



MEETING THE CHALLENGE -- HEBREW CHRISTIANS AND THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

*Jewish religious leadership has unequivocally declared "Hebrew Christians" as completely separate and disassociated from the Jewish community. This has been set out in a statement, "**Meeting the Challenge: Hebrew Christians and the Jewish Community**," written by Dr. Lawrence H. Schiffman* in 1993 for the then Task Force on Missionaries and Cults of the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York.*

This statement has been endorsed by the four major Jewish denominations Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist as well as national Jewish organizations.

** Dr. Schiffman, head of Judaic Studies for New York University, and a world-renowned scholar on the Dead Sea Scrolls, has traced the historical evidence of the theological and social separation of Christians and Jews.*

Introduction

It has been almost 2000 years since the final break between Judaism and Christianity. The early Jewish leadership perceived the increasing danger of confusion between classical Judaism and the "new" Jewish Christian views. At the same time, Christianity was undergoing its own changes, such as development of the belief in the divinity of Jesus, the trinity and the abrogation of the Torah which further separated this new religion from Judaism. The final break occurred when Christians began accepting converts who did not conform to the traditional definition of Jewish status. From that time on, these two groups were clearly distinct and the break was complete.

2. The Limits of the Jewish Community

From its inception, Judaism has had specific regulations which define membership for individuals and has set limits beyond which one is considered as having left the Jewish community. For organizations, standards have also been set for inclusion within the Jewish communal structure. Even though those members of Hebrew Christian or Messianic Jewish groups who are originally of Jewish status retain their ability to pass on this Jewish status to their offspring, they face a significant loss of privileges within the community, including denial of membership in synagogues and other Jewish communal organizations, and most recently, denial of immediate Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return.

3. Jewish vs. Christian Messianism

The Jewish messianic idea differs significantly from the Christian one. According to Jewish tradition the Messiah will not be divine or change the Jewish obligation to observe the Torah.

Christianity, on the other hand, believes that the Messiah has already come. According to their interpretation, his death and second coming were foretold in Jewish scripture. In the Christian view, belief in this divine messiah, whose coming abrogated the need for Torah observance, is essential to one's redemption.



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4. The Hebrew Christians

Though Hebrew Christianity claims to be a form of Judaism, it is not. It is nothing more than a disguised effort to missionize Jews and convert them to Christianity. It deceptively uses the sacred symbols of Jewish observance (i.e., community Passover seders, menorahs, messianic services, etc..) as a cover to convert Jews to Christianity, a belief system antithetical to Judaism.

5. Hebrew Christianity and the Jewish Community

For all the above reasons, Hebrew Christianity is not a form of Judaism and its members, even if they are of Jewish birth, cannot be considered members of the Jewish community. Hebrew Christians are in radical conflict with the communal interests and the destiny of the Jewish people. They have crossed an unbreachable chasm by accepting another religion. Despite this separation, they continue to attempt to convert their former coreligionists. Jewish organizations, both religious and communal, in dealing with Hebrew Christians or Messianic Jewish groups should use discernment, recognize the difference between Jewish rights and Jewish privileges.

Historically, the belief in or practice of any other religious tradition has been understood to lead to the loss of rights to full participation in the Jewish community, which has the following ramifications:

- denial of membership or honors in synagogues and/or Jewish communal organizations
- exclusion from burial in Jewish cemeteries
- refusal of Jewish communal funds to support any activities of Hebrew Christian or Messianic Jewish groups
- exclusion from access to Jewish communal facilities or mailing lists

Jewish organizations or institutions which open their membership to the general public should consider restructuring their organizations to exclude from their membership those individuals whose presence is disruptive to Jewish continuity.

Our history has clearly shown that when confronted with a group of Jews which has adopted another faith and seeks to convert others, we must stand firm in asserting that this other faith is not Judaism and that its adherents have forfeited their privileges as Jews. Jewish tradition believes that the opportunity to return to participation in the Jewish community is always open. When this occurs, all privileges are restored.