

DISMANTLING OUR SEPARATING WALLS

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“The Torah of the New Testament is the very person of Christ whom we can follow only by the power of the Holy Spirit.”



In Kinzer’s essay, the reader can see our agreements as well as our convergent and divergent views on many aspects of the mystery of the Church. In this rejoinder, I would like to focus on the three topics Kinzer has highlighted: 1. types and sacramental realities, 2. the Torah observance of the Jewish people and 3. the mission of Israel. I will present my understanding of these issues from a Catholic perspective. In this way, I hope to contribute to dismantling the separating walls between us, the walls Jesus has already demolished in his own sacrificed body.

1. TYPES AND SACRAMENTAL REALITIES

Kinzer agrees with my presentation of the relationship between types and realities but distinguishes it from what he calls the sacramental realities of present day Jewish life: “Both personal and event types point us to their antitype, but live on within it

mainly in a *hermeneutical sense*—that is, in providing the necessary interpretive framework for rendering intelligible the antitype’s meaning.” The living realities of Jewish life, the Torah, the people of Israel, the Sabbath, the Land, the city of Jerusalem and the Mitzvot are present realities that shape the life of the Jewish people as they shaped Jesus’ life and not only his imagination, as did the types. According to Kinzer, these are for every Jew sacramental realities by which he or she is connected consciously or unconsciously with the mystery of Christ.

I agree that these living realities establish a quasi-empirical contact with Jesus for us Christians and Messianic Jews, and they have the potential to do the same for the Jewish people. Yet, I believe that all the biblical types and antitypes are more directly sacramental since they are part of the Word of God. If read with faith, the Word of God becomes “living and effective” (Heb 4:12), judges and sanctifies the hearers, and connects them in the present with the *Logos*, the Word of God in person. This means that if the non-Messianic Jew has faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the prophets, the written word becomes a here-and-now spoken word of God’s self-revelation. Thus, in some obscure but real way, the graced soul intuitively senses the fulfillment of the Messianic promises. It was in this way that Abraham anticipated the joy of the birth of Christ when he looked at his newborn son Isaac, the child of the promise. This anticipation is real and not imaginary, a share through the Spirit in the filial relationship of the Son.

I also agree that the six realities of present Jewish life can also work as sacramental, but only if they are interpreted—consciously or semiconsciously—according to the Bible of the Old and New Testaments. Without at least an implicit guidance by the Word of God, all the six realities of present Jewish life can be distorted—and were and are often distorted—to the extent that they become an obstacle to believing in the Messiah. Here are a few examples: if Torah and Mitzvot replace faith and the legalistic fulfillment of the rules builds up the self-righteousness of the Pharisee; if genealogical Israelite ethnicity in itself, without faith, assures entrance into the world to come; if the Promised Land means that Israel has the right to expel Arabs, or prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state; these and other such distorted beliefs oppose rather than promote any relationship with Christ.

Jesus himself was indeed influenced by all these realities but also subjected their aberrations to a scathing critique. At the same time, there are truly believing non-Messianic Jews who decline faith in Jesus, out of what they believe is fidelity to God, and yet live the love of God and love of neighbor; these show us the face of Jesus without knowing it. I believe that, among many others, Emmanuel Levinas, Martin Buber, and Abraham Heschel were great examples of the Jewish “saint.”

2. THE OBSERVANCE OF THE TORAH

In our first exchange of views there surfaced a marked difference between Kinzer’s position and mine regarding the observance of the Torah by Messianic Jews. I said that since the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, no one has the moral obligation to keep the ceremonial and dietary laws of the Old Testament. Yet, the Messianic Jews could practice the Torah out of thanksgiving for God’s special providence, which has preserved Israel throughout her long history of exile and persecutions. Kinzer, however, pointed to the analogy between Israel’s vocation to keep the Torah in its entirety and vocations in the Catholic Church. Just as a man called to the priesthood, so Messianic Israel is aware of her calling to a special priestly service for the nations. Therefore, just as a man called to the priesthood has a moral obligation to follow his call, so does Messianic Israel have obligation to practice “some form of Torah observance.”

Before discussing this concrete question, we need to look at Jesus’ relationship to the Torah. He makes clear in the Sermon on the Mount that he came not to abolish the Law but to fulfill it and that those “who break one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do so, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.” But he immediately adds: “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:17, 19–20).

The Pharisees, however, scrupulously observed even the minutest details of the commandments, so Jesus must mean a righteousness other than theirs. Is not the entire sermon an exposition of what he means by the righteousness which surpasses that of the Pharisees? One must observe the Torah in its full depth,

the way the author of the Torah explains it in Matthew 5–7 and through the entire gospel. This includes both the practice of the least of the decrees and fulfillment of the two chief commandments: “Love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, and with your whole mind” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.” For, Jesus states, “The whole Law and the Prophets depend on these two commandments” (Mt 22: 37–40). Moreover, if we read the texts about morality in John and Paul, it becomes evident that Jesus commands us to love one another as he loves us—not simply trying to imitate him with our own strength, but participating in his Spirit and thereby being enabled to love with his love and so to give away our lives in this twofold service of God and neighbor. Moreover, the Holy Spirit does not only command us to obey universal precepts, but many times he invites individuals to accept a vocation, fulfill a project, or share the poverty of Jesus’ earthly life. Such personal calls are addressed not to all but to those chosen by God, individuals or groups. We might add that the Holy Spirit aims at shaping and forming within us the image of Christ. In this sense the Torah of the New Testament is the very person of Christ whom we can follow only by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is a standard much higher than the Torah of the Old Law. The dietary prescriptions and ceremonial purifications fulfilled an essential function before Christ: they made separation from the Gentiles almost a necessity and in this way they kept the observant Jews from falling away from the worship of the one God, the God of Israel. But after Christ has redeemed the entire human race, he also abolished the separating wall between Gentiles and Jews and made all believers members of his body. In this one body, the observance of the dietary and cleanliness regulations would remain an obstacle separating Jewish Christians from Gentile Christians. Returning to the question of the Torah observance of Messianic Jews, I begin to appreciate Kinzer’s point: the obligation of “some form of Torah observance” is part of the Messianic Jews’ particular vocation. I only hope and ask that Messianic Jews do not insist on any regulations that would distance them from table fellowship with Christians. Paul could not be more insistent on this issue in Galatians when he reprimands Peter’s withdrawal from Gentile table fellowship (2:11–14); moreover, in the Acts it is Peter himself who received the heavenly command to eat (previously)

unclean food (10:9–16). According to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus himself made all kinds of food clean (7:14–19).

3. THE MISSION OF THE MESSIANIC JEWS

Reflecting on the mission of the Messianic Jews within the universal mission of the Church, I assume that they intend to preserve their Jewish identity not merely out of natural patriotism, but also from a sense of gratitude to the God who has shown Israel so many special signs of his love during the Old Testament and who, in the Christian era, has so often invited his people to live the vocation of Isaiah's Suffering Servant. This invitation presents us with a frightening irony: the (pagan) Christians persecuted Jesus in their Jewish neighbors. All who went to the gas chambers of the concentration camps with the *Shema Yisrael* on their lips and in their hearts became witnesses to the living God and, unawares, shared in the cross of Christ. As Pope Benedict XVI said at Auschwitz, the Nazis, by wanting to kill all Jews, wanted to kill God himself:

Deep down, those vicious criminals, by wiping out this people, wanted to kill the God who called Abraham, who spoke on Sinai and laid down principles to serve as a guide for mankind, principles that are eternally valid. If this people, by its very existence, was a witness to the God who spoke to humanity and took us to himself, then that God finally had to die and power had to belong to man alone—to those men, who thought that by force they had made themselves masters of the world. By destroying Israel, by the Shoah, they ultimately wanted to tear up the taproot of the Christian faith and to replace it with a faith of their own invention: faith in the rule of man, the rule of the powerful.¹

In spite all the efforts of annihilation, God renewed and keeps believing Israel alive up to this very day. The recent discovery of Israel's Messiah in Jesus by a growing number of Jews is a powerful witness to the *magnalia Dei* (the great deeds of the living God). These Messianic Jews know that their vocation within

1 Benedict XVI, *Visit to the Auschwitz Camp*, May 28, 2006.

the body of Christ is unique; therefore, they do not intend to disappear from salvation history but serve as living witnesses to God's revelation in the Old Testament and to his enduring special providence for Israel.

Only the Messianic Jews can decide what "form of Torah observance" would fit their unique status and vocation within the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. One area with great promise is the Jewish feasts, which would shed a new light on the Christian celebrations. They could also compose a Jewish Catholic Eucharist, consisting of ancient Hebrew prayers, especially those of the Passover and *toda* sacrifice, in order to testify to Jews and Gentiles that God has fulfilled Israel's four-thousand year old expectation for redemption. We can only surmise what Paul has intuited in the Letter to the Romans as he exclaims: "[I]f their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?" (11:15).

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