

First Things Online (May 24, 2006)

Richard John Neuhaus writes:

So what's your church? I don't know what easy answer Mark Kinzer has in response to that question. He is president of the Messianic Jewish Theological institute, and an ordained rabbi who teaches Jewish studies at Fuller Theological Seminary. Jews who have come to faith in Yeshua as the Messiah go way on back. The first disciples were Messianic Jews, or, as some prefer, Hebrew Christians. And some historians think it obvious that the approximately six million Jews in the Roman Empire at the time of Christ became less than one million a few centuries later because most of them had become Christians.

Now Kinzer has published a fascinating book, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism: Redefining Christian Engagement with the Jewish People* (Brazos). Like Michael Wyschogrod, whose work has been frequently noted in *FIRST THINGS*, Kinzer argues that Jews who believe in Yeshua are and must remain Jews. Wyschogrod, of course, is not a Yeshua-believer and is therefore, in the ordinary understanding of things, less complicatedly a Jew.

A merit of Kinzer's book is that it provides an enlightening history, enlivened by personal stories, of the ways in which Jews who believe in Christ have attempted to articulate their continuing to be Jews. Of course, most such Jewish believers have simply "converted," identifying themselves as Christians who are Jewish only by birth or background. They stopped being observant Jews, just as other Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, expected—and sometimes demanded—them to.

At this point in the history of the working out of the mystery that St. Paul ponders in Romans 9 through 11, Jews who embrace Yeshua as Messiah are becoming more theologically assertive and articulate about their continuing to be Torah-observant Jews. This creates perplexing ecclesiological questions. Are there then two churches, one for Jews and another for Gentiles? As I say, these questions have been around for centuries, and most Christians thought they were definitively settled at the "first church council" recounted in Acts 15 when it was agreed that Gentiles did not first have to become Jews in order to belong to the community of disciples. Thinkers such as Wyschogrod and Kinzer, however, draw a different lesson from Acts 15, contending that it was assumed that the Jewish believers in Jesus would continue to be observant Jews.

The "postmissionary" in Kinzer's title is crucially important. The ecclesiology he proposes on behalf of Messianic Judaism makes five basic claims: 1) The perpetual validity of God's covenant with the Jewish people; 2) The perpetual validity of the Jewish way of life rooted in the Torah, which is the enduring sign and instrument of that covenant; 3) The validity of Jewish religious tradition as the historical embodiment of the Jewish way of life rooted in the Torah; 4) The bilateral constitution of the ekklesia, consisting of distinct but united Jewish and Gentile expressions of Yeshua-faith; 5) The ecumenical imperative of the ekklesia, which entails bringing the redeemed nations of the

world into solidarity with the people of Israel in anticipation of Israel's—and the world's—final redemption.

It is the fourth claim that raises particularly problematic questions. Admittedly, they are not so problematic for those Protestants who view ecclesiology as secondary and of only instrumental significance. In this view, faith in Jesus is the decisive factor, and then one joins a church in order to sustain and share that faith. There are many churches, so why shouldn't there be yet another church composed of Christian Jews who continue to do their Jewish thing? The only church that really matters is in the realm of the invisible.

It is very different for Catholics and the Orthodox, however. Incorporation into the *totus Christos* means that one is a member of Christ, the head, and his one body, the very visible Church. Messianic Judaism has been chiefly engaged with Protestant bodies, although Kinzer does recount the efforts of Catholics of Jewish origin who have tried to advance something like his “bilateral ecclesiology.”

Kinzer concludes with this:

In speaking of the schism between the Western and Eastern churches, John Paul II has stated that each church now breathes with only one lung. This is an apt metaphor, especially if we extend it by seeing the air breathed by the church as the Spirit of God. With only one functioning lung, the church's capacity to receive and impart the Spirit is restricted. This metaphor is even more applicable to the primal schism that wounded the *ekklesia* in its infancy. The church must come home to Israel if it would again breathe freely and deeply.

That way of putting the matter raises all kinds of theological red flags. And, quite frankly, many Christians might view Kinzer's proposal as being just short of theologically bizarre. And yet, there are the ponderings of Romans 9 through 11. Whatever else one makes of St. Paul's reflections, there is no doubt that he was sure that the mysterious connection between Israel and the New Covenant engaged a story not yet finished, a story unfolding against an eschatological horizon. And there are tens of thousands of Messianic Jews who are contending with increasing sophistication that they have fresh insights into how God is unfolding that story.

Robert Jenson, the distinguished Lutheran theologian, says that Kinzer's argument poses an enormous ecumenical question: “What form is communion between these [Messianic Jewish] congregations and those who now think of themselves as ‘the churches’ to take?” The question is larger still for those who understand themselves to be members not of “the churches” but of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.