

Reaching God's Chosen People

Written by Jack Hayford

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Current events in Israel have brought much to mind regarding those in Messianic ministry today. Whatever the sociopolitical problems faced by those ministering in Israel, too many engaged in reaching the Jews are misunderstood. So, my review here is with an eye toward equipping leaders to help others understand this timely, prophetic and uniquely difficult ministry.

And this ministry is timely, to say the least. A century-long move of the Holy Spirit has been fulfilling the Ezekiel 37 "dry bones" vision, and a spiritual harvest is afoot among God's ancient, chosen people. Prophetic developments in Israel and among global Jewry ignite any thoughtful soul witnessing God's sovereign hand at work regathering the lost sheep of Israel. Their regathering to His land is probably the single most significant sign of the nearing of Jesus' second coming.

From Herzl and the birth of the Zionist vision (1890s-1917), to the horrors of the World War II Holocaust as 6 million European Jews were slaughtered in the Nazi death camps (1939-1945), to the founding of the modern state of Israel (1948), ongoing events have kept Israel in the international spotlight for a hundred years. Whether people recognize it or not, God is trying to get the world's attention.

A mixed response. Christian response to these events has varied widely. Many show unawareness and passivity, knowing little history or biblical prophecy, while others reveal interest and passion, but not always with discernment in their response or efforts. But for me, a basic understanding of a few key concepts sharpened my perception, helping me respond to the Holy Spirit's renewing and reviving ministry in this regard.

I came to realize that what God is doing among Jews and in Israel needs to be seen as being as much a renewal as the Spirit's revitalizing the church in such arenas as worship, the fullness and gifts of the Holy Spirit and the ministry of the believer. I began including some of the following in special teaching occasions, and found this helped people better see God's present purposes in Israel and among Jews, while also clearing their thinking about Messianic ministry.

"Messianic ministry" is relatively new terminology and is used today by most who seek to touch Jewish people with the gospel. Their outreach is commonly assailed by the Jewish religious community, and thus by the press, accusing "Messianics" of proselytizing and attempting to steal Jews away from their Jewishness. However, Messianic evangelism is clear in its focus and message, seeking only to invite Jews to faith in their Redeemer without becoming any less Jewish.

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Misgivings and misfirings. It's that last phrase--"without becoming any less Jewish"--that bewilders many, both Christians and Jews; it's a bewilderment that often breeds resistance to Messianic ministries. As I travel, I am surprised at the frequency I encounter both misgivings and misfirings concerning ministry toward Jews.

The misgivings are found among sincere believers who are unaware of key concepts undergirding Messianic ministry. The misfirings are the often sorely misguided "shots" at saving Jews taken by equally sincere believers whose absence of seeing the historical context of Jewish-Christian relations boomerangs their intended love for the Jews into being seen as a crusade against them. Thus, these evangelists end up shooting themselves in the foot. The rejection they meet, attempting to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ or seeking to convert or "complete" Jews, too often leads to feelings of being "persecuted for righteousness' sake" (see Matt. 5:10).

The fact is, their approach is too often dominated by ignorance, however innocent, and even a few points of review regarding Messianic ministry might have helped. Let me suggest those that helped me begin:

1. Messianic ministry does not begin with excitement, but with exposition. It is predicated on the Bible's revelation that God has never forgotten nor rescinded His timeless covenant with Israel and the Jewish people (see Rom. 9-11). Many Christians are not aware that a powerful residue of anti-Semitism present in the 16th-century Reformers shaped a theological stance toward the Jews that dictates against the sensitivity needed in today's environment.

It is worthwhile to gain at least an elementary grasp of this issue and its resolution. Two highly recommended books on the subject are *Israel, the Church and the Last Days*, and *Jewish Roots*, both by Dan Juster. They may be ordered online at www.tikkunministries.org.

2. There is a distinct need for understanding and sensitive terminology. For example, the very term Messianic for this ministry is a strategic choice--one that peculiarly often faces criticism by Christians who don't realize how objectionable to Jews such words as "church," "Christian," "conversion" or even Jesus' name have become.

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To many Jews, the word "Christian" is weighted with negativity often completely unknown to or misunderstood by evangelical believers. Yet, whether we feel it is fair or not, these Jewish feelings are fully understandable when we see these facts of history as the majority of Jews do. These facts have shaped their view of Christians and Christianity.

The crusaders (11th and 12th centuries), formally commissioned by Rome to drive "the infidel Moslems" from the Holy Land, just as readily killed Jews for the same reason--by the thousands.

Hosts of Jews were killed by the official church during the Spanish Inquisition (14th and 15th centuries) because they would not convert to Christianity on demand. For centuries, most Christians dubbed all Jews as "the Christkillers," and generations of children were taught anti-Semitic attitudes as a deserved retribution.

The Protestant Reformation included no reform of the above attitudes; in fact, Martin Luther himself, in the spirit of the times, wrote with deep animosity against Jews. The Nazi Holocaust--targeting the extermination of the Jewish people--was spawned in a nation that was nominally Christian. Meanwhile, most "Christian" nations around the world--including the United States--did virtually nothing to stop the slaughter.

To the average Jewish mind, these events define the Christian attitude toward Jews, and thus the idea of becoming a Christian is readily defined as betrayal of one's own people and a renouncing of one's ethnic origin and history.

Thus, since "Christ" literally means "Messiah," and since the Messiah is still a person longed and hoped for by multitudes of Jews, those seeking to communicate God's love to today's Jews refer to themselves as "Messianic"--i.e., of or concerning "the Messiah"--rather than as "Christian."

3. Another key term, obviously essential in Messianic ministry, is the name of Jesus. Few contemporary Christians are aware of how sorely distorted the English name of our Savior, Jesus, has become, both by the failures of history we've reviewed as well as the corruption of His name and its meaning in the Jewish culture.

The name Yeshua is the literal Hebrew equivalent of Jesus' name, and is used in all Messianic ministry today. This, too, is often objected to by some who brand the practice "cultish" (though such a charge would never be brought against a Hispanic ministry for pronouncing Jesus "Hay-soos").

4. Finally, the times demand removing objections. We must remove the objections Messianic Jews (i.e., present-day Jewish believers in Jesus/Yeshua as the Messiah, the Son of God and the only Savior of mankind) often face for celebrating holidays unique to the Jewish culture. But we need to discern between the propriety of a Messianic Jewish believer's celebration of timeless events within the framework of their culture and the proposition that "this practice is a regressive dependence upon the law rather than grace." Such criticism is as meaningless as assailing an American Christian for celebrating the Fourth of July or Thanksgiving.

These issues only open a subject that calls the whole church to awareness and sensitivity if a present, prophetically pregnant moment is to birth its possibilities. Otherwise, we may unwittingly mirror the very thing done by many believing Jews in New Testament times. Though born again themselves, they rejected Gentiles who had received Jesus as the Messiah/Savior unless he or she practiced Jewish traditions (see Gal. 1, 2; Rom. 1-4). But that "renewal" was sustained as Jerusalem's church leaders--all of them Jewish--took discerning action, and God's Word triumphed over human misunderstanding (see Acts 11:1-18; 15:1-32).

May the same Holy Spirit of renewal help us in the same way today. The times we are in invite it; the Holy Spirit of truth requires it. It is rooted in the belief that the revelation of God's Word relates an end-times spiritual awakening among the Jews to a global move of the Holy Spirit in reviving, life-giving power.