Messianism and Messianic Jews

Part 1 of 2: What Christians Should Know About Messianic Judaism
with
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Welcome to the table where we discuss issues of God and culture. I'm Darrell Bock Executive Director for Cultural Engagement at the Hendricks Center at Dallas Theological Seminary and our topic today is Messianism and Messianics. These are Jewish people who have believed in Jesus and my guest Vladimir Pikman who is the Rabbi, that's the correct title at Beit Sar Shalom which is a Messianic synagogue in Berlin Germany.

So we appreciate you coming in Vladi and having this discussion with us about messianic Jews. We're glad to have you here. And what are you doing in Dallas? I mean Berlin you're not exactly in the neighborhood so how did you end up in Dallas?

Well this year is a very special year for us because we decided which is God led us to have a sabbatical here in Dallas what was originally an idea to do just research and for me to finish my doctoral dissertation turned out to be a very busy season here at Dallas Theological Seminary being like a scholar or a missionary in residence with the seminary visiting professor this last spring semester and also I got involved in teaching Christians how to reach out to their Jewish friends as well as starting a couple of different outreaches to the Jewish people.

Okay. We'll be talking about those down the road. Let’s hear a little bit about your story. Now listening to your accent I know you not from Texas. So tell us a little bit about your background and how did you end up - you ended up in Germany but that isn't where you started.
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Vladimir Pikman  That's very true. I was born and raised in Kiev capital of Ukraine. At that time it was the former Soviet Union - I feel ancient actually - however I grew up in a liberal Jewish home. In our family we maintained a Jewish identity but we didn't believe in good. So most - not most - but part of my life I was a Jewish atheist but experiencing much of anti-Semitism in the former Soviet Union. I left the country as soon as the Soviet Union begun to collapse. I moved to Israel to be around other Jewish people and to be free of anti-Semitism around me. In Israel through a very, I would say supernatural encounter with God at the Wailing Wall. I believe that God is real and it happened just almost literally by touching the Wailing Wall in old city of Jerusalem. It was like electricity struck. God is real suddenly I knew that. A couple months later I had my chance to use the Wailing Wall to ask the God of Israel about his guidance for my life putting there a note with my question to God.

So yeah it was a very challenging thing for me because I even promised God in this note that I will never complain about his guidance. It was foolish probably I can understand. That very next day he sent me back to Ukraine I was complaining like crazy. I came back to Ukraine as I saw just to finish my studies at the University there. At that time I was finishing my Masters of Science in mathematics but I met my old Jewish friend who meanwhile became a believer in Jesus. And he started talking to me about believing in Jesus about the fact that I'm a sinner, that I need Jesus otherwise I'm going to burn in hell. I didn't like any of these things. Especially it was strange for me that he is a Jew who believes in Jesus because for me it was just Jewish people don't believe in Jesus. Why? Because Jewish people don't believe in Jesus period. No explanations I needed at least that time, it was clear. At the same time I was getting jealous observing friend having things that I was missing in my life. He was sort of peaceful, loving, forgiving, confident, and he was claiming that when he's praying to Jesus his prayers are reacted, responded by God. So even in my life as I had some challenges I was going to my Jewish-Christian friend asking him to pray for me to Jesus, to his Jesus to help me.

Darrell Bock  So substitutionary prayer?
Vladimir Pikman

Yeah. Sort of. [Laughs] Well I didn't know this terminology at that time though. I took the Bible and tried to consider I'll go through the Old Testament trying to find passages telling that Jesus could not be the Messiah just like a competition with my friend. It took a year for me to fail. In the Old Testament I saw enough evidences for me to consider Jesus as the Messiah but as I decided to pray, try to pray in Jesus name for the first time. I prayed 30 seconds after this prayer again saying, "Father if Jesus is not the Messiah please forgive me I made a mistake." Because I was afraid I was doing something wrong. At that time I considered that in the whole world there are only two Jewish men who believe in Jesus as the Messiah, my crazy friend and I. And it took three more months for God to put me in a situation where I needed him badly.

For the first time in my life, felt not like a Jewish angel but a Jewish sinner. Knew the way to get rid of this sin, needed it very badly, prayed, my life got changed. Got changed so powerfully that I couldn't keep it just for myself. Immediately the same day I was already sharing this good news with everybody at work on the streets. I joined the Messianic congregation in Kiev then I joined the ministry called Chosen People Ministries. At that time clearly US based international mission organization. Became minister first in Ukraine planting congregations there in 1995 to my surprise God called my wife and me to go to Germany to start the pioneering outreach among Jewish people there. So that's the short version.

Darrell Bock
So you've been in Germany how long?

Vladimir Pikman
We moved there in 1995.

Darrell Bock
So 20 years.

Vladimir Pikman
20 years total but minus 4 years in between 2002 through 2006 we spent here at Dallas Theological Seminary, both of us. My wife and I graduated from DTS in 2006 we moved back to Germany. So I would say it's 20 minus 4 1/2 years.
Darrell Bock: Okay. All right. Now let me there's one part of your background I want to kind of ask about because it's something that's important for people to get about Jewish people. You said you grew up in a liberal home. You were an atheist. So you were Jewish in ethnicity and identity but not really religious. Would that be a fair summary or how do you put that together? Most people think - they aren't aware of the differences in Judaism say between Orthodox conservative, reformed, and then secular just to simplify this.

Vladimir Pikman: You mean at that time?

Darrell Bock: Yeah at that time.

Vladimir Pikman: At that time I was clearly Jewish ethnically. And my identity was Jewish and it was probably what we consider to be Jewish. Religion was not an issue in the former Soviet Union but the ethnicity. Actually biblically and historically I would say it is a very important components of their ethnicity belonging to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, I would say biologically. So like descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that's what determines Jewishness. I mean religion is attached, world view is attached usually to a particular ethnicity. Even if we remind ourselves of the Holocaust being Jewish for Nazi's meant not what you believe in and whether you believe in anything but more of your origin. You're descendants from particular people.

Darrell Bock: So when you say your identity is Jewish and you had an ethnic identity and you had this attachment to Abraham. Nothing else came with it other than that attachment. So you weren't thinking about living in a keeping kosher or anything like that or did you do some of that in your home?

Vladimir Pikman: No. Not really. It was not an issue and to be honest it's not an issue for probably more than half of the Jewish population in the world this day. I mean like keeping Kosher and observing the law. It's not the main marker of the Jewish identity, even today worldwide. Even including probably Israel to some extent. But for us being Jewish and Jewish identity meant primarily sort of our destiny. So it's like we were destined to be Jewish. We were considered to be Jewish by the people around us and we were considering us as the Jewish people.

Darrell Bock: You saw yourselves as Jewish.
Absolutely. We saw ourselves this way and the people around us saw us this way whether we were willing or not.

There was no escape.

Exactly. And also it was like being Jewish it means to belong to certain people and it's something what you cannot get out of so to speak.

Okay. I think that that's important because some people think about being Jewish as being committed to Judaism and to the practices of Judaism and those two things don't necessarily go together. As you say there are many people who are ethnically Jewish but religiously secular. And in that way - it's like the joke you often hear in Israel about the difference between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Jerusalem is the place where all the religious activity takes place and Tel Aviv is a very secular kind of city. The same kind of distinction. So there's a range of - this is part of what makes sharing with Jewish people and drawing them into Messianism interesting just because you meet someone and they say they’re a Jew doesn't mean that they're all in the same place.

Two Jews three opinions.

Yeah. That's exactly right. Let's talk a little bit about Messianism, and you are and I've used this title appropriately you are a Rabbi in a synagogue. It meets on the Sabbath, which would be a Saturday. Let's talk about how Messianics view the synagogue, what it's there for and also what happens on a Sabbath service.

You mean our Messianic congregation?

Yeah. Exactly Messianic congregation.

Well there are different types of Messianic congregations. If there are three opinions for three Jews there are five opinions for two Messianics. The fact is that every Messianic congregation is different. So right now I can speak just on behalf of the congregation we have in Berlin.

Okay. That's fine.
Vladimir Pikman: Our congregation in Berlin looks, first part of the service at our synagogue at Shabbat looks very like in a normal conservative or orthodox synagogue. So we have one hour liturgical service with the Torah. Service carrying the Torah, reading from the Torah. And then the second part of the service is more contemporary. So not liturgical songs but more like worship songs, more contemporary type of worship. And then the third part of the service is teaching and prayer. Again for some Jewish people liturgical part is important. So they come to the liturgical part. Some Jewish people they don't care too much about it. They come later. And some people they don't care - well let me rephrase - they care primarily about the teaching so they come even later.

Darrell Bock: So people come in and out of the service you aren't there the whole time necessarily?

Vladimir Pikman: Yes but in most synagogues, at least in Europe, it has always been the case, you can come you can go. It's not like the doors are locked.

Darrell Bock: And you read through the Pentateuch in the Torah section. And are you on an annual or a three year cycle. How often do you get through the Pentateuch when you're reading in it?

Vladimir Pikman: We go on an annual cycle. That is most appropriate.

Darrell Bock: Okay. And is there, in many synagogues there's what's called the Torah reading and then there's the reading that goes with it. Do you have that as well or do you just read in the Torah only?

Vladimir Pikman: Our service altogether it takes about three hours.

Darrell Bock: Yes. I've been there. It is a full service. [Laughs]

Vladimir Pikman: Exactly. So it's okay for three hours people can take it but if we will read all it will probably four or five hours. That's why we study that during the week and we read just some parts of it -

Darrell Bock: A portion.

Vladimir Pikman: - a portion during the Shabbat service.
Darrell Bock  But is there just a Torah reading or is there another reading that comes with it as well?

Vladimir Pikman  Usually it's the Torah reading as the core because in Jewish mind the Torah represents the entire scripture. So we read something from the core. From the Torah and during the teaching time and worship time and liturgy time, there are passages from other parts of the scripture including the New Testament.

Darrell Bock  Okay. And that's what part of what makes this a Messianic synagogue is the fact that the New Testament is also a part of the worship service and a part of the teaching and a part of the biblical reflection that goes on in the community. So obviously teaching and prayer are an important part of what happens in the synagogue on Shabbat. What other reasons are there for a Messianic synagogue in your thinking?

Vladimir Pikman  Well there is a whole list -

Darrell Bock  That's fine.

Vladimir Pikman  - of different reasons for Messianic congregations to be important, usually we think of missiological reason as the first. Missiological reason I mean like for the Jewish people to come and to experience the service that is while being Yeshua, Jesus, centered at the same time is like home for the Jewish people. Culturally, traditionally, liturgiology and et cetera.

Darrell Bock  So in that sense it's not very different from say going to a Korean church or an African American church. If I can use a picture there's a flavor to the way the worship is done and a set of expectations and people are comfortable because they were raised in that context to experience that kind of worship.

Vladimir Pikman  Right. That’s one reason. This reason I would not consider as the major one because there are many Jewish people I know who are at home in different churches of different denominations and confessions. So if Jewish people consider Jesus or believe in Jesus they can naturally go to a church and I know many such Jewish people. So Messianic congregation is unique and not only or exclusive but a missiological way to reach out to the Jewish people. It's one reason.
Darrell Bock  
And do you know a lot of people who will attend a Messianic congregation on Shabbat but then also associate with a church on a Sunday or is that unusual?

Vladimir Pikman  
There are cases like this but that's not what I would consider as a good way of doing things because it's good for somebody to be a member like one body. Just to be involved and minister in some place but let me talk about some other reason for Messianic congregation that I consider more important for some reasons. I see much of ecclesiology reason in the Messianic congregation because it's a visible expression of Jewish segment of the body of the Messiah or the body of Christ. The unity between Jews and Gentiles that is the core unity of the Church or the body of Christ according to the Bible in my understanding, has to be visible because in its visibility this unity demonstrates the way the Messiah is and the way God actually functions together with his Messiah.

Darrell Bock  
So you're thinking of passages like Ephesians 2 and 3 that talk about the Jew and the Gentile together in one body?

Vladimir Pikman  
Yes. Exactly and I think of passages like John 17 as Jesus praying about his disciples being one for the world to see that Father and Son are one. So for me it's very important and I see that in the Bible for the Jewish segment, the Jewish component of the body of the Messiah to be visible. And the church in general I think should appreciate the Messianic movement even small, challenging, weak, still maybe even not united but it's a very important visible part of the oneness between Jews and gentiles. And there is another reason that I think very important as well. God has never forsaken or cast away Jewish people as his people, as his chosen people. So God is still faithful to his promises and his covenants with the Jewish people. And Messianic movement, Messianic congregations they are called I believe to be like a demonstration of the covenantal fidelity of the God of Israel and the people of Israel. So the last two mentioned reasons are even more important.

Darrell Bock  
So that means that people who are members of Messianic community really represent in a very technical sense of the term. Not just the faithfulness of God but the existence of a remnant that exists in any period of time as God's plan is moving forward.
Right. Exactly, besides there is another reason that can be debated to some extent the different denomination but I do believe that it is also a reason, eschatological reason. So emerging of the Messianic movement is also a step in preparation for the Messiah to come back because the Church or the body of the Messiah, what we know as today, according to the book of Acts started with the Messianic movement "as it was back then" [crosstalk] exactly. And we're coming to very exciting times actually now because we see the emergence of the state of Israel but also and I would consider that not less important the emergence of the Messianic movement.

So that kind of summarizes the existence of Messianic communities. Let's talk a little bit about Messianism as you're aware of it in Israel because one of the things that is happening is that the Messianic movement is growing in Israel. There's been to some degree almost unprecedented growth. So if we had your colleague Michael Zinn here he could talk about this directly that is the ministry that he is responsible for in Israel but talk a little bit about what you're aware of in terms of the influence of Messianic presence in Israel.

Well the Messianic community or the number of Jewish believers in Yeshua, in Jesus is growing in Israel rapidly in the last couple of years and many of those who are involved in ministering there talking even about revival among native Israelis or those who were born there so called Sabra's so it's growing rapidly. It's probably not growing like Acts 2 or 3 or 4 but it is dramatic growth because over last few years it was almost doubling. The number of believers were doubling almost on an annual basis. So it's very significant and the Israelis are getting more and more open to believe in Yeshua.

And it's actually the tendency probably worldwide among Jewish people. Jesus is becoming more sympathetic to the Jewish people so they learn to appreciate him. And you're aware of a number of different Jewish scholars more like academically secular through very Orthodox writing books about Jewish Jesus and emphasizing his Jewishness. So telling something with other words like he's a good guy, he's one of us. Well for the Gentiles but one of us sort of. So there is a growing openness to think of Jesus. Probably because the Church is getting more open to the Jewish people and probably because the Church in general is not so pushy on Jewish people.
So when we think about this. The original influx of influence of a response to Messianism in Israel was also associated to some degree with the immigration patterns into the nation. I think I've heard this right. That many, many Russian Jews who came to Israel have ended up coming into the Messianic movement but what I think I'm also hearing you say that is more recently although the immigration element is a part of this it's not the only part of what's going on now.

In Israel?

Yeah. In Israel.

Yeah. You're absolutely correct. The Messianic movement the number of Jewish believers in Jesus was significantly growing in Israel in 1990's due to the Russian Jewish immigration and due to the revival among Russian Jews worldwide including Israel but in this season we see more and more Israeli born Jewish people.

Now you used the technical term, Sabra, most people won't know what that is.

Exactly that's why I'm trying to use explanation rather than the term.

So Sabra is a native born Israeliite basically?

Exactly yeah.

And so even they are becoming open in dealing with - in fact one of the interesting things about Israel is the mix that you get. We started talking off talking about the mix of Jews that you experience from orthodox to conservative to reformed to secular and anyone who has been to Israel will know that you get that whole range in the nation itself. Is there any sense of where out of those backgrounds the Messianic movement is having its draw? Is it more attractive to some on that spectrum versus others? I mean are we talking about more secular Jews becoming interested in Jesus? Are we talking about more Orthodox Jews becoming interested in Jesus? Where is it coming from do you know?
Vladimir Pikman Well primarily the interest is the biggest among reformed Jewish or secular Jewish people. Particularly because they are not part of a very close knit community. Like with Orthodox, the Orthodox Jewish people the issue is not that they - with their knowledge, with their understanding consciously reject Jesus. They even don't consider Jesus because they are part of a very close knit community. They cannot do that. They cannot consider that because in their very close environment it's a no go.

Darrell Bock It's not permitted.

Vladimir Pikman No not permitted at all. So it's very complicated for them culturally and community wise. For liberal, secular, reformed Jewish people they are more open minded and they are more individualistic in a sense they have more like freedom embedded in them to think for themselves personally. Besides take United States as an example you have here probably 14 percent of Orthodox Jews among the Jewish population in the United States. So the Orthodox Jews are not the majority in the Jewish world today anyway.

Darrell Bock I haven't even thought about what the percentage of Jewish population is here in the United States but it's probably not what 1-2-3 percent? Do you know? 300 million people.

Vladimir Pikman No it's I think it's like around 6 million.

Darrell Bock So 2 percent basically.

Vladimir Pikman Yeah. 1.9 to be precise [Laughter]
**Darrell Bock**

Okay. That mathematics background is coming out. I've got two sets of questions that I want to go on I'm not sure. Let me go back and deal with one thing about the synagogue that I don't think we covered that I think is important and it's suggested by the reasons for a Messianic synagogue that you raise but that I think is an important part to appreciate about Jewish Culture at large as seen in the synagogue and that is the importance of community. Particularly because and the reason it segues from the number of 2 percent is because as a minority community the issue of community is actually pretty important to Jewish people and the thing that I've told people about my experience in relationship to Messianic congregations is that the Jewish appreciation for community and how it ought to function is a very important value even among ethnic Jews. You don't have to be religious to have this dimension. It's an important part of Jewish life. So one of the functions of a synagogue and you suggested this by talking about needing a place where they feel at home to worship et cetera, is this sense of community that you get out of your participation in the synagogue. It's a central gathering place and reference place for life for a lot of Jewish people.

**Vladimir Pikman**

Yes. You are absolutely correct. And it's also important for like postmodern secular Jewish people who don't have any community at all and still it's probably like embedded filling in all of us and particularly in Jewish people to be people of the community. So community's is very important part of the Messianic congregation. And usually the Messianic congregation that I know worldwide, we are very big on community. After services we have something to keep people together and let people stay together longer. Like at our work in synagogue or congregation in Berlin our doors are open at like 9:30 in the morning and we close the doors like 8:00 in the evening. The service three hours, the lunch is together afterwards. There is afternoon program. There is fellowship afterwards so many people stay in the community the whole day not because they have to but because they enjoy it.

**Darrell Bock**

So Shabbat is not only a day of rest it's a day of community.

**Vladimir Pikman**

Well in Jewish mindset Shabbat is the day of community and community with God and with each other. So it's like holy convocation. It's in gathering together with God in the midst.