

Historic Christianity & Apostolic Judaism: The Core Difference

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Introduction

"This world is not my home, I'm just a passin' through
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue;
The angels beckoned me from heaven's open door,
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore."

"O Lord, you know, I have no friend like you,
If heaven's not my home, then Lord, what will I do?
The angels beckoned me from heaven's open door,
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore."

This old song captures a most profound truth: in common, easy to understand terms it describes the world view of Historic Christianity. What I mean by "world view" is the manner in which Historic Christianity understands the broad plan of redemption. I've come to realize, however, that the "world view" of Historic Christianity is not my world view. And because of this, I've also come to realize that I am not comfortable in defining myself within the boundaries of Historic Christianity. But let me explain.

Self-identity is always a difficult issue. It's difficult because often the boundaries that define one group from another are not so clearly drawn. Defining who is "in" and who is "other" is tricky business for a number of reasons. Most obvious is the fact that beliefs and practices (*halachah*) of opposing groups often overlap. In this respect, for example, there are many things I hold in common with Historic Christianity, not the least of which is that I confess Yeshua to be the Son of God and the long awaited, promised Messiah of the Hebrew prophets. But I have come to realize that there are profound differences between what I understand the Scriptures to teach and the message of Historic Christianity. In other words, I realize that I do not see myself within the boundaries of Historic Christianity. (Bear with me: I'll define terms below.)

This matter of self-identification has been a sticky wicket for "messianic Judaism" in general. Messianic groups have bemoaned the fact that "we are still trying to find out who we are." Witness the current debates of "Definition" among leading Messianic groups today. They are throwing their hats into the ring of the long-standing (and still undecided) debate over "who is a Jew." And it's obvious that, like the many who have tried to give a definitive answer to this question, the current foray will fare no better: there will not be consensus.

But I'm not concerned in this essay to attempt an answer to this age old question of Jewish Identity. I rather intend to show that the world view of Historic Christianity does not "work" for those of us who are recovering a Torah-centered life. And I would suggest that one's world view is a key element in self-definition.

This struggle for self-definition was also evident in the era following the destruction of the Temple. Since the Temple was the defining focal point for the primary sects of 1st Century Judaism, the Jewish community that remained after the Destruction sought new ways to maintain her identity without the Temple and priesthood. The Sages at Yavneh solidified their approach in the Mishnah, expanded, defined, and redefined in the later Talmuds. Likewise, the emerging Christian Church sought for ways to define herself. She did this by presenting herself as distinct ("other") from the Synagogue, and by adopting a world view quite opposite of her Jewish roots. Caught in the middle of all this was the remnant of "The Way." Still thoroughly Hebraic in her perspective, yet confessing Yeshua as Messiah, the remnant of "The Way" found herself rejected by both of the other groups. Even though "The Way" was thoroughly Hebraic in thought and world view, her acceptance of Yeshua as the Messiah made her *persona non grata* within Rabbinic Judaism. Likewise, the emerging Christian Church was not comfortable with "The Way" for a number of reasons, but primarily because her thorough going Judaism was clearly outside of the Church's newly found identity. While Rabbinic Judaism and Historic Christianity were defining themselves as opposite of each other, "The Way" found herself caught in the middle. And it is clear that the current Torah movement identifies itself with "The Way."

In the era following the Destruction, then, we find three groups seeking self-definition, not two, as is usually taught. The divisions were not merely between Rabbinic Judaism and Historic Christianity, but between Rabbinic Judaism, Apostolic Judaism (i.e., The Way), and Historic Christianity. (I am indebted to Christopher O'Quin for the term "Apostolic Judaism"). We may define these three groups as: 1) Rabbinic Judaism: the theology and *halachah* which based itself on the teaching of the Rabbis in the Mishnah and Talmuds; 2) Apostolic Judaism: the theology and *halachah* of Yeshua and His Apostles (i.e., the Torah as interpreted and applied by Yeshua and His Apostles); and 3) Historic Christianity: the theology and *halachah* of the Greek and Latin Church fathers (i.e., the Bible as interpreted and applied by the Church Fathers).

What Are the Differences?

One does not need to search too far to discover the marked distinctions between Rabbinic Judaism and Historic Christianity! The two are worlds apart. But the question that faces those of us in the Torah movement is how we "fit" within the polar positions of these two opposing groups. Consider this scenario: A modern Orthodox Jew, a Christian and a member of a Torah Community (some might use the label "messianic") are dialoging about their own theology and *halachah*. When the modern Orthodox Jew is asked how he differs from the Christian, his immediate response would most likely center upon the issues of "Jesus," the "New Testament," and the Torah. He rejects Jesus and the New Testament, and maintains the eternal nature of the

Torah as defined by the Sages (that is, including the Oral Torah). The Christian affirms these distinctions: he sees himself as distinct from the Orthodox Jew because he believes in Jesus as his means of salvation, receives the New Testament, and holds that the Torah as been abolished in favor of the "New Covenant." Where does this leave the member of the Torah Community? He affirms Yeshua as the Messiah and that He is the only means of salvation; he receives the Apostolic Scriptures as having divine authority, yet he also holds the Torah to be eternal and necessary (that is, the Torah as defined and interpreted by Yeshua and His Apostles).

Rabbinic Judaism: rejects Jesus; rejects New Testament; affirms Torah (including Oral Torah)

Historic Christianity: accepts Jesus; accepts New Testament; rejects Torah

Apostolic Judaism: accepts Yeshua; accepts Apostolic Scripture; accepts Torah (as defined by Yeshua and His Apostles)

It may appear that the primary distinction between Apostolic Judaism and Historic Christianity is the issue of Torah. And in fact, this is the case. But the difference is far deeper than one might first expect. Apostolic Judaism is not "Christianity with a tallit" nor is it "Christianity on Shabbat with the Festivals." In the history of the Christian Church, a number of groups have tried this (Seventh Day Adventism, Worldwide Church [Armstrong], and many "messianic" groups). Rather, an acceptance of the Torah as the foundational revelation of God to His people establishes a fundamental difference because it teaches a different "world view." This means that it comes with a theological presupposition that affects everything else. It is this "world view" and the fundamental difference it embodies that I would like to explore.

The Foundational Difference between Apostolic Judaism & Historic Christianity

When we discuss foundational principles it is difficult (if not impossible) to be comprehensive. Often the starting point of any body of truth is at once the most simple (i.e., unified) while at the same time most profound (i.e., complex). But I would like to suggest that one of the clear difference between Apostolic Judaism and Historic Christianity is the world view that each espouses. I'll sum up the differences of the two world views by noting three presuppositions and the polar positions each group takes. These are: 1) The Universe as unified vs. the Universe as dualistic; 2) The goal of redemption as God dwelling among men vs. The goal of redemption as a means for the soul to escape this world to dwell with God elsewhere; 3) Miracles as the evident hand of God in everyday life vs. Miracles as a taste of "heaven."

1. The Universe as Unified vs. The Universe as Dualistic

What do I mean by "The Universe as Unified?" Usually, in the dualistic viewpoint of Historic Christianity, the universe is viewed as divided into two realms: the material and the immaterial. This is often described by such opposites as "material vs. spiritual," "earthly vs. heavenly," "human vs. divine," etc. But even more important in understanding the dualism of Historic Christianity is that the two realms also define "good vs. evil." The material realm is evil

or at least fraught with evil; the earthly is bad or at least not as good as the heavenly; the human realm is evil while the divine realm is holy. Of course, there are varying shades of these emphases in the multifaceted theologies of Christianity, but in general Historic Christianity holds a dualistic perspective. In contrast, the unified view holds that there is good and evil but this is not divided along "material vs. spiritual" realms. A unified view of the universe recognizes both the material and non-material realities of our existence. But it sees these two realms as a unified whole within God's creative purpose, not as pitted against each other.

For instance, the opening account of the Torah, describing as it does the creative work of the Almighty, knows no such dualism. God creates the material universe and calls it "good." Even after the fall of Adam and Chavah into rebellion against their Creator, the promise of salvation comes within the material realm (the "seed of the woman"), not outside of it. Furthermore, the on-going revelation of God's redemption has as its goal the dwelling of God with man (the Tabernacle), not the elevation of mankind out of and away from the world into which he was created. Indeed, the entire book of Exodus has as its theme the dwelling of God among His people. It becomes the duty of Israel, not to escape her "this-world-existence," but to prepare a dwelling place for God within it.

It was the introduction of Greek philosophy into the early Christian Church that set her on a different path, and this Greek philosophy was primarily introduced from the writings of Plato. In fact, the difference between the unified worldview and the dualistic worldview can rightly be called a difference in hermeneutics—that is, the manner in which the universe as a whole is understood. Plato had developed a philosophy or worldview that was dualistic and had given mankind a hermeneutic based upon this dualism for interpreting the world in which he lived.

The simplest way to describe this Platonic viewpoint is to use Plato's own analogy of The Cave. He describes a cave dug into a hillside. The floor of the cave descends to the very back wall of the cave where some people live in the darkness. Unable to see the reality of their existence, they are unaware of the real situation in which they live. For them, the dark extremity of the cave is their world. However, when the sun shines through the cave's opening, they see their shadows on the back wall of the cave. This, they believe, is the reality of their existence. They believe the shadows to be "real." But it is not until they turn around, see the light coming from the cave's opening, and crawl their way up out of the cave that they realize the whole of the universe is far different than they could have ever imagined. For Plato, the light of the sun was the Demiurge, a non-personal "wisdom" that projected ideas down upon the realm of human existence. The things that mankind "sees" are actually only shadows as far as Plato is concerned. The reality is the idea itself, not the "shadows on the cave's wall." The idea of any object is the reality; its "existence" in our own realm is only the shadow.

Such a perspective gave way to a dualistic view of the universe. Mankind's nobility is seen, therefore, when he musters the courage to see the "light" and to live in the realm of the intellect, escaping the material world (shadows) for the real world (intellect; thought; ideals).

You may find it hard to believe that a Greek philosopher who lived hundreds of years before Yeshua came could have such a profound affect upon Historic Christianity. But whether one wants to admit it or not, Platonic thought has affected the whole of Western Civilization, primarily because his basic worldview was adopted into the Christian Church.

How did this dualistic, Platonic perspective become the foundational hermeneutic for the

Historic Christian Church? Primarily through one of her most important fathers, St. Augustine (354–430 CE). St. Augustine, bishop of Hippo, was a student of Plato before his conversion to Christianity. While he finally rejected the Manichaeans who taught an even more strict dualism, he never fully rejected the Platonic philosophy of which he was so fond. In fact, in his *Confessions* he credits Plato as providing the intellectual foundation for his faith. For instance, in the *Confessions*, book 7, chapter 9, Augustine relates that many of the important doctrines of Scripture he learned from Plato before he ever read the Bible. Granted, he goes on to say that these same truths as found in the Bible went beyond Plato (especially in revealing the incarnation), but my point is simply that St. Augustine *did not find the Scriptures and Plato to be at odds. Instead, he saw the basic hermeneutic of both to be the same.* Markus ("Plato" in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, [MacMillian] 1:198) notes: "Later in life Augustine came gradually to see a deeper cleavage between philosophy and Christian faith; but he never ceased to regard much of philosophy, especially that of the Neoplatonists, as containing a large measure of truth and hence as capable of serving as a preparation for Christianity."

This hermeneutic was therefore set in Historic Christianity: there were two worlds, one seen (the materialistic world) and one unseen (the spiritual world). The former is a "shadow," the latter the reality. The former is that of "works," that latter of "faith." (Doesn't faith lay hold of what one cannot see?) The goal of the Christian, therefore, is to mature in such a way as to live more in the spiritual world and less in the materialistic one. And the Scriptures, particularly the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament) were interpreted through this hermeneutic. Thus, when Paul speaks of the "earthly" and the "heavenly;" the "natural" and the "spiritual," (1Cor 15:43ff), it was interpreted as describing the dualistic world of Greek philosophy. But Paul, in using such terms, is not suggesting that the earthly is bad and the heavenly good, or that the natural is evil while the heavenly is holy. Far from it! He is describing two realms within a unified world in which God works, two realms which coalesce in the life of the believer .

In fact, it is in the hermeneutics of Historic Christianity (dualism) that the very word "spiritual" has been misunderstood. Since for Historic Christianity the material world is essentially evil, that which is "spiritual" must likewise be "non-material." But in the Greek Scriptures, the word "spiritual" does not necessarily describe something of non-material reality. "Spiritual" means "having to do with the Spirit," so that Paul can presume both eating and drinking to be spiritual exercises: "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1Cor 10:31). This world, the here-and-now, is the place of divine presence, for God has entered our world and taken up His abode among His people. Our daily existence in this physical world is therefore one of high value and purpose, for we are constrained to constantly make a place for His dwelling among us—to "sanctify His Name" in our world. We do not despise the material things we have, nor our own physical existence. Rather, we find in our world the purpose for our very creation. In short, we were not created for "heaven," we were created for this earth, and it is here that we find our close and deepening relationship with the Almighty.

It seems clear that Apostolic Judaism, like the other sects of Judaism in the 1st Century, had a unified worldview, not a dualistic one. This meant that both material and non-material were good and could be sanctified as holy; that life in this fallen world and life in the world-to-come were not essentially different, but were distinct only in terms of the effects of sin in this

world and the absence of sin in the world-to-come. Yet the world-to-come is within the same universe as the present world (though created anew), and is likewise composed of the material and non-material. The resurrection of the righteous is proof positive that God still considers this physical world to have sanctifying value, to be "good" in its essential creative structure, and to be that which God desires for us.

What Does This Mean for Us?

After this brief philosophical discourse, you might be saying, "so what does this mean in terms of my everyday life?" It means a great deal! Instead of giving excuses regarding the material things we have, we can look at them as part of God's blessing. Instead of thinking that "poverty" is closer to "spirituality" while "wealth" is a sign of "worldliness," we must come to the biblical perspective that all we have can be sanctified for the Master's glory. In fact, neither material wealth nor material poverty should be used as an indication of God's blessing or withholding blessing. What *is* proof of God's blessing is the manner in which we sanctify our world as a place fit for His dwelling. If Paul had learned to be content both with little and with much (Phil 4:11f), we must reason that from his perspective both were realms of God's blessing.

This has enduring significance. Why do we think that those who are rich are blessed by God, but those who are poor are not? We only adopt such a stance if we have also accepted the dualistic hermeneutic. Or we can say it the other way: why do we think that someone who is wealthy could not be as "spiritual" as the one who is poor? Because we have fallen prey to the idea that the things of this world are inherently evil. (Of course it is true that riches can be a temptation to pride, cf. Matt 19:23f). But once we have realized that the Scriptures teach a unified approach, we also recognize that material things can be either good or bad, but not because they partake of the material world, but because their value is gained in the owner's ability to sanctify his world for the dwelling of the Almighty in his midst. This will make a huge difference in our perspective on work, on recreation, on relationships, and how we use our time. In short, it will urge us toward a biblical perspective on every aspect of life.

2. The goal of redemption as God dwelling among men vs. The goal of redemption as a means for the soul to escape this world to dwell with God elsewhere.

The Scriptures paint a unified picture of God's redemption of sinful man. Both in the Tanach as well as the Apostolic Scriptures, the victory of God in redemption is seen when He dwells among His people. This story begins in the garden of Eden where God walks with Adam. And it continues when God comes looking for Adam and Chavah after the Fall. God comes to man—into the created realm. He does not bring man into the ethereal realm of the eternal. This same picture continues in the Torah narratives of the Tabernacle (Exodus) and the worship of God in the sanctity of the Holy and Most Holy (Leviticus). Likewise, the history of Israel is shaped by the motif of God dwelling in Israel's midst, and ultimately in the Land in which He promised to plant her (Numbers/Deuteronomy). In short, the victory of God in redemption is *incarnational*, not *escapism*. ". . . The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our

Lord and of His Messiah; and He will reign forever and ever" (Rev 11:23). Indeed, the millennial picture of the prophets is Immanuel reigning in Jerusalem. In Ezekiel, this final and ultimate victory of God is seen in the building of the eternal Temple: "They will live on the land that I gave to Jacob My servant, in which your fathers lived; and they will live on it, they, and their sons and their sons' sons, forever; and David My servant will be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will place them and multiply them, and will set My sanctuary in their midst forever" (Ezek. 37:25–26). The Scriptures do not give us the idea of an eternal state which is an escape from this earthly existence. Such a teaching followed easily from the dualistic hermeneutic of Historic Christianity but it finds no basis in Scripture.

This is not to deny the difference between mortality and immortality. Surely we are mortal (given to death) and will be resurrected immortal (never to die). But immortality is not opposed to our present physical world. Yeshua, after His resurrection, lived upon this earth for 40 days as proof that the immortal, resurrected body can be "at home" in the physical universe. Indeed, Adam was created to live forever. It was only the introduction of sin which changed this. Our hope, then, is not set upon a belief that we will escape this world, but that in overcoming sin, our Redeemer has give us the ability to live out the purpose for which were were created. The goal of redemption is not to allow the soul to escape this world, but to enable the soul to make this world a place for God's dwelling. Rabbi Schneerson taught: "The purpose of life lived in Torah is not the elevation of the soul: It is the sanctification of the world" (*Torah Studies*, [Kehot Pub. Society], p. 248).

Historic Christianity taught just the opposite: the purpose of redemption is that man should leave this world, that the soul should take flight to heavenly realms. Consider the product of Historic Christianity in the cathedrals of the medieval Church. The worship service was an attempt to replicate the imagined heavenly scene, with "other-world" architecture, "other-world" music, and "other-world" services. Christianity came to the masses as a means of escape from the sorrow and woes of their fallen world. Worship was possible only in the abode of the cathedral, and the common man could expect joy and blessing only in its shadow.

In contrast, Apostolic Judaism taught the glory of the indwelling Spirit in the "here-and-now" and the realization that the Messiah was with His people, dwelling in their midst. Instead of the cathedral, we rejoiced in the Sukkah. The full and complete dwelling of God with man, a still future reality, had invaded the present in the dwelling of the Spirit. Eternal life was already a reality for those who are in the Messiah, having been given a foretaste of the final and eternal dwelling of Messiah in His Kingdom. "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Messiah Yeshua, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every anti-Torah deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds" (Titus 2:11–14).

What Does This Mean for Us?

The contrast between the worldview of Apostolic Judaism and Historic Christianity in this

regard is profound. Faith in Yeshua as our Savior and Messiah sets us on the path of sanctifying this world for His dwelling, not offering us an escape from this world. We find our mission therefore to be that of sanctifying our marriages, families, community, and world. Our eyes are not cast upon the possibility of escaping this world, but on our God-given calling to sanctify it for Him. Granted, the hope of His return "purifies" us (sanctifies us) all the more, but not because we will escape this world, but because we are preparing our world for His dwelling. We have an awesome task and we have been given the message of redemption, the power of the Spirit, and the truth of the Torah (His revealed word) by which to complete it. When He returns, will He find faith (faithfulness) upon the earth (Luke 18:8)? Yes, He will, for He has determined to complete the work in us which He has begun (Phil 1:6).

This *incarnational* perspective (God dwelling with us) as over against the *escapism* of Historic Christianity thus gives a proper perspective on every aspect of our lives. Our work, occupation, recreation, relationships, community, and all that we do takes on a sacred dimension for us. For us there is no such thing as the "sacred" and "secular," only "sacred" and "profane." Everything we do; all aspects of our earthly existence are sacred, and transformed into the sacred work of sanctifying His Name in our world.

3. *Miracles as the evident hand of God in everyday life vs. Miracles as a taste of "heaven."*

In the dualism of Historic Christianity, miracles fall into the realm of the "heavenly" and transport man into a world in which he does not presently dwell. In contrast, miracles are seen by Apostolic Judaism as the evidence of God in our midst. Surely Historic Christianity would agree that the birth of a child, for instance, is in fact a miracle. But these "common" miracles are not given their due because they are just that, common. Apostolic Judaism, however, confesses that the miracles of God are with us everyday, evening, morning, and afternoon (cf. the *Shemonei Esrei*, 18th Benediction). One might argue that if the common events of life are in fact miracles, then the very concept of "miracles" has lost its meaning. But such an argument betrays the very difference I'm attempting to point out. For the biblical record accords all of man's existence to the miraculous hand of God: "in Him we live and move and exist" (Acts 17:28). Biblical faith gives the believer the eyes to see that what others call "common" is, in fact, the miraculous hand of God. It is for this reason that Apostolic Judaism finds the necessity of blessing God for everything: "pray without ceasing" (1Thess 5:17); "in everything pronounce a *b'rachah*" (1Thess 5:18). Historic Christianity views life as mundane and hopes to be elevated by the miraculous; Apostolic Judaism lives life as sacred and expects the presence of God's miraculous hand because He dwells with us. Indeed, the call of faith upon God's children is that they should live with the expectation that God will bless them as He has promised He would. Our hope is not that God will act out of the ordinary (i.e., give us miracles) but that since God dwells with us we may anticipate His miraculous hand in the everyday events of our lives. Growing in faith means the ability to see God's miracles in what others only call common.

What Does This Mean for Us?

Believing that God dwells with us, and that the return of our Messiah will complete and fulfill this dwelling in our midst means that we live out our lives with praise and thanksgiving for the "normal" events: a child, a hug, an erev Shabbat, a friend, the food we eat, the joy of song, the beauty of the creation, the intimate relationship of husband and wife, laughter, tears, the sublime truth of Scripture—and on, and on. In each aspect of life we pause to praise the Doer of Miracles and bless His Name for life itself, "l'chaim!"

This changes us. Instead of focusing on the woes and sorrows of this fallen world (though of course we willingly admit and face these), we set our hearts to give thanksgiving for the untold myriad of blessings that God grants us every day. We're not adopting a kind of "positive attitude" in spite of the trouble around us, somehow sticking our heads in the sand, unwilling to face the sadness of this mortal life. But we find at the same time so much of God's hand in our lives that our sorrow and tears are offset by our many opportunities for thanksgiving. Every day is a gift because God dwells with us, and thus every day offers us a platform to sanctify His Name upon the earth and to bask in the reality of His presence with us.

Conclusion

The "messianic movement" in our modern times has suffered from an inability to find the group's self-definition. We have tried to show our commonalities with Historic Christianity on the one hand, and with the traditional Synagogue on the other. We've attempted to convince both of these groups that in some measure we fit with each. We have not wanted our Christian brothers and sisters to reject us as heretical, nor have we wanted the Synagogue to reject us as idolators—as those who have forsaken the Torah. Yet we must face this reality: both the traditional Synagogue as well as Historic Christianity have moved away from the position of Yeshua and His Apostles, and have defined themselves in some terms that are clearly unacceptable to us. It is time for those of us who have accepted the Torah as normative, yet who have also confessed Yeshua to be the Son of God and His Messiah, to recognize that we will not find our definition in either Rabbinic Judaism nor Historic Christianity. While we surely have affinities to both, and in some areas of theology and *halachah* greater affinity to one or the other, we have come to believe that the Judaism of Yeshua and His Apostles is also distinct from both. We are attempting to live out the life of "The Way"—we're trying to recover Apostolic Judaism. As such, we must set ourselves to rediscover and put into practice the worldview of our Master, and the life of faithful obedience to which He calls us.