

# **Organized Religion**

## **A Jewish Messianic Perspective**

Over the years I've heard many people say that the reason they don't go to synagogue is because of religion. They cite "organized religion" as the culprit for why they don't go to congregational gatherings on Shabbat. I've also heard similar statements for other non-Biblical faith expressions. Thousands of people seem to be experts on organized religion but have never practiced it, while still others adamantly reject any form, formality, or structure that these organized assemblies entail. Are the traditional models of religious structure in Judaism and Christianity outdated? And what about "organized religion" as it applies to Messianic Judaism? Is organized religion anachronistic?

In today's American culture, people have become individualistic, liberally tolerant, and politically orientated regarding "alternate views" of religion. Especially with the younger generation, some have taken the position that one's faith is best expressed through an individual (vertical) relationship with the L-rd. By this way of thinking, anything else that man has added for organized assembly, polity, and structure is either irrelevant or unnecessary. In this brief article, I assert that "religion" consists of individual faith as well as corporate expressions and that both are necessary in relating to Adonai.

"Religion" has been defined as a "system" or set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature and purpose of the universe – it's an expression of conduct and ritual for a group or assembly of people who subscribe to the same belief.

If religion is a "system" of religious practice for the devout, then what systemic practices are important for the believer? Which should be kept? What should not? What religious practices are "essential." Which are not? Is it *irreligious* for laity to even ask these questions?

Religious practice has always generated questions, and solid Biblical answers need to be provided. If one was able to squeeze out all of G-d's mitzvot (commandments) from Genesis to Revelation and then formalize these into a modern application (no Temple and away from Jerusalem) – only then would we be as close as possible to *true* Biblical religion. And even then, there would still be differences of opinion on form and application.

Throughout the ages, defining religious practice has resulted in the various expressions of Judaism. And in Christianity, defining religious practice has led to denominationalism, sometimes ending in bitter conflicts – even deadly hostility. Many wars have been fought and many lives have been lost due to conflicting religious ideologies.

In any religious system, many of the closest adherents are more apt to argue about details rather than practicing the essential core values of what their religion espouses. In Messianic Judaism, oftentimes we are no different. Defining Messianic Judaism is an on-going effort. And at the end of the day, when all is said and done,

whatever definition prevails will only be satisfactory for a segment of Messianic Jewish believers.

What are the core beliefs at Kehilat Mashiach regarding our religious practice? Our first pillar of religion has to do with

(1) Our essential relationship with G-d.

Yeshua has brought us into intimate relationship with Him. This relationship can never be replaced by any communal gathering. "Religion" begins with a commitment to G-d. If we are committed to Him in the manner we live out our lives, then following His commandments will become the fabric of our existence.

And at Kehilat Mashiach, we believe the Scriptures are clear concerning our second pillar of religion:

(2) Our care and concern for others.

Ya'akov (James) was an advocate for Torah and in his thinking religion wasn't merely a way of looking at certain things; it was a way of looking at everything. He stated the following:

*"The religious observance that G-d the Father considers pure and faultless is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being contaminated by the world."* James 1:27 (CJB)

This is not a new commandment. In fact, there are no less than 10 verses in the Tanakh that specifically exhort providing for the foreigner; the widow; and the orphan. And there are even more references that speak directly to one or the other. **If true religion involves caring for people, then the benefit of meeting as a congregation provides ongoing relational involvement with G-d's people.** Furthermore, one is more likely to avoid "contamination by the world" when there is ample support and prayer from a community of like-minded believers.

Throughout the pages of Scripture, HaShem has always dealt with His people as community – and when community (mishpocha-family) is absent, there is a dimension of one's faith that becomes severely lacking. G-d wants spiritual fruit, not religious nuts who isolate themselves from the hurting and needy. To use the analogy in 1 Corinthians 12, if an ear or a foot is in pain, the rest of the body doesn't isolate itself – it goes to the rescue! (Sorry, ministering through electronic means is not the same as personal, relational, fellowship!)

In family life there is always a sense of dedication and commitment. Consequently, as the fruit of G-d's Spirit is nurtured and grown in a community, through each other we learn to see more of G-d, and through the Ruach we learn what true fellowship is all about.

Some of you may be familiar with the term "Koinonia." Koinonia is an anglicized Greek word which means communion through intimate participation. It has to do with sharing and fellowship with others. I suppose one could have "Koinonia" with oneself, but what a lonely gathering that would be!

True religion is the life we live, not the creed we profess. Daily life for the apostles involved contact – it involved reaching out to the world with the Besorah Tovah (the Good News), but it specifically involved intimate fellowship with others in the community of faith.

*"They continued faithfully in the teaching of the emissaries, in fellowship, in breaking bread and in the prayers."* Acts 2:42 (CJB)

Many years ago I was taught that no man is an island in the Kingdom of HaShem. According to the inspired words from the writer of the book of Hebrews, there should be no mavericks shooting off to do their own thing while forsaking the assembly on Shabbat.

*"And let us keep paying attention to one another, in order to spur each other on to love and good deeds, not neglecting our own congregational meetings, as some have made a practice of doing, but, rather, encouraging each other. And let us do this all the more as you see the Day approaching."* Hebrews 10:24-25 (CJB)

If your religion is the kind that can be easily hidden, then it can also be easily lost. If you have accountability only to yourself, then you are being deprived of the fullness of G-d's ecclesiastical plan for His people and you are depriving others of the work G-d is doing in you.

To wrap up . . . is organized religion bad? It can be. Is it all bad? Absolutely not! Many people cite organized religion as the cause of their pulling away from corporate assembly. But is this the *cause* or simply an excuse?

Too many folks use religion like they would a bus – they ride it only when it's going their direction! Let's continue moving forward in G-d's direction! We will continue to exalt Torah faithfulness as the core of our fellowship at Kehilat Mashiach (the sword of the Spirit never becomes dull from use!) and we will continue to identify with the Jewish people in the expression of our faith.

In Messianic Judaism, we may all never agree on every point – on every detail, but there are plenty of commonalities and pillars of faith that bind us together – and isn't that what community is all about? To be part of community is a very Jewish thing to do! It is a very Messianic thing to do! But even more than that, being part of a community of fellowship is a very godly way to show your love for Him as you demonstrate that love by caring for others.

If your religion means much to you, live so it will mean much to others. May blessings be yours in abundance as you follow the G-d of Israel!