

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The “Holy Protestant Traditions”

As a Messianic Rabbi, when talking with Evangelical Protestants, I oftentimes have some interesting dialogues. Years ago, I was in a Christian bookstore looking for a particular reference. As was my practice, I was wearing my yarmulke, admittedly a man-made tradition but not an anti-biblical one. As I was looking through the books, I noticed two men who kept looking my way. They would exchange glances with each other and then look my way, turning away as soon as I looked at them. I knew they were curious and probably thinking, “What’s this Jewish guy doing in here, in a Christian bookstore?” I decided to wander over and engage in a conversation. I commented something like it was a nice bookstore. One of the guys couldn’t wait to ask me what I was doing there. I told them I was from a Messianic congregation and that I was a believer in Yeshua, “Jesus” to them, and about the books I was looking for, and then I asked them what they were doing there. They were quite amazed. This

was something unique to their experience. I don't think they ever actually met a Messianic Jew before. (Isn't that a shame?)

One of them told me that they were Bible teachers at a local church and they had just finished a study series with their people and they were looking for something new to start another cycle of teaching. When he said the word "cycle" I immediately thought of the "cycle" of the festivals listed in Leviticus 23. I asked them, "Have you ever considered teaching the cycle of God's festivals in Leviticus 23?" I said, "God set these as Torah teaching pictures that we repeat each year. During this time, we re-experience all of the great history of God's covenant faithfulness to us and also all the great doctrines of our faith as actually lived out. Creation, atonement, deliverance, redemption, sanctification, resurrection, and acceptance with God through the work of Messiah are all pictured, prophesied, and promised to us." These two guys were utterly amazed. One of them said, "I never thought of that." I responded, "It's not an entirely original idea. It's been around for 3,400 years or so" We all laughed and they went away looking for some material I recommended. You see, these two men were stuck in a traditional theology that artificially separates the Bible and its teachings into the camps of "then" for "those people" and "now" for "us". The challenge is to see the entire Word of God as one of continuity instead of contrast.

The story is typical of the modern mindset, especially within most, but not all, Evangelicals. Due in large measure to the rigid compartmentalization of things emanating from the error of Dispensationalism, many view not only the Bible but their interactions with people through this distorted lens that tries to fit everything into the square holes and round holes defined by their theology. As applied to Christian/Jewish definitions, this “binary bias”, as I call it, has relegated all expressions and experiences into two camps. Either you are a Christian and go to “church” on Sunday, celebrate Christmas and Easter, and are “saved” or you are a Jew and go to “synagogue” on Saturday and celebrate “all those Jewish festivals” in the “Old Testament”. What a shame this thinking has become the norm for so many people within the one body of Messiah. This thinking is also seen outside the realm of Evangelical Christianity.

Another example of a bit of a “paradigm shift” was my interactions with a guy who worked for me at a counseling agency. I hired him and he was a great worker. At first, I did not know he was Jewish. (No, we don’t all look alike, and we don’t all have the nose of a prophet. That is just a stereotype.) Since I wore my yarmulke, he knew I was. The topic came up one day when he asked me where I attended. I told him the name and shared that it was a Messianic congregation and that I was a believer in Yeshua as Messiah. He was a little shocked but curious since he

had seen my demeanor and how I was not aggressive with my faith. I shared that I have a Jewish background but was raised as a Roman Catholic and later rejected that and eventually embraced Messianic Judaism. I could tell he had never encountered anyone with that testimony. I left it at that without pushing any agenda.

Later he came back and asked me about my faith. He was curious and asked, “Do you celebrate Christmas?” I said, “No, but I do embrace Hanukkah”. He left and, again, I did not push into him. Another time he asked, “What about Easter? Do you celebrate that?” Again, I responded, “No, but we do enjoy the celebration of Passover.” He was really curious. Still, I left him alone to ponder things. Another time he asked a few questions and each time I answered him straightforwardly but without any pressure to “buttonhole” him into a corner and start preaching and peppering him with Bible verses. I let him feel that his questions were heard and answered but, most importantly, that he felt safe to return if he had more questions. This, I believe, is the wisdom of being a “fisher of men”. We offer bait, we wait and we wait some more. Different bait for different fish, perhaps, but we let them nibble as they wish. I recall someone once said, “Yeshua called us to be fishers of men, not hunters.” A lot of wisdom there. A while later this guy invited us to his daughter's Bat Mitzvah at their congregation.

My wife and I attended and had a wonderful time. Since he was sitting next to me, he was amazed that during the service we were both praying in Hebrew from the same prayer book. I think he was really stunned by that.

The part of me that is evangelistic would like to finish the story of how he came to faith in the Messiah and became a believer. That is not how this story went. He left the agency, and I never heard any more from him. But I am sure that is not the end of the story for him. Seeds were planted and I leave the rest to God. The main point of my relating this is to show how preconceived bias exists but can be overcome by the right kind of witnessing.

By simply living and acting out my Torah-positive, Messiah-centered, grace-filled faith, I am presenting something in the category of “other” to the world of religious thought. I am not representative of a “typical Jew” if there ever could be such a thing. I am also certainly not representative of a “typical Christian”, and we all know there are none of those either. But I am presenting something outside of the normal range of expectations from either camp. Having said that, I immediately realized how sad it is that what was the norm in expression in the first-century Messianic experience has become the oddity. How far we have divided among ourselves and embraced false teachings and erroneous positions?

The various branches of Protestantism have done this in spades. Much of this is due to branches growing out of other branches and repeating and compounding previous errors. Some have added new errors along the way. Each branch can be traced back to its breaking from some other stream of the teaching of some man. Very little of the content of the branches retains the solid sap from the original trunk of the tree. A good look at Romans 11 might be in order here for the reader.

To show how far man-made traditions have influenced thought, I recall one of my Bible professors at Bible College. He was an elderly, kind gentleman who had much knowledge and wisdom, although we used to spar on several issues. (I say older, but I realize that at this point in my life, I think I am older than he was then!) He once shared that, due to his church background that went all the way back to his childhood, to that day, he had never been to the movies. We were all shocked.

“Never?”, we all said in unison. He went on to tell us that his church traditions required them to avoid going to what were then called “picture shows”. For his church culture, it was a mark of piety, and they were quite firm about it. He related a little ditty, “We don’t smoke, and we don’t chew, and we don’t go with girls who do!” We discussed some church rules against dancing, although that hardly squares with King David’s expressions of joy and what is described in the Psalms. We had

a good discussion of traditions that have been used by churches as requirements and markers of spirituality.

Some churches require abstinence from all alcoholic beverages. I find this curious in light of the many Bible verses that are contrary to such an absolute prohibition.

- 1 Timothy 5:23 says, “Be no longer a drinker of water only but use a little wine for your stomach’s sake and your frequent infirmities.”
- Psalm 104:14,15 says, “He causes the grass to grow for the livestock, and plants for man to cultivate, that he may produce food out of the earth: wine that makes the heart of man glad, oil to make his face to shine, and bread that strengthens man’s heart.”

Messiah’s own example at the wedding in Cana in John 2 is a problem for the anti-alcohol crusade.

On the other hand, the Bible does warn against drunkenness in Ephesians 5:18 and many other places. This issue is one of temperate and moderate use. Apparently, some see things in the “all or nothing” cognitive distortion that develops into a

man-made prohibition and they make this a requirement for membership with their church.

These extra man-made traditions are not a part of the gospel message at all but by their insistent requirement for church membership and continued discipleship, the net effect is to “add to the Word of God”. I do not mean to assert their intent is bad. I do not believe the intent of the rabbis who put “fences around the Torah” was necessarily bad either. But is it not the same? And where does it stop?

I have received much praise from Evangelical Protestants over the years for my firm stance on the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures, my continued appeal of “sola Scriptura”, meaning only the Scriptures are our authority and not the Oral Torah of the rabbis, the church councils, or pronouncements of the popes. But I find it interesting that when my focus is on the many man-made traditions that I find within the large umbrella of Protestantism, including some Messianic congregations, the praise quickly dissipates into suspicion and distrust. I have often experienced “the left boot of fellowship”. It just shows how deeply entrenched these traditions have become.