

Can a Jew be a Christian? The challenge of Messianic Judaism: The challenge of Messianic Judaism

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [May 3, 2005](#) issue

Can you be a practicing Jew and also believe that Jesus is the messiah? The customary answer is no. Though Christianity began as a Jewish sect, it quickly became an all-gentile affair. Indeed, Christians came to understand themselves as people who by definition were not Jewish and who believed that Christianity had “superseded” Judaism—that is, “taken its seat” of favor before God. The word “Jew” came to mean those who had denied Christ, even murdered him, having been unable to see their own scripture’s clear prediction of his coming.

Christians have significantly modified this view in recent years, especially in the wake of the Holocaust. They have tried to come to terms with the fact that the Nazis who murdered millions of Jews drew on a longstanding Christian tradition of slandering Jews. The Roman Catholic Church led the way in theological revision during Vatican II with the document *Nostra Aetate*, which struck some of the worst statements of anti-Judaism from church teaching. Protestants soon followed. Abandoning all forms of “supersessionist” theology now seems the only viable form of repentance. Mainline Christians forswear the belief that the church has replaced Israel in the divine scheme of redemption. There is no reason for a practicing Jew to convert to Christianity, since God’s original covenant with Jews remains intact. Most Jews, of course, could hardly agree more.

Yet the question still arises: Can a practicing Jew also believe in Jesus? The question arises in a forceful way with the presence of “Messianic Jews,” who claim that their profession of Jesus as messiah and Lord does not invalidate their Jewish identity and practice. The worship practices of Messianic Jews resemble those of the synagogue, but their theology is closer to that of evangelical Christians—who often fund missions to the Jews. Many Messianic Jews call themselves “completed” or “fulfilled” Jews, indicating not only that one can be Jewish and believe in Jesus, but that every Jew ought to.

The existence of Messianic Jews makes both Jews and mainline Protestants uneasy, if not angry. This anger explains the controversy surrounding Avodat Yisrael, a Messianic Jewish congregation in suburban Philadelphia. For unlike hundreds of other Messianic Jewish congregations in North America, Avodat Yisrael (the name means “in service of Israel”) has been aligned with a mainline denomination; it has received some quarter of a million dollars in start-up funds from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). (Just last month, however, it lost its official status as a PCUSA congregation. See the report on the next page.)

The PCUSA is one of the denominations that has repudiated supersessionist theology. So many Presbyterians and other mainline Protestants have wondered what the PCUSA was doing supporting Avodat Yisrael.

Many Jewish groups have asked the same thing. Their complaints about Avodat have come at a time when the PCUSA has taken other steps that Jews have found offensive: Last year the church voted to consider divestment from businesses in Israel that are deemed harmful to Palestinians. And a group of PCUSA leaders met with the Muslim organization Hezbollah, which is linked to terrorist activities. These events have constituted what theologian Mark Wallace calls “a perfect storm” in the PCUSA’s relationship with Jews. Christopher Leighton, director of the Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies in Baltimore, says he cannot remember “a more bleak and strained relationship between Presbyterians and Jews in my professional life.”

But to listen to Andrew Sparks, the spiritual leader of Avodat and an ordained PCUSA minister, the denomination has acted with unprecedented faithfulness in supporting his congregation. Sparks, whose mother is Jewish, making him a Jew even by strict rabbinic standards, submitted a report to the Philadelphia presbytery in November in which he explained his perspective: “The church today has a chance to get right what the early church got wrong.”

That is, the early church was made up of both Jews and gentiles who professed faith in Jesus as Messiah and Lord. The church’s overwhelming success in preaching to gentiles, and its lack of success in preaching to Jews, made the church not only all-gentile but quickly anti-Jewish. To accept Jews into the church *as Jews* who follow the Torah’s instructions for observant Jewish life even as they live in fellowship with Jesus-believing gentiles, would represent a return to the church envisioned by the writers of the New Testament. (Sparks was directed by the Philadelphia presbytery not to discuss Avodat with reporters, and he declined to be interviewed for this story.)

Sparks does not think his ministry is at odds with the PCUSA’s disavowal of supersessionism. He points to the Roman Catholic Church’s ability to balance interreligious dialogue with Jews and support for Jewish Christians. The Catholic Church has made space for a specifically Hebrew Catholicism, complete with its own bishop and liturgical rite, and there is talk of a seminary in the works. Sparks says Messianic Judaism is a crucial third party to Jewish-Christian dialogue. He speaks of Avodat as a bridge between the church and the large Jewish community in Philadelphia.

This sort of talk incenses many other Jews. Carol Harris-Shapiro, a Reconstructionist rabbi who teaches at Gratz College in Philadelphia and wrote *Messianic Judaism: A Rabbi’s Journey Through Religious Change in America*, attacks Sparks’s metaphor head-on: “Both ends of the supposed bridge are on the Christian shore,” she argues.

If there is anything about which all four branches of Judaism in the U.S. (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist) agree, it is that one cannot be both Jewish and Christian at the same time. One who converts is often still considered to retain a Jewish status, but is disqualified from the responsibilities and benefits of Jewish life, such as participation in a prayer quorum or burial in a Jewish cemetery.

Christianity and rabbinic Judaism emerged as rival claimants to continuity with Israel after the destruction of the Jewish temple in 70 AD. Since Christians have long held political power over them, Jews’ opposition to Christian claims about Jesus are not only theological (a denial that Jesus is the messiah) but essential to Jewish identity and survival. That’s why Jews tend to be more tolerant of other Jews who dabble in, say, Buddhist thought and practice than of those who move toward Christianity. Harris-Shapiro underscores a basic Jewish concern with Christian evangelizing of Jews: “The problem with proselytization is [that] the already-small Jewish community is shrinking. There is real fear of our disappearance.”

Especially troubling to Jews is that Christian missionary efforts like Avodat Yisrael seem duplicitous. Messianic Jews use altered English or Hebrew words for traditionally Christian terms in an effort to display a Jewish form of Christianity. The baptismal process is called a *mikveh*, for example, and the New Testament is the New Covenant or the *B’rit Chadashah*. Christian symbols like the cross are removed or put to the side. Some Messianic Jews insist they are *not* Christians, but Jewish followers of “Rabbi Yeshua.”

What looks to some like a recovery of Jewish practice strikes others as an effort to hoodwink Jews into being Christians. Jews for Judaism, a countermissionary group dedicated to opposing the messianic group Jews for Jesus, believes the very name Jews for Jesus is as contradictory as “kosher pork” and as repulsive to observant Jews as mixing meat and milk. Harris-Shapiro’s book cites a Jewish figure who compares a messianic Jew to a transvestite, a designation designed to condemn the duplicity and imply deviance of the worst sort. *The Presbyterian Outlook*’s coverage of last summer’s PCUSA general assembly noted that one rabbi responded to a

photo of Sparks holding up the Torah scroll by calling the image “incredibly painful” and “a desecration of the holiest rituals and objects of [Jewish] faith,” akin to desecration of communion elements by non-Christians.

Many Presbyterians side with the Jewish critics of Avodat. They worry that Avodat’s blending of Jewish and Christian practice is hurtful to the Jews with whom they have worked hard to foster friendship over the past few generations. Susan Andrews, a pastor who recently served as moderator of the denomination, points to what she regards as a more genuine bridge between Jews and Christians that has been built at her church. Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church in Bethesda, Maryland, has enjoyed a 40-year partnership with Bethesda Jewish Congregation, with whom it shares sacred space, joins in common community outreach and worship, and even argues over theology. Such cooperation and dialogue with Jews is hard-won, rare in the past 20 centuries, and precious to its practitioners. These achievements were perceived to be directly threatened by the PCUSA’s support of Avodat.

But not all Presbyterians share Andrews’s concern. Advocates for evangelism generally have supported Avodat. So have proponents of ethnic ministries, which make up some 60 percent of new church plants in the denomination. If Presbyterians can support ethnic Korean or Indonesian churches, they argue, why can’t they support Jewish ones? Former PCUSA moderator Fahed Abu-Akel, speaking in support of Avodat at the church’s general assembly last year, said: “If we listen to the opposition, then Brother Peter and Brother Paul would not have written the New Testament. For me the gospel is for everyone” (reported in the *Presbyterian Layman*).

Several efforts in the Philadelphia presbytery and in the general assembly to cut off Avodat’s funding met with failure. That result may reflect matters of polity as much as theology. Regional presbyteries don’t like national bodies telling them what to do. Also, Presbyterian ministers may be more traditional theologically than their leaders, and laypeople more so. They may be more dedicated to evangelism generally, and undeterred by concerns that seem to them to reflect mere “politically correctness.” The social-ethnic disagreements are also complex. Presbyterians’ commitments to ethnic “diversity”—usually a liberal cause—come into tension with the “liberal” position on not evangelizing Jews.

Bill Borrer, cochair of a special committee called in to oversee Avodat’s work amidst the controversy, recalls a committee member charging that Avodat is not sufficiently Reformed—that is, aligned with traditional Presbyterian theology stemming from Calvin’s Reformation. When Borrer asked each committee member to define “Reformed,” however, he found there was no consensus. If denominational leaders cannot agree on what it means to be Reformed or Presbyterian, Borrer observed, how can they be sure Avodat is not?

In an ironic turn, Avodat’s advocates have suggested that their critics, in defending Jewish sensibilities, are actually being anti-Jewish. Sparks reported on the controversy to his presbytery by saying: “The church is a mother that has given birth to a child. This child is Avodat Yisrael. . . . But there is a problem. Some people don’t like the way this baby looks. Some would seek to change the child into something it is not. Some would even like to cast it out of the family.” Sparks also wrote a letter on behalf of Avodat passionately opposing Presbyterian divestment from Israel as a threat to the Jewish relations that Avodat seeks to enhance.

Sparks and his supporters often cite the work of orthodox Jewish theologian Michael Wyschogrod, who has written with surprising sympathy about Messianic Judaism. For Wyschogrod, being Jewish is primarily about God’s election and only secondarily about one’s religious belief or practice. He is willing to accept Messianic Jews’ claim that they are still Jews as long as they act like Jews by obeying the Torah, keeping kosher, observing the holidays, circumcising their sons, and so on.

Sparks and fellow Jesus-believing Jews point to Wyschogrod’s argument that the true test of Christianity with regard to Judaism is its treatment of the Jews in its midst. If the Jews it baptizes may continue to live as Jews, then those Jews who do not believe in Jesus have nothing to fear from the church. However, if the church insists

that an eclipse of Jewishness is a necessary correlate of baptism, then the church is well on its way toward anti-Semitism. By this logic, Messianic Jews who follow Torah are *necessary* to keep the church from returning to its anti-Jewish past.

History presents divided evidence on that claim, however. It is true that the loss of Jewish identity within the church led directly to Christian persecution of Jews, but missions to the Jews in the late 19th century were careful not to impugn Jewish thought and practice. Nevertheless, conversion did mean a loss of Jewishness and required joining an all-gentile church. The Philadelphia presbytery has a 60-year history of involvement in this type of Jewish mission through its relationship with Messiah Now, whose approach to evangelism Borrer describes as “low-key.” Messiah Now is funded largely by individual converts and several Presbyterian congregations.

In the 1960s and ’70s, Jewish believers in Jesus began to form congregations that sought to maintain a more robust form of Jewish identity. This emphasis was partly an outgrowth of various ethnic-pride movements and of the worldwide prestige Israel won for its successes in the 1967 and 1973 wars. The name “Messianic Judaism” was coined in those years. Leaders of the movement tended to come from Moody Bible Institute and other fundamentalist schools that emphasized evangelizing Jews. Not coincidentally, these groups tended to espouse premillennial dispensationalism. In accordance with John Darby’s elaborate scheme of the “end times,” the Jews were expected to convert en masse before the return of Jesus to reign over a Jewish kingdom from Jerusalem for 1,000 years. Dispensationalists therefore have a distinct place for Jews in their scheme of salvation—they need to be around in order to be converted and to populate the kingdom at the eschaton.

Sparks is part of a particular movement within Messianic Judaism called Hashivenu (“return us God”), which takes a different approach theologically. He joins with the PCUSA in renouncing supersessionism. He also avoids the language of conversion, and speaks instead of reaching out to nonreligious Jews and intermarried families. For Sparks and colleagues, the Jews’ election has not been abrogated. The fulfillment of Israel’s covenant in Messiah Yeshua does not necessarily mean that Jews who do not recognize this messiah are condemned. They insist therefore that a community like Avodat is consistent with the PCUSA’s statements against supersessionism. Given these positions, critics’ fears that Avodat represents a regression to a crude soteriology, in which Jews must “turn or burn,” are overblown.

Another representative of this new form of Messianic Judaism is Mark Kinzer, author of *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism: Redefining Christian Engagement with the Jewish People* (forthcoming from Brazos Press). Kinzer, a Messianic rabbi in Ann Arbor, Michigan, argues that the New Testament never commands Jewish followers of Jesus to abandon Jewish practice. They must live as one body with gentile Christians, but they must still obey the Torah. Paul’s arguments about the place of the law are not directed against Jews who follow the law, but against anyone who would insist that gentiles must follow Torah to be saved.

Further, for Kinzer, the renunciation of supersessionism means that God is still with the Jews, including non-Christian Judaism over the past two millennia. Hence Jewish thought in the form of rabbinic teaching and Jewish practice in both home and synagogue can be seen as gifts from God for a Messianic community’s ongoing life.

Views like Kinzer’s represent another ironic twist in which one mainline commitment—renunciation of supersessionism—is taken up by Messianic Jews to support their own practice. Even though Jesus or Paul may not recognize today’s forms of Judaism, God gave those practices to the Jews, so they can and should be part of a specifically Jewish life in the body of Messiah.

Avodat’s brand of Messianic Judaism is not focused on proselytizing Jews. It aims to witness to Jews about the coming of the messiah and also to witness to the gentile followers of Jesus about the Jewishness of Jesus. It’s noteworthy that Kinzer has his Ph.D. in New Testament from the University of Michigan. Other young

Messianic Jewish scholars are studying at schools like Harvard, Duke and Cambridge. One of them, David Rudolph of Cambridge, recently published an article describing the movement in the theological journal *Pro Ecclesia*. These are not schools or forums where fundamentalists, dispensationalists or supersessionists flourish. This new wave of Messianic Jewish scholars is small, but it takes only a few to alter the terms of discussion considerably.

One scholar currently in a Ph.D. program, who wished not to be identified for fear of censure from opponents of Messianic Judaism, tried to rehabilitate the bridge metaphor that Harris-Shapiro challenges. “It’s not that our beliefs are a bridge between Christianity and Judaism. The bridge is in our flesh. We are both circumcised and part of the body of Messiah.” Such language reflects not only traditional Jewish emphasis on orthopraxy or “right practice” over orthodoxy or “right belief,” but also a growing Christian awareness of the theological importance of practices.

A renewed Jewish Christianity among nonfundamentalists is not as surprising as it might seem, considering that historians for several generations have highlighted the particularly Jewish nature of the New Testament and the first Christians. Every introductory New Testament class now begins with an account of the Jewish context of the document. Theologians have picked up on the work of historians and brought Israel into the center of theological discussion. George Lindbeck, for example, has called for the church to recover its “Israel-like” nature. John Howard Yoder wrote about the exemplary nature of Israel’s posture with regard to imperial power (and he wrote with explicit sympathy for Messianic Judaism). Robert Jenson has offered a theological defense of non-Christian Israel on christological grounds. Kendall Soulen has critiqued the church’s “Israel-forgetfulness.” Many of these theologians were influenced by Karl Barth, who put heavy emphasis on the doctrine of election and God’s preference for the particular (e.g., Israel) over the general (universal truth claims).

Opponents of Avodat have their own theological commitments, some of which also stem from Barth. Cynthia Jarvis, minister of Chestnut Hill Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, thinks support for Messianic Judaism is inconsistent with the Reformed insistence that God keeps his covenantal promises. If God’s election of Israel cannot be contravened, Christians have no business proselytizing those already “with God,” to quote the 1987 Presbyterian statement on this question.

What would happen, Jarvis wonders, if a well-meaning attempt at rapprochement between Presbyterians and Muslims led to a Muslim Presbyterian Church? Both groups would immediately see such syncretism as a corruption of both communities and a violation of their most central claims, and they would be appropriately outraged. Jarvis’s opposition included taking out an ad in a Jewish newspaper in Philadelphia to show that some Presbyterians disagreed with the PCUSA’s funding of Avodat.

Jarvis insists she is not opposed to evangelism or even to Jews converting to Christianity. She has baptized several Jews herself, she said. Susan Andrews acknowledges that she has also baptized some Jews. (Avodat apparently has not yet baptized anyone.) Jarvis opposes what she sees as the masking of a Presbyterian church plant as a synagogue. Even more, she is opposed to her church investing time and energy in what cannot but be evangelism targeted at Jews. To her, an individual baptism of a Jew bespeaks a special circumstance, whereas a Presbyterian-Jewish congregation bespeaks a denomination that has returned to a view of Judaism as theologically insufficient.

Leighton, director of the Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies, makes similar charges against Messianic Judaism. He argues that “following Jesus requires one to make hard choices,” and he points to Bonhoeffer’s comments on the cost of discipleship. “In the case of Messianic Jews, this cost is leaving behind a claim to ongoing Jewishness.”

Lauren Winner, who has written in *Girl Meets God* of her conversion to Christianity from Orthodox Judaism, and in *Mudhouse Sabbath* of those parts of Judaism she misses, worries that an effort to blend the two faiths may run roughshod over reality. Anglican worship, she says, echoes its Jewish antecedents without claiming to *be* Jewish. And she feels she should stay away from the synagogue she used to attend: “I have to respect [the fact] that for these people who loved and nurtured me in the faith I am now an apostate.”

Jarvis, Leighton and Winner all recognize that for Jews the Christian appropriation of Jewish faith is a source of anguish. It reminds them of centuries of persecution and forced conversions. Jews often regard a Jew’s conversion to Christianity as a “posthumous victory for Hitler.”

Yet for Messianic Jews, these arguments beg the question. Messianic Jews claim still to be Jews. The ones I spoke with at Avodat and elsewhere spoke of their obligation to marry other Jews and raise their children as Jews. They pointed out that while other Jews may not recognize the validity of Messianic Jews’ Jewishness, such division is not unusual: some of the various branches of Judaism in the U.S. don’t recognize each other’s Jewishness either. Messianic Jews say their relationships with other Jews, even other rabbis, are much better than the statements of Jewish spokespersons and watchdog groups would suggest.

Kirk Glibe, a messianic Jewish rabbi in charge of Devar Emet (“Word of Truth”) Messianic Synagogue in Skokie, Illinois, brushes aside claims that Jesus-believing Jews are a threat to Judaism. “The majority of Reform rabbis, and many Conservative rabbis as well, do not actually hold to the concept of God as it is portrayed in the biblical text. Most Jews are intermarrying. Don’t blame us that Jews are disappearing. As born Jews, we not only believe in God, we still act Jewishly.”

Several Jewish observers of Messianic Judaism think the best Jewish response to it is to ensure that Jewish life flourishes. Harris-Shapiro suggests that the best way for Jews to “combat” Messianic Judaism is to strengthen the religious institution at the center of Jewish life: the home, with its weekly Shabbat worship and observance of other Jewish holidays. Those not captivated by the beauty of their own tradition are more likely to turn to another faith. Harris-Shapiro suggested that Wyschogrod’s surprising sympathy with Messianic Judaism really stems from his confidence that Jews who practice Torah will eventually return to the fullness of Judaism—without the adjective “Messianic.”

Another observer who makes a forceful case for Jews retrieving their own tradition is Lawrence Hamilton, a Jew who converted to Christianity, became a Lutheran minister and then converted back to the Judaism of his birth. Some Jews who convert to Christianity never knew their own tradition very well, he asserts. (He is similarly troubled when Christian converts to Judaism say, “I never understood the Trinity anyway”). He worries that Avodat’s effort to reach out to unaffiliated Jews is a case of “pouncing on the sheep who stray farthest from the fold.” Converts, he says, should be able to articulate the fullness of the faith they leave behind as well as of that they wish to join.

Given the multiple attacks Avodat has faced, it is not surprising that the members and leaders feel besieged. It is, when all is said and done, a very small group. Barely 20 people were present at the service I attended. All this fuss over this little gathering? With these numbers, and this much controversy, Avodat does not seem like a mission experiment likely to be repeated soon by any mainline denomination. But perhaps it is good for such a congregation to be connected to a mainline church, thereby raising profound questions about Jewish and Christian identity.

Why shouldn’t a Christian affirmation of Israel’s election and a Christian renunciation of supersessionism leave room for a specifically Jewish form of Christianity? This way of posing the issue undercuts one of the most frequent arguments made on Avodat’s behalf—that it is simply one more effort at multicultural ministry (like, say, Korean Presbyterian churches). A strong affirmation of election along Wyschogrod’s lines makes that kind

of claim impossible. The Jews are not an *ethnos*, one of the nations. They are elect, claimed by God, with or without their assent. The next question is whether Christians, who hold that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel, must require Jews who come to Christian faith to renounce their claim to ongoing Jewishness.

At the Avodat shabbat service I attended, almost every adult present had a role in the service. I was the only man not wearing a yarmulke. Most had on prayer shawls. They may not qualify to be part of a *minyan* elsewhere, but here they have prestigious roles, reading from the Torah scroll, parading it around to be kissed, chanting scripture in Hebrew, blessing children, leading music, preaching. During one of the many New Covenant readings, the words of Yeshua were quoted: "Blessed are you when you are persecuted for righteousness' sake." The cantor then leaned over to tap Andrew Sparks's shoulder. Sparks smiled sadly and shook his head.