

NOTE: It is once again time for the controversy surrounding the right date for Christmas. Even before I read sections of Alfred Edersheim's, *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, I really had no problem with celebrating the 25th of December as Christmas. My historical reading helped me understand that the Messiah could not have been born during Sukkoth, which is one of the three pilgrimage festival. People would have been going up to Jerusalem and not to the town or village of their birth. Also, Herod would not be foolish enough to hold a census during the annual festival cycle.

As well, Christmas has nothing to do with Saturnalia, which was largely just celebrated in Italy at Winter Solstice (December 21st). I agree that many pagan elements have invaded how people celebrate the birth of the Messiah. Since Chanukah was also originally a festival that anticipated the Messiah, I want to put the Messiah back into both Chanukah and Christmas.

If you want to put up a tree, it is about as pagan as a Chanukiah. We do not put one up for a variety of reasons, one of which has to do with my allergies. We have a nativity scene and do not bother with lights. On Christmas, our family gets together and sings Carols. We also read the birth narratives, exchange gifts and have a big festive meal. My kids were never brought up with either Santa Claus or Chanukah Harry and we taught them the difference between legends and the truths of the Bible.

Throughout the holiday season, I speak to everyone and anyone about the birth of our Messiah and say He was the babe who was born in a manger so He could grow up and die on the cross for the sins of the world. Chag Samaech, Chag Yom Yeshua, Chag huledet samaech Yeshua (Happy birthday, Yeshua).

Sermon: First Winter Series: Embracing the Bigger Picture Ephesians 4:1-16

I exhort you therefore who am a prisoner in the L-rd to walk in a manner worthy of the vocation that has been given to you, in all humility all gentleness and patience, putting up with one another with love, doing your best to keep the unity of the Spirit by the bonds of peace. This is because, there is only one body, and only one Spirit, just as there is only one hope by your calling; there is only one L-rd, only one faith, only one baptism (immersion) and only one G-d, Father of all, who is above all, among all and in all. But to each of you, grace has been given, according to the measure of the gift in the Messiah. This is why it is said: having gone up into the heights, he has taken captives and has made gifts to men. Therefore what does it mean, He is risen on high, if not also that He has descended into the lower parts of the earth? The one who descended is the same who has ascended above all the heavens, in order to fill all things. He has given some as apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists and others as shepherds and teachers, for the perfecting of the saints in light of the work of the ministry of edification of the body of Messiah, until we have all come to the unity of faith and the knowledge of the Son of G-d and to maturity and to the measure of the full stature of Messiah. And thus we will no longer be floating and tossed by every wind of doctrine, by the deceitfulness of men and their craftiness in deceitful scheming, but in professing the truth in love, we will grow in every respect in the One who is the head, into Messiah. It is from Him that the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

I came to the L-rd as a young man of 19 and I had a lot of baggage to unpack and to repack. I immediately plunged into the Bible and after nearly fifty years I am still plunging into it. I was so glad to find the Messiah and to be delivered out of the great darkness I had fallen into. Each day was a new discovery in the Word and answers to prayer broke the chains of the world, the flesh and the enemy. The official theological description of what happened to me was: crisis conversion, response in depth.

I should not have survived and, sadly, not many of my friends who came to faith with me are still walking with the L-rd. Over the years I have led any number of people into faith and I fought hard to keep them. One year after a Billy Graham Crusade, he estimated that only 10% of the people who come forward are still walking with the L-rd. I did a lot of work and follow up and my retention rate is somewhere around 60%. Why the difference?

When I lead someone to the Messiah, I teach them how to pray and how to study and I hook them up with good fellowship and even teach them about worship and outreach. When the Messiah comes into a heart and into a life, there is a big gap that develops in the person's heart and in their life. So much needs to be removed, repaired and cleansed. It is a big full time job and I was willing to do it because those who led me to faith put a lot of time and energy into my transition from a creature of the darkness into a son of the light.

I had endless questions and I had bad habits and had to learn all over again about what was right and what was wrong. No more deceit, no more lies, no more gossip and no more participating in the unfruitful works of the darkness. Before I came to the Messiah, I was a big party animal and fled from the emptiness inside me by filling my life with as much noise and stimulation as possible. I wasn't really happy, but I sure was busy.

Now, my time and my energy had to be diverted into a whole new direction, with a whole new set of priorities. This is what our passage is talking about today. There is no room in the Messiah for a weak response or a partial response. You either jump in head first or you wash out when the birds of doubt steal your faith, or the rocks of temptation wither your faith, or the choking weeds (the pleasures, the cares and the riches of the world) of this life stunt your spiritual growth and you make no real progress.

I realize that we are all unique individuals and that we all have different needs, but the same principles of discipleship and holiness apply to each of us and to all of us. We need to develop our own personal, biblical explanation of our faith, so that our lives are all filled with the Messiah and His Word.

It is not an easy job, but it is the only job we are called to. We have to learn, not just to get along with one another, we have to learn to love and appreciate one another, so that we can keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. We will disagree. We will annoy each other. How did Noah and his family put up with each other for a whole year in the cramped space of the Ark? They learned to become a close knit community, bonded by love and by peace, in all gentleness and humility with lots of patience.

We will not all be very intimate with everybody in the shul, but if this ever ceases to be a possibility with anybody, we are in trouble. We need to appreciate the young ones in our midst. We need to appreciate the adults in our midst, as well as the seniors. We need to welcome our visitors and help them to see if our shul is a good fit for them.

We are very welcoming and gentle and loving, but we are not just trying to be nice to make people like us. We want to discover if they are willing to come along with us down the road of spirituality and discipleship, because that is the only reason we exist as a Messianic Jewish community of Jews and Gentiles.

After pleading with the Ephesians to seek for and maintain amazing unity, Paul gives us a seven fold description of why this is the only way to walk with the Messiah. Our world is filled with churches and synagogues which have divided and split and which often do not get along with each other very well. This is never G-d's will for us as we relate to others who share all or a part of our faith. Because over and above all the divisions and various denominations, there is really only one body and we are all members of it, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile.

Many diverse voices are clamouring for our attention and many religious opinions are looking to convince us, but there is also only one Spirit who will only say things according to the Word and according to the teachings of the prophets and the apostles. If you are not listening to the Spirit which speaks according to the Bible, you are listening to the wrong spirit. We may still have out differences, but in the core things and core teachings, we need to speak one single voice. We need to aim to hear G-d' voice alone, over and above the noisy crowd of other influences that want to drown out the voice of G-d.

Paul goes on to say that there is only one hope which we have been called to. We are citizens of the heavenly Kingdom, called to life everlasting in a new Heavens and on a new Earth. If you are hoping for anything else, you are wasting your time. We will never become gods, each given our own universe. We are not in the process of reincarnating ourselves back to the godhead and there are not seventy virgins waiting for us. We are called to the kingdom of G-d and not to some version of the happy hunting grounds. Our kingdom drive needs to grow and deepen in us as we grow deeper into the L-rd through His Word.

There is only one L-rd, Yeshua Hamashiach – not Buddha, not Mohamed, not Krishna, not Odin, not Zeus and certainly not Confucius. The only way to the Father is through Yeshua and His judgment will determine our eternal fate, whether we agree, believe or disagree and disbelieve. What you believe cannot affect the objective reality we are living in, you can just deceive yourself into oblivion.

All roads do not lead to G-d – there is only one faith and Yeshua is the only road to G-d. Now some people who have not come to faith for a variety of reasons, will still be judged by Yeshua and it is none of my business if He decides to let some of them in, while He excludes false and carnal believers. There is only one baptism - by immersion into the death and resurrection of our Messiah – a ritual burial, followed by a ritual resurrection. Nothing more and nothing less.

There is only one G-d, the G-d of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the Father of our beloved Messiah. All the rest are make believe or demons. There is also none like our G-d – He is eternally unique.

Now comes the practical part of Paul's teaching. Messiah has led captivity captive and has given gifts to members of the body, and His redeemed community leadership functions to help all of us and each of us reach our full potential in the Messiah.

This is often called the fivefold or the fourfold ministry. Some are apostles – community builders and architects who want to see positive redemptive communities spring up around the world in

every generation. Then there are the prophets – the encouragers who tell us we have all the resources we need to get the job done and who warn us about the consequences of wandering off course. They are followed by the recruiters (evangelists) who dialogue with pre-believers and those caught in any kind of error and want to lead them back into the fold. They are our spiritual salesmen and need to be full of honey and light and not be those who like to perpetually argue with everybody.

Lastly come the shepherd teachers, who watch over the flock and help them find both food and healing as they are protected from the wolves, the dogs, and the pigs. Now all of us can function in all of these gifts, but some do it as a lifestyle, so the rest of us can grow spiritually. We are all priests and there is only one level of spirituality. Our training team will make sure we are on track.

What is the objective? Maturity, stability, and abundance for all believers, whatever our gifting and whatever our contributions to the community. I am not called to be the super holy one so you can bow down and kiss my ring. I am the shepherd teacher, who is also acting like an apostle and a prophet and an evangelist. As we grow, these specially gifted ones will arise in our midst and we will see amazing things happen in our midst – until we become a massive community which will need a building ten times this big to fit us all in!

We live in an untrustworthy, treacherous world that will repeatedly try and shipwreck our faith and lead us down the carnal garden path – or down the path of unbiblical doctrines which lead to error and folly. We are likened to ships being tossed until our ropes are secure and our course is set and we no longer let anyone or anything in this life distract us from our final destination.

We may encounter damage and setbacks and we may be fooled some of the time, but as long as we dig into the Word and allow the redeemed community to hold us accountable, as the Lord, His Word, and His body remain the central focus of our loves.

It is possible to speak the truth in love and come to the full stature of the Messiah. This does not mean we will be perfect and completely sin free. It means that we will invest all of our energy and all of our resources into a single spiritual objective – speaking the truth in love. Because, if we bite and devour one another, we will be consumed one by another. We must not argue, but be gentle and patient, in meekness instructing those who oppose themselves, as we let our salty light shine, with lots of sweetness and firmness until they escape themselves out of the contentious snare of the enemy, the world and the flesh.

There is a corporate growth as an individual growth, which is part of our calling and we need to grow together as we grow in Him, so that our personal and our corporate spirituality rise up as a pleasant odour before our King, as we offer our mouths and our lives as frequent offerings to Him.

We should never become discouraged if we feel we are not making enough progress, quickly enough. He will lead us at our own pace and according to our own giftedness, so that our hearts and lives fully reflect His light as we walk through this darkening world.
Shabbat shalom and Shavua Tov.