

CAN YOU BE JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN?

By Mark Robinson

“NO, YOU CAN’T!!!”

“No, you can’t what?”

“You know what I’m talking about, the question you’re asking on your sign. ‘Can you be Jewish and Christian?’ You can’t be both!”

I feared the gentleman might have a stroke. His face was red, his blood pressure was obviously up, and his anger was evident.

“Why can’t you be both Jewish and Christian?” I asked.

“You just can’t!”

With the finality of that statement he walked off, obviously unwilling to even remotely consider the possibility-- an unfortunate but typical response from many Jewish people in regard to this question. The issue is settled; no dialogue is necessary, regardless of facts offered. So why is it that otherwise rational, intelligent, open-minded, and inquisitive people can sometimes respond so irrationally and emotionally to this question?

You see, I am Jewish: born to a Jewish mother and father. I always was and still am proud of my heritage and Jewishness; yet, a number of years ago I decided to become a Christian. I still strongly believe that I am Jewish and find no contradiction in saying I am both Jewish and Christian. I realize that you may not agree with me on this point, but please consider what I am about to say. Hear me out on why I, and thousands of other Jewish people, believe you can be both Jewish and Christian.

WHO IS A JEW?

Who is a Jew? is an important question in Jewish circles. Although, in the minds of many, it is like the proverbial observation: “When you get two Jews together you have three opinions.” Yes, we Jewish people are opinionated, especially regarding this subject. Acknowledging our need to understand an issue before believing its validity, I offer this brief article hoping it will enable you to consider a different point of view.

First, let’s establish something that I think we can all agree on whether we are Jewish or Christian (or anything else); that is, one cannot practice both Judaism and Christianity and be consistent. The teachings of each religion are sufficiently diverse (whichever branch of either religion you might embrace) so that you cannot honestly be a devout, convinced follower of one and also a devout, convinced follower of the other.

“That settles the issue,” you may be thinking. “You can’t be Jewish and Christian.” If we relegated the understanding of these terms simply to the practice of a religion, you would be correct. The issue, however, goes beyond any religion and the practice thereof.

The generally accepted belief among Jewish people is that if your mother is Jewish, you are Jewish. The former chief rabbi of Israel, Yitzchak Halevi Herzog (1888-1959), said that according to Jewish religious law, *halacha*, only the offspring of a Jewish mother can be considered a Jew.¹ Rashi, the renowned Talmudic scholar stated, “Since the mother of the child is Jewish, he [the child] is to be counted as one of our brothers.”² The Talmud, in Kiddushin 68b, states that a child born of a Gentile father and a Jewish mother is Jewish.

However, there are many among Israel’s brightest minds and most stellar personalities who do not limit whether one is Jewish to the Jewishness of one’s mother. David Ben-Gurion, first prime minister of Israel, said that anyone who declares that he is a Jew, lives a Jewish life, and is interested in the welfare of the Jews is to be considered a Jew, regardless of the faith of the mother.³ In March 1983 at the Convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, this Reform Judaism body voted to recognize as Jewish a child whose mother or father is Jewish.⁴

It is obvious from the above that you could get an argument no matter what your position is on the question of *Who is a Jew?* In the understanding of most Jewish people, one is Jewish no matter which form of Judaism you observe: Reconstructionist, Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, or ultra-Orthodox. Even if you are an agnostic or an atheist, you are considered Jewish if your parents (or at least your mother) are Jewish. It seems the only agreement among the majority of Jewish people is that you are *not* Jewish if you become a Christian.

The belief that one ceases to be a Jew upon becoming a Christian, or upon embracing another religion, is rejected by those in Judaism (primarily the ultra-orthodox) who adhere to Jewish religious law. In the Talmud, Sanhedrin 44a, Rabbi Abba ben Zabda said, “Even though [the people] have sinned, they are still [called] Israel.” He gave this illustration: “A myrtle, though it stands among reeds, is still a myrtle, and it is so called.” Rabbi Alfred Kolatch, author of the informative *First and Second Jewish Book of Why*, states: “...in the eyes of Jewish law a Jew can never forsake Judaism regardless of what he does or professes. He is considered to be a sinning Jew who has forfeited certain rights, but no more than that. **A Jew is a Jew forever**” [emphasis added].⁵

In 1962 Oswald Rufeisen (born to Jewish parents in Poland) requested citizenship under Israel’s Law of Return. Oswald was known as Brother Daniel because he had become a monk with the Catholic Carmelite Order. When his application was rejected by the authorities, he appealed to the High Court of Israel. Judge Moshe Silberg, head of

the court, rejected the appeal and emphasized that although, according to *halacha*, Daniel is technically a Jew, in the eyes of the Jewish people he is not a Jew. The decision of the court was not in keeping with Jewish religious law, but did agree with the view of the majority of the people at the time.⁶

The issue, according to Jewish religious law, is very clear. Even if a Jew decides to embrace Christianity, he is still considered Jewish, although sinning.

WHO IS A CHRISTIAN?

In the Christian world there is no less a dispute on who, in fact, is a Christian. Are Catholics Christians? Or are only Protestants Christians? What about other groups, such as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons), or Jehovah's Witnesses?

The issue of who, or what, is Christian is best understood by differentiating between *religion* (what is commonly referred to as Christendom) and the term *Christian*, especially as it applies to individuals. I think most of us would agree that Catholicism, the different Protestant denominations, and even groups such as Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses would be accepted as part of Christendom...very few would argue with this generalization. The issue here, as in the question of *Who is a Jew?*, goes beyond the mere practice of a religious system.

The word Christian comes from the two Greek words--*Christos ianos*. *Christos* is the same word as the Hebrew word *Maschiach*, and both are translated in English as *Messiah* or *Christ*. *Ianos* means *follower of*, or *like*. Thus a Christian is "*one who follows the Messiah*." The word Christian is used in the New Testament three times--Acts 11:26, 1 Peter 4:15-16 and Acts 26:28. Each time it is used in the context of lifestyle. It speaks of someone who is living his life patterned after the way the Messiah (Jesus) lived. A Christian is simply someone who decides at some time in his/her life to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior, and to follow Him. Biblically, no one is born a Christian. One might be born into a family that belongs to a sect of Christendom, but that child is not a Christian. At some point in his or her life each individual must make the decision to accept or reject Jesus. A decision to accept Jesus and follow Him, makes that person a Christian—it is not by birth.

BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING

There is one other element that must be examined in this issue, and I would argue that it is foundational to answering our question. Actually, the question of *Can you be Jewish and Christian?* should be settled by this source alone as it is the original and authoritative teaching on who is a Jew and who is a Christian. This source is the Bible. God should be the final and sole arbiter in determining the correct understanding of this issue.

It was God who brought the Jewish people into existence. He had called Abram (his name would later be changed to Abraham) to leave Ur of the Chaldees and go to the land we now refer to as Israel. Abraham obeyed God and was given a number of promises (Genesis 12:1-3). The promises would be continued through Isaac (Genesis 17:19), and then through Jacob (Genesis 28:10-15). We are told that Jacob had twelve sons who made up the nation of Israel. The lineage of Israel (the Jewish people) would be determined patrilineally (through the father), according to the Bible. Interestingly, a reason given by the Reform Judaism movement for accepting a child's Jewishness based on the father, is "that is how they did it in the Bible." Ultimately, the term *Jew* became synonymous with Israel and referred to any person who descended from one of the tribes of Israel (the twelve sons of Jacob). Biblically, one was Jewish by birth.

The Bible also promised Israel a Messiah (Christ, in our modern day English usage) who would enable both Jew and Gentile to have a personal relationship with God through Him. One of the basic purposes of God's bringing Israel into existence was to provide a people through whom the Messiah would come. Not only is the Messiah's lineage through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but we are told that He would come through the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:10), and from the family of David (2 Sam. 7:12-16).

To make sure we would not misidentify the Messiah, God gave us scores of prophecies which enable us to identify Him. Among them we are told that He would be born in Bethlehem:

But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, *yet* out of thee shall he come forth unto me that *is* to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting. (Micah 5:2)

Born of a virgin:

Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:14)

Born before 70 A.D.:

And after threescore and two weeks shall Messiah be cut off, but not for himself: and the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary; and the end thereof shall be with a flood, and unto the end of the war desolations are determined. (Daniel 9:26) (The sanctuary, or Temple, Daniel speaks of was destroyed in 70 A.D. by the Romans after the Messiah was cut off.)

He would be despised, die, and rise from the grave:

He is **despised and rejected of men**; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath

borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for **he was cut off out of the land of the living**: for the transgression of my people was he stricken. **And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death**; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth. Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, **he shall prolong his days**, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. (Isaiah 53:3-10; emphasis added)

When we look at these prophecies, we are able to analyze all who would claim to be Israel's Messiah, and judge whether or not they meet the requirements which God instituted. Upon establishing who the "true" Jewish Messiah is, the individual can then choose whether or not to follow Him.

CONCLUSION

Two things can be initially established from this consideration of *Can You Be Jewish and Christian?* First, one is born Jewish, and will always be Jewish, no matter what belief system is adhered to. Secondly, a person is not a Christian--a follower of the Messiah--by birth, but becomes one when a decision is made to accept and follow Jesus.

When the etymology and meaning of *Christian* is understood, it is very clear that not only can a person be Jewish and also a Christian, but for a Jewish person it is both *consistent and logical* to be a Christian. More often than not the question *Can you be Jewish and Christian?* is decided based on emotion, past anti-Semitic acts of Christendom (and those in Christendom), and a misunderstanding of the original biblical meaning of these terms.

I have asked many Jewish people the following question: Shouldn't Jewish people accept and follow the Messiah of Israel? There is only one answer: YES. Understand, I am not asking you *who* the Messiah is, or if you personally want to follow him, or even if you personally believe in the concept of the Messiah, *but rather*

whether the Jewish people should accept and follow the divinely promised Messiah for our people. The only correct answer to this question is YES.

My next question is this: If Jesus *is* the Messiah of Israel, shouldn't Jewish people accept and follow Him? Again, there is only one reasonable answer to this question--YES. Notice I did not ask if *you* believe Jesus is the Messiah. My question is simply *if* He (or whoever you might name) is the Messiah, shouldn't Jewish people accept and follow him? Again, the only honest answer to this question is YES. Jewish people should accept and follow Jesus ***if He is the Messiah.***

When someone who is Jewish reads the prophecies God gave of the Messiah in the Jewish Bible, identifies by those prophecies the individual in history who fulfills them, and then decides to accept and follow that person (the Messiah), ***they do not stop being Jewish.*** They accept the basic promises that the God of Israel gave to us, and embrace the divinely promised Messiah. Actually, deciding to follow Messiah (or in today's vernacular, becoming a Christian) is *very* Jewish!

Thus, the basic issue is, "*who is the Messiah?*" Does Jesus fulfill the prophecies? Is Jesus the Messiah? The above mentioned messianic prophecies, and many others pinpoint Him as the Messiah. Don't take my word for it; check it out for yourself in your Jewish Bible. I did, and thousands of others have, and we've become followers of the Messiah--*Jewish* followers of the Messiah, or, to put it another way, *Jewish* Christians.

ENDNOTES

1. *The Second Jewish Book of Why*, Alfred Kolatch, Jonathan David Publishers, 1985, page 17
2. Ibid. Page 26
3. Ibid. Page 17
4. Ibid. Page 28
5. Ibid. Page 36
6. Ibid. Page 19-20