

PASTOR'S NOTES. What was (and is) a Jew? – Part 2

Some years ago, during my ministerial education, we attended a presentation from a rabbi on “What is a Jew?” That might seem like a fairly simple question, but he demonstrated that to both Jews and non-Jews, it is not. Most of us non-Jews likely see Jews as persons practicing the “religion” of Judaism, just as Christians are persons practicing the “religion” of Christianity. And we might further know that there are three major “denominations” of Judaism: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reformed. Sounds pretty basic, right? But the closer you look, the more complicated it gets.

While non-Jews tend to view Jews in terms of religion, Jews themselves over the years have tended to view themselves more as an ethnic group, though not entirely. For the most part, Jews who have left the Jewish religion still identify themselves as Jews. And this holds true for them even if they are generations removed from anyone in the family who is religious. They still see themselves as Jews. So for many Jews today, the religion does not matter – although I suspect most would consider that a Jew who converts to Islam, Christianity, or another major religion is no longer rightly a Jew. On the other hand, a person can convert to Judaism. In our time, Sammy Davis Jr. is probably the most famous convert to Judaism, though not the only one, and most would consider him as much a Jew as anyone.

The rabbi's conclusion, which I have heard echoed by others over the years, was his definition of a Jew: someone who is not a “goyim” (the Yiddish word for Gentile). While individual Jews themselves may differ over the definition of a “Jew,” he argued that most would agree that a Jew is someone who is not a Gentile. This sense of identity is similar to those who identify themselves as on the LGBTQIA+ “spectrum;” essentially what causes someone to self-identify this way is because they see themselves as NOT “straight” or part of the “standard” sexual group. In our day, it seems that is how a number of us identify ourselves: by what we are not. This way of identifying ourselves has evolved to this over the last hundred or more years.

The question of what is a Jew might seem pointless to many of you, but it has impacted my life more than just the rabbi's talk. I made a number of Jewish friends in college, even before I took classes in Hebrew. One spring I was invited by a number of them to attend a Passover. As a typical Christian, I was aware of the Passover in the Old Testament, and knew that it was a Passover that was Jesus' Last Supper, and this is where our tradition of communion comes from. I found the Passover most interesting (and delicious), but didn't give it much thought until some years later.

In one of the congregations I served, I had a couple – a young woman who was United Methodist, and her husband who said he was a Messianic Jew. They attended our worship service (which was early at 8:30 am Sundays) and then would go on to the Messianic Jewish temple in Marblehead, Ohio (about 40 minutes away) and attend Sunday service there. I first thought of Messianic Jews as just another Christian denomination, since these are persons who believe in Jesus Christ. But their view of themselves is different.

Messianic Jews see themselves as Jews who have come to see Jesus as the promised Messiah. So most of us would just call them Christians. But for them, they still carry their Jewish identity. Further, they realized that becoming “Christian” does not mean they are no longer Jews. Jesus and all of His disciples were Jewish, and they continued to be Jewish their entire life. So worshipping Jesus does not mean for them that they are no longer Jewish, or for that matter, that they stop following Jewish

traditions. And over time I have met other Messianic Jews who believed this way, including one who lived in my home for a time.

I should note here that many Jews do not consider Messianic Jews to be “Jews.” Some of my Jewish friends said, “becoming Christian or some other religion strips away their Jewish pedigree.” But Messianic Jews see themselves still as Jews, and those I knew were as dedicated to Jewish feasts and traditions (and to the Bible) as any.

During this time, several of us from my church attended a Messianic Passover. The Passover celebrated by this group was a little different than the Passover I attended years earlier. It included everything that was in the earlier one, but it also highlighted how Jesus used this tradition to point to His own work, leading ultimately to giving His body and blood on the cross. Communion for me took on a fuller meaning as I saw it was far more than just the moments of the sharing of the bread and the cup. Our Messianic Jewish friends encouraged us to recover the roots of our communion and to practice this ourselves. So we started doing our own Messianic Passover. Our Passover was meant to be as close to what Jesus celebrated with His disciples, including His words:

*Then He took a loaf of bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, “**This is My body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of Me.**” And He did the same with the cup after supper, saying, “**This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood.**”* (Luke 22:19-20, NRSV)

*For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when He was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, “**This is My body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of Me.**” In the same way He took the cup also, after supper, saying, “**This cup is the new covenant in My blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.**” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.* (1 Corinthians 11:23-26, NRSV)

Over the years there has been sharp criticism of Christian churches who conduct Passovers. No doubt there are those who have done so with the wrong motivations, and I could write a lot about the various arguments critics have made against doing Passovers. Most of the arguments assume that some things are identified as “Jewish” and “Christian,” and to be respectful, you don’t cross those lines. I find the criticisms rather ironic; as a historian it appears to me that the reason Christian churches have “communion” instead of a Passover is likely because the early Church was so anti-Jewish that they purposely purged as much of the Jewishness from our traditions as they could.

I still have more to say about the issue of Jewish identity. I realize it will take me another article to talk about how today’s group identity concepts have developed, both inside and outside groups. Further, I believe this does shed a different light on what is happening in the land of Israel today. Until then, “pray for the peace of Jerusalem.” (Psalm 122:6)

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Ran' or similar, written in a cursive style.