accomplish this in our Biblical Studies, however, is not a question easily answered at present. Many Messianics still significantly struggle with the factor of Greco-Roman classicism for interpreting parts of the Apostolic Scriptures.

For a further discussion, consult the editor’s article “The Role of History in Messianic Biblical Interpretation.”

- We are the last generation!
- We are all victims of the system!
- It is us against the world!
- We have to shut ourselves off from the world!

The last time I heard a Messianic teacher make a remark about the ills of today's Christianity, I actually found myself saying: "*That is so 2001.*" Seven years ago in 2001, we started to see a variety of publications hit the Messianic world harping on each one of these things. Seeds were planted in the hearts and minds of Messianic Believers, many of whom were honestly seeking Biblical and factual truth. But rather than receiving sound teaching that was rooted in the Scriptures, documented by history, and most importantly *not sensationalized*—a great number of people were spun. Overly-simplistic statements about the Bible and history were made, and to this day they severely challenge both the credibility³ and believability⁴ of too much of the Messianic movement in the larger theological world. And it is quite scary to think that mongrel plants spewing poisonous venom are now growing up from those seeds!

While it is absolutely true that there are problems in today's Church, that we may be seeing some end-time phenomena coming together, and that the world is an evil place—**none of the statements above offer solutions to the problems.** Victimized oneself and then unleashing vile hatred *have not* been able to provide stability or longevity to today's Messianic community. On the contrary, these things have caused unnecessary divisions, severe spiritual ineffectiveness, and even apostasy from faith in Yeshua. We certainly do have an uphill battle, and embracing a Messianic ideology that is guided by God's mission of service to the rest of humanity will not only be met with challenges, but also internal opposition. The Messianic movement has some great potential to change the world for the Lord that it is only now beginning to realize. The enemy obviously does not want us to enter into our own, but to remain in the past.

The Apostle John lays out the strategy we must follow to move forward:

"Whoever believes that Yeshua is the Messiah is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the *child* born of Him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome. For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Yeshua is the Son of God?" (1 John 5:1-5).

What John tells us to recognize and do is very simple:

- We are a part of a worldwide Body of Messiah that recognizes Yeshua (Jesus) as Lord and Savior.
- Our obedience to God begins with loving Him and loving others.
- Via our love for God we are to keep His commandments, as principally embodied in the Torah.
- Those whose lives are truly guided by God are those who can overcome the world, *and* they are continually functioning in His love.

If God's love has filled our hearts, and we recognize that there are many more people than just ourselves who know Messiah Yeshua (Christ Jesus), then working from there we should be able to overcome any obstacles we encounter. As our Lord Himself admonishes, "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). Rather than shoving the Torah and its commandments onto people, should we not follow Yeshua's own words—and lead via a positive example of faith? Keeping God's commandments *begins* by acknowledging Him as supreme and loving Him (Deuteronomy 6:4-5), but it certainly does not end there. Unfortunately, too many in the Messianic community are not guided by God's love. They do not testify of the blessings of keeping *Shabbat* or the

³ Consult the editor's article "The Quest for Credibility."

⁴ Consult the editor's article "The Top Ten Urban Myths of Today's Messianic Movement."

appointed times, but instead criticize others who do not keep them. Thankfully, it is His job alone to know their heart condition and judge whether they are worthy of His Kingdom. **But our job is to make a difference in the world, and demonstrate good works and lives totally changed by His love!**

Being Honest With Ourselves: Avoiding the Issues that Really Matter

I believe that one of the best, and most constructive things that any Believer can do is to reflect each day on his or her spiritual condition, and be honest about those things that need serious improvement. One needs to ask the Lord every morning in prayer about those areas of life that need to be remedied, in order to be more effective in His service. This, in fact, has some precedent in Jewish history as the Pharisees were self-critical, recognizing that there were hypocrites and impious persons among their ranks who were not concerned with the weightier issues of the Scriptures. The Talmud specifically offers seven different classifications of Pharisees (b.Sotah 20c; b.Sotah 22b; y.Berachot 14b).⁵ Being self-critical, today's Messianic movement does need to change its approach to some things.

As I have stated in other articles, one of the serious challenges that has arisen in the Messianic world in the past few years has actually been an *overemphasis* on the Torah (Genesis-Deuteronomy). Now I would like to firmly state that *I do get excited* when reading the Torah, because it is the living and active Word of God and teaches me important things about my Creator. The challenge is not focusing on Scripture; the challenge is that the Torah is often the *only* part of the Bible read, studied, and examined by a significant sector of Messianics today. In only teaching "Torah," too many avoid the Apostolic Scriptures (particularly the Pauline Epistles),⁶ and ironically enough they totally avoid the Prophets and the Writings. Add to this the fact that the major issues in the Torah itself that we need to be focusing on and discussing—we stay away from *like the plague*. I believe this minimizes the effectiveness of our movement, namely because we do not ask the self-critical question: **"Now that we are following the Torah, what are we going to do about it?"**

I asked a prominent Messianic leader about a year ago the question, "How are you going to prepare us for the issues that society is going to force upon us?" His short answer was: "That's simple. We teach Torah and Torah says not to do what the nations do."

Respectfully, this was not a complete answer. While the ethos that God wants His people to follow is surely found in a Torah foundation, there was no "meat" to actually describe *how* we are to confront the ills of society and make the Torah's mission of priestly service *our mission*. It is true that we are not to follow the ways of the world. But we cannot avoid the world. This response totally skirted the issue more than likely because most Messianics *have not been asked the question*, much less considered how to approach the changes in modern society. And, too many Messianics who actually do answer the question—answer it with isolationism, rather than engagement.

I come from a family of clergy, educators, and military officers—and have been modeled examples of men and women who have always placed a high value on societal betterment. Whether it is proclaiming the gospel, teaching students, or defending America, I am carrying on a family tradition of where it is taught that we each have a responsibility to leave a positive mark on others with the actions of our lives. I strongly identify with the Rabbinic dictum, "Get yourself a teacher, find someone to study with, and judge everyone favorably" (m.Avot 1:6),⁷ especially in lieu of warnings seen in Scripture (1 Timothy 1:7; 2 Timothy 4:3; James 3:1). Our Commander and

⁵ Cf. David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1995), pp 69-70.

⁶ Consult the editor's article "Congregations Among Us."

⁷ Leonard Kravitz and Kerry M. Olitzky, eds. and trans., *Pirke Avot: A Modern Commentary on Jewish Ethics* (New York: UAHC Press, 1993), 5.

Chief today, God Himself, *does expect the Messianic movement* to leave a positive mark in today's world.

Difficult things lie ahead for the next generation of Messianic teachers and leaders, and as a person who certainly makes up that next generation, I intend to be one who is ready. **Ignoring the issues brought forth by modernity and post-modernity is no longer an option.** Yet to see a new Messianic movement come to fruition—that can make a positive and lasting difference—it is necessary that we consider a variety of modern-day issues where we must begin to conduct some serious discussion and remedy current trends. For now, simply recognizing that these issues even exist may be as far as we can go—but progress has to start somewhere.

Issue #1: Knowing More About the Bible

The need for greater theological relevance in today's Messianic movement easily tops the list of the modern challenges we face. Certainly while Messianics bring a unique perspective to Biblical Studies as it involves things like Messiah in the feasts, or considering the Jewish background of Yeshua's teachings, Messianic theology as a whole is not engaged with the larger matters that have dominated both Jewish and Christian scholasticism for the past one-hundred fifty years. How many serious theological studies—just in the Torah alone—have we avoided for too long that our Christian brethren actually understand better than we?

At the present time, one of the biggest issues that has been thrust forward as requiring a great deal of attention concerns the composition of the Biblical books. This trend began in 2005 with the integrity of two books of the New Testament (the Gospel of Matthew and the Epistle to the Hebrews) being challenged in the Messianic community. Since that time, it has become apparent that we need to know what the discussions are as they relate to not only the composition of the Apostolic Scriptures, but also the Tanach.⁸ This is undoubtedly an area where some “pet” teachings that we have allowed into the camp will find themselves jettisoned. We need to be familiar with some issues that are centuries old, maintaining a high regard and conservative approach for the Bible, lest unsuspecting Messianic persons find themselves taught from people who want to tear the Bible apart. I certainly think all of us want to have respect for God's Word!

What has occurred in recent years actually has a great number of parallels in theological studies over the past two centuries. Higher criticism, a liberal approach to the Bible often designed to strip all supernatural elements from the text, has challenged the inspiration of *every* Biblical book and event. In many cases, key Biblical narratives and accounts that you and I probably take for granted are viewed as stories at best, mythology at worst by higher critics. A liberal approach that purposefully wants to doubt the Scriptures is present in sectors of both the Synagogue and the Church. Today's Messianics are just now beginning to see some unstable teachers rip to pieces the Apostolic Scriptures. Will they go all the way and realize we can more easily “shred” the Tanach? I think we should all agree that we need to pray against this trend. Modernism and post-modernism have already left a negative mark on Biblical composition.

When we learn to place *great value* on the Scriptures as they have come to us through the centuries, knowing the questions that have been posed about each Biblical book, we will also learn to have a great appreciation for the treasure trove that they truly are! There are viable, conservative answers to all of the criticisms posed against the Bible. We can be prepared to engage with each text on a more individual and verse-by-verse basis, considering the opinions of contemporary Jewish and Christian scholarship, and see our own commentaries written that can help others. In doing this, we will begin to see a unique Messianic theology emerge. Furthermore, in having a stronger and more well-reasoned theological foundation—often dealing with subjects that are by no means hidden in the text—we will be better prepared for the tasks and assignments that God has for us today.

⁸ Consult the editor's workbook *A Survey of the Apostolic Scriptures for the Practical Messianic*, and forthcoming (2008) workbook *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*.

The most significant challenge with this area, more than anything else, is that it will *take time*—and for some of us who are called a lifetime—of study and work. The modern Messianic movement that is coming forth will have to accomplish a significantly larger (and indeed gargantuan) amount of work than its predecessors accomplished.

Issue #2: Our Relevance to the Community

In regard to the good works of His followers, Yeshua says in His Sermon on the Mount, “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does *anyone* light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house” (Matthew 5:14-15). These are qualifiers to His further remarks about demonstrating our actions of obedience to the world (Matthew 5:16) and His importance to “fulfill” the Torah (Matthew 5:17-19). Clearly, in order to be the light of the world or *to phōs tou kosmou* (τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου)—we have to actually interact with the world. No better example of this can be seen than in the Book of Acts, as the Jewish Apostles went far beyond their homes in the Land of Israel and interacted with foreign cultures and societies, sharing with them the good news that the world’s Savior had come.

Very few of us are going to be called to do what the Apostles in Acts actually did. Yet, the mission of God very much includes interacting with other people in our local communities. There is a story I once heard about a missionary who returned home to England after forty years of service to the Lord in India. He experienced the biggest culture shock when he saw how many people not only did not go to church anymore, but also denied the existence of God. He validly asked the question: “What happened to *my England?!*” concluding that his own people needed to hear the gospel more than the Indians he served. And indeed, such things are becoming more commonplace the world over.

The biggest challenge any of us will face as Believers each day is how we testify of our faith to the people we interact with. Today’s Church is clearly struggling with how to do this; which means that the emerging Messianic movement is struggling with it even more. How do we let our light shine? How do we let our good works be seen? How do we testify of our *unique Messianic faith* to the heathen? How many of us even ask these questions?

The call upon Messianics who want to be useful in the Lord’s service is *not* to be cut off from society. Throwing away the television, ripping out the phone, not accessing the Internet, and avoiding various public and private institutions is not the way for us to impact others for God. The good rabbi from Tarsus, the Apostle Paul, actually went to Athens and debated philosophy with the Epicureans and Stoics at the Aeropagus (Acts 17:16-32)! He held his ground in the defense of Yeshua’s resurrection. If he could do that in the First Century, then surely the least we can do is be familiar with the negative circumstances of our society, knowing what they are, and being able to confront them should we encounter them.

Each one of us has an opportunity to make a difference in our own local communities. We each have a unique sphere of influence, and have been given a unique set of spiritual gifts from our Heavenly Father by which to reach others. But if we totally shut ourselves off from the world—as is becoming commonplace in some sectors of the Messianic movement—it is a sign that we are not quite “there” as a movement. It does not fulfill the mandate of Israel serving as priests, representing God in a world that needs Him.

Remedying this is by no means going to be easy, especially given the new dynamics of globalization. We need to not only be familiar with our own society and culture (whatever that may be), but we have to know about other cultures and societies due to the highly mobile nature of people. We can certainly start by taking a good look at our local towns and cities, and prayerfully asking the Lord what we can do and how we can serve.

Issue #3: Concern for Social Justice and the Poor

One of the most significant words seen in the Tanach is the Prophet Amos’ rebuke, “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who

crush the needy, who say to your husbands, 'Bring now, that we may drink!' The Lord GOD has sworn by His holiness, 'Behold, the days are coming upon you when they will take you away with meat hooks, and the last of you with fish hooks. You will go out *through breaches in the walls*, each one straight before her, and you will be cast to Harmon,' declares the LORD" (Amos 4:1-3). Amos rebukes Israel (specifically the Northern Kingdom) because the powerful have gotten rich at the extreme expense of the poor. God is going to exercise His Divine judgment as a direct consequence of their sin.

This is only one of *hundreds of passages* of Scripture that is concerned with social justice, many of which concern the poor and the needy. The Torah itself admonishes, "You shall not oppress a hired servant *who is poor and needy*, whether *he is* one of your countrymen or one of your aliens who is in your land in your towns" (Deuteronomy 24:14). Surely as Yeshua says, "you always have the poor" (Matthew 26:11; Mark 14:7; John 12:8), the social conditions of the poor will thus *always* be an issue for the community of faith.⁹ Yet, how many of us fail to consider the wider implications of His half-brother's, James', words?

"If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,' and yet you do not give them what is necessary for *their* body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, *being* by itself" (James 2:15-17).

Did you notice the *specific* kind of "works" that James has just described? He speaks of acts of goodness and kindness that concern human life. It is insufficient for us to wish "*shalom*" (CJB) upon a person—meaning total peace and harmony between God, man, and nature—and then do absolutely nothing to see that *at least partially* achieved.¹⁰ A total travesty among too much Torah teaching today is that it often fails to examine the principles of helping others to which the Prophets and Apostles consistently call the people back.

Surely, as a Bible teacher with clear assignments from the Lord I cannot suddenly stop my studies and then go off and help with humanitarian projects in the third world that take food, medicine, and education to people who are oppressed. Yet, as a Bible teacher I cannot ignore or deny the Scriptural validity of such humanitarian projects, either. I cannot ignore that the Bible teaches us to be concerned about the plight of others. Clearly, we can all do some small part to follow the decrees of Scripture in order to help the physical betterment of others.¹¹ We can all volunteer for local social projects, or even just support others who are called to serve the oppressed on a full time basis. As a developing and maturing Messianic movement, we do not need to find ourselves overlooking one of the most important parts of the Bible as it concerns letting our light shine via our good works. There is indeed a "social gospel" that is concerned with the needs of the downtrodden.

Issue #4: Human Sexuality

By far, the most prominent and avoided issues that the Torah, the Prophets, and the Apostolic Scriptures all address *over and over again*—that too many Messianics skip over—concern human sexuality. Any Believer in Yeshua today does not need to look around that much to know that a firm grounding in sexual ethics from the Bible is essential for modern people. Because too many have cast aside or ignored Biblical guidelines relating to sexuality, not only have secular people found themselves engrossed in sin, but also many people in today's Church have likewise succumbed to temptation.

⁹ It is notable that one of the reasons why many countries have developed into "welfare states" is because the religious community has not fulfilled its responsibilities in helping with the poor, homeless, and oppressed. Seeing that the community of faith may not be willing to help, people naturally turn to civil government to answer their pleas.

¹⁰ For a further discussion, consult the editor's commentary *James for the Practical Messianic*.

¹¹ This is one of the definitive reasons why in 2007 Outreach Israel Ministries started sending out monthly Health Updates, as we have a definite concern for proper eating and nutrition for modern people. We do consider it a duty to help others remain physically fit for service in the Kingdom of God, in fulfillment of Scriptural mandates to be concerned for the health and welfare of all people.

Walter C. Kaiser validly summarizes in his book *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, “Human sexuality is not some awesome force over which men and women have no control. Nor is it some drive that is earthy and outside the boundaries and interest of morality and religion. Instead, Scripture calls it ‘good’ from the very beginning and credits it as being a gift from God.”¹² Indeed, the Bible itself is replete with examples of how something that God intended to be good, Satan quickly twisted and perverted for significant evil. Many cases could be considered regarding how severe sins in the Bible often have a sexual root, or improper sexuality as a major factor.

The whole subject of sexuality is so big and complex, that it is not difficult at all for some people to want to avoid it altogether. It concerns not only the state of the married and the marriage bed, nor just the unmarried person awaiting marriage—but also issues like what constitutes proper intercourse and how it is to be mutually pleasurable, whether or not masturbation is sin, the ethics of contraception and family planning, and the life cycle of pregnancy and childbirth. Even circumcision is a sexual issue. It can be embarrassing to talk about many of these things, and so many Bible teachers (Jewish, Christian, and Messianic) just jump over sex. Unfortunately, when such issues are not discussed from a proper Biblical perspective, the world will then teach our children its *improper and ungodly* views of sexuality. As a direct consequence, things such as teen pregnancy and abortion have become far too commonplace.

The condition of today’s world clearly demonstrates the fact that both the Synagogue and Church are suffering due to an erosion of sexual morals from Scripture. In fact, *the most significant issue* that the Synagogue, the Church, and society as a whole are having to deal with is homosexuality. I do not consider it any coincidence that the Messianic movement is growing at a time when sexual morals are at an all time low. We have a huge opportunity to make a serious difference for the Lord in this area! We can help people not only overcome sinful temptations, but also be firmly grounded *starting with the Torah* in the Bible’s teachings about sex. We can also accomplish this in a theological manner that is consistent with *both* the Tanach and Apostolic Scriptures, as we clearly consider the entire Bible as relevant instruction for God’s people.

As we consider ways to properly address human sexuality as the Messianic movement, I **am by no means** suggesting that teachers should start using anatomical terms from the pulpit. Yet, we can certainly address aspects of sex that are common to both males and females and most age groups. We can speak against the temptations of sin, emphasizing its consequences, and seek to provide a place where if direct questions are asked they can be answered appropriately (in private). We can emphasize the words of the Psalmist, “I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 113:14), and hear more teachings on the proper respect and use of our bodies.¹³

Issue #5: Gender Roles and Women

One of the most difficult issues that today’s Synagogue and Church are having to consider regards gender roles, and specifically the role of women. This means that the Messianic movement is not that far behind in having to deal with it.¹⁴ Certainly when we look at the Scriptures, we see that at Creation “God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27, NRSV). Two genders were made of human beings: male and female, both in the image of God, and both for unique purposes. Obviously, there are some physical differences between men and women.

The specific issue that has arisen in Western society over the past fifty years largely concerns jobs and positions that have historically only been held by men. It is not difficult at all to see that today’s Messianic movement is basically run by men. But in some cases the Messianic

¹² Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 192.

¹³ Kaiser offers an excellent place for us to start in Chapter 12 of *Toward Old Testament Ethics*: “Holiness in Marriage and Sex” (pp 181-208), that answers many of the difficult questions posed by the Tanach in regard to ancient sexuality.

¹⁴ Some theological conversation on the issue has at least been presented in the camp of Messianic Judaism. Consult the section “Senior Congregational Leadership—For Men Only?” in Dan Cohn-Sherbok, ed., *Voices of Messianic Judaism* (Baltimore: Lederer Books, 2001), pp 151-168.

movement is an institution run by men *for men*. I am probably not alone in my sentiment that women in the Messianic community are a great asset that have largely not been able to employ the full array of their spiritual gifts and talents at many congregations and fellowships. Some Messianic men believe that a proper, submissive wife in marriage involves no kind of equality, in spite of Ephesians 5:33 which admonishes, “each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must *see to it* that she respects her husband.” There is a mutual responsibility that must be recognized.

A clear thrust of the gospel message is that “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Messiah Yeshua” (Galatians 3:28). And, I would suggest that it is from this verse that we must consider (or perhaps reconsider) the role of women in the emerging Messianic movement.

It is a fact that in the Hebrew Tanach, we certainly see some women in positions of critical leadership. Heroines such as Deborah (Judges 4-5), Ruth, and Esther are certainly godly women to be considered as models of service. In significant sectors of Judaism, the issue of women in leadership is not as “big” as it is in evangelical Christianity (and by extension the Messianic community) because there are significant examples of women leading others in the Tanach. Women who wish to serve in positions of leadership in the (non-Orthodox) Synagogue are often allowed to because of these precedents.

While the evil woman Queen Jezebel is often cited as the example of what might happen should women be placed in any positions of spiritual authority—as “Jezebel” represents the epitome of an evil, controlling woman—Jezebel likely receives too much attention at the expense of *all* of the evil men seen in Scripture. While Jezebel is targeted as the epitome of evil women—what one *single* male example could be given to represent evil men? Pharaoh, Haman, (Antiochus Epiphanes), Judas Iscariot, the antichrist? This is difficult for many to determine. Many claim that if women are given positions of spiritual authority that things will run amok, but is this a really strong argument in view of the fact that there are scores of examples where men have controlled things and problems have abounded? Both men and women are equally guilty of causing problems for the *ekklēsia*.

In the Apostolic Scriptures themselves, we do see women take on significant roles in leadership that are often overlooked. Following Paul’s visit to Philippi in Acts 16, it is the female Lydia who leads the new group of Believers, and Paul’s letter to the Philippians includes a reference to two women, Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2), who presumably occupy positions of leadership.¹⁵ Paul extends greetings to a female apostle, “Junia,” in Romans 16:7 (NRSV, ESV, HCSB).¹⁶ And, we cannot forget the wife-husband teaching duo of Priscilla and Aquila in Acts 18. These women are often figures that are overlooked, or sometimes even disregarded, in this conversation among Messianics today.

In my experience in Messianic ministry over the years, I have personally witnessed the discrimination of some Messianic women at the hands of Messianic men. Clearly based on what we read in the Scriptures of mutual respect and responsibility for one another as members of the faith community, this is not something that the Lord wants. Wives do not need to be in “fear” of their husbands, having to ask them “permission” regarding where they can and cannot go shopping, and what brands regarding home essentials they are allowed or not allowed to buy. Husbands equally should give their wives space to manage their duties in the household without interference, and there should be a mutual recognition of the rights and responsibilities of each. Both the husband and the wife should keep one another accountable, and always be

¹⁵ Consult the editor’s commentary *Philippians for the Practical Messianic*.

¹⁶ Even though many earlier Bible translations render Romans 16:7 with “Junias” (Grk. *Iouñias*, Ἰουνιάς), more modern scholarship has adequately determined that a feminine “Junia” is undoubtedly being referred to. *ABD* indicates, “Without exception, the Church Fathers in late antiquity identified Andronius’ partner in Rom 16:7 as a woman...Only later medieval copyists of Rom 16:7 could not imagine a woman being an apostle and wrote the masculine name ‘Junias.’ This latter name did not exist in antiquity; its explanation as a Greek abbreviation of the Latin name ‘Junianus’ is unlikely” (Peter Lampe, “Junias,” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. [New York: Doubleday, 1992], 3:1127).

communicating throughout the day as a sign not only of their commitment—but also of their love.

How will the Messianic movement deal with gender roles, and specifically women, in the future? This is a question that is not easily answered at the present, yet new sides in the discussion will certainly be presenting themselves as our movement spiritually matures.¹⁷

A Messianic Movement that Can Make Progress

I see a great deal of value and a great deal of potential in what the Messianic movement can offer the world. Yet, today's Messianic community and its people must undergo some changes if it desires to enter into the future that God has set. We can complain and whine and moan about how “bad” things are, and about all the negative things that we feel have happened to us on the Messianic journey. These things are not constructive, nor do they encourage us to accomplish the actions of faith that the Lord desires of us.

The first chapter of the Messianic movement has closed: we have seen a generation of Jewish people come to faith in Messiah Yeshua and awareness has been raised of the Jewishness of our faith. The second chapter of the Messianic movement is beginning: we will be molded into a people that fully embody the mission of Israel as seen in the Scriptures. We are going to mature into men and women, congregations and fellowships, and ministries and outreaches that will keep Yeshua the Messiah at the focus of all we do, return to a sound Biblical morality rooted in the Torah, **and have the answers that the lost are seeking.**

In order to do all of this, we have to learn to live as modern Messianics in today's world. Isolationism is not the answer—engagement is! Both the Prophets and the Apostles engaged with their world, calling people to repentance and change—and it is not surprising to me to see that the books of the Bible that testify of their actions *are the ones most avoided by Messianics*. This will be the first area of change as the shifting begins, and while there will be tension, it will be necessary as we grow toward full adulthood (Ephesians 4:13).

I desire to see a Messianic movement that is truly fulfilling the *total* mandate that God gave to Ancient Israel: serving the world by testifying of His goodness. I would submit to you, however, that entire sectors (at least of American society) have remained “un-Messianicized” because of the very fact that we have not been accomplishing this mandate as He expects of us. While we might not have all of the answers today, we do need to begin to ask the questions and prepare ourselves. One day we will not be able to be an isolated movement that is only able to reach out to *certain* sectors of the world, when God's mission includes the *whole* world.

In 2008, we need to see some serious progress made on a whole number of spiritual fronts. As a movement, we need to stop our tendency of “reacting” to things. On the contrary, we need to take actions—and in so doing stop avoiding the things that are actually going to help and empower us for His service. The fundamental ideology of “The Bible says it, I believe it, and that's it!” that just throws the Scriptures in someone's face will no longer work. The similar, yet significantly different, “The Bible says it, I believe it, now let's discuss it,” ***needs to begin to significantly assert itself.***

The true test of whether or not a spiritual move is truly of God is seen in how it can change lives. Will the Messianic movement become a piety movement *par excellance* that exceeds what others in the past have been able to accomplish—because we actually recognize ourselves as Israel and not just connected to Israel? Will we complete the work that began millennia ago? Will we convey God's blessings to others? Surely, we have many good things to look ahead to in the future—but the choice is clearly up to us. Let us be those who can take the message to our fallen world and effect a difference. Posterity is counting on us!

¹⁷ For a further discussion of this issue, consult the FAQ on the TNN website “Women in Ministry.”

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