



Congregations Among Us 2007

Today's emerging Messianic movement is at a critical juncture in its growth and development, particularly as we consider the future. Where we are in the distant future needs to be considerably different than where we are today (in 2007). We need to have made significantly more progress in the refinement of our theology and approach to the Bible, and we need to be more socially active and engaged with the affairs of our modern and/or post-modern culture so we can make a true difference in the lives of other people. We have much to do today as we consider the challenges ahead—and while there is much to look forward to, allowing time to work things out is not a virtue that we often demonstrate.

I believe that much of what is taking place today is paralleled from what we see of the growth of the early Messianic community in the Book of Acts, General Epistles, and Pauline Epistles. From the beginning of the Book of Acts to John's letters we see that gospel message expanded out from a small backwater province of the Roman Empire, Judea, to ultimately Rome itself and throughout the Mediterranean basin. The good news that the Messiah had come went out to Jewish synagogues throughout the Land of Israel, and not only the Jewish community in the Diaspora—but to multitudes from the nations who eagerly embraced it as they encountered people with changed lives.

In a similar manner, the early Messianic community of the past century was originally constrained to groups of Jewish Believers, primarily in urban centers throughout the United States. Eventually, it spread to other Jewish communities throughout the world, including Israel. Today, Messianic communities are popping up in areas that do not necessarily have significantly large Jewish communities, but rather many non-Jewish Believers in Messiah Yeshua are being shown the richness of their Hebraic Roots and are being led to live Torah obedient lives like their Lord.

The challenges presented to the early Messianic community in the First Century are addressed thoroughly in the Apostolic Scriptures or New Testament. They testify of the hardships that the Apostles faced, including their criticism, rejection, and even the imprisonment and physical harm levied against them. They indicate that when communities of Believers in Yeshua started being formed, issues arose largely pertaining to Jewish and non-Jewish interaction, and how these people groups were to function cohesively allowing individuals to mature in their newfound faith via the power of the Holy Spirit. We have letters in the Apostolic Scriptures written to many of these early assemblies, with pertinent instruction regarding how they were to handle the situations as they arose.

Much like two millennia ago, Messianic communities are popping up all over the world. Some of them are very large, and some of them constitute only a handful of people. Each congregation and its congregants have an important mission: **to uplift and encourage one**

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another in the Lord, and make a difference in their community. This is what each ancient congregation as described in the Apostolic Scriptures was supposed to do. For some, fulfilling the mission of God was easier than for others. It is imperative for us to understand these early assemblies, so that we too might be empowered to be about the work of the Lord—and mature both spiritually and theologically.

What are the “congregations among us” that we see present in today’s emerging Messianic movement? What important message—or even messages—have we been missing from our examination of the Scriptures?

Our Need to Move Beyond *Just* the Torah

Much of today’s Messianic community has grown because born again Believers in the Christian Church have sought greater enrichment to their faith. Too many people were exclusively taught from the New Testament in Church settings, and realized that having a “Biblical faith” meant looking beyond just the writings of the Apostles. Because the Messianic movement places a high degree of emphasis upon the Torah and Tanach—more commonly known as the Old Testament—many people enter in because we are willing to discuss parts of Scripture that much of Christianity today unfortunately ignores. As I am sure many of you can testify, the Tanach has important stories and accounts that profoundly minister to the human condition. We need to know the first events of humanity’s history: the Creation, the Fall, the Flood, Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Esau, Joseph in Egypt, and the formation of Israel as a nation to understand God’s redemptive plan. We discover that there are deeper answers to the circumstances we face today—and not surprisingly the curiosity of Christians today relating to the “Old Testament” is extremely heightened (if not at an “all time high”).

Wanting to know more about the Bible and being ministered to by the foundational stories of the Tanach, are essential for the future growth of the Messianic movement. The Tanach has important themes and concepts that provide many of the answers that today’s fallen world is seeking. Knowing how to properly handle violence, the decline of morality, and being concerned with social justice are broad ideas that the Tanach directly speaks about. The Torah itself contains what many theologians have termed a Holiness Code that tells us things about the character of God that we should understand if we are being conformed to Yeshua’s image (Romans 8:29). We have the responsibility as Messianic Believers to demonstrate our acquaintance with these important concepts.

But as good as this may sound, significant sectors of today’s Messianic community are not focused on the broad themes of redemption, holiness, and positively impacting society. In a similar way to how much of today’s Christian Church only focuses on the New Testament, a sizeable part of today’s Messianic movement is now really only focusing on the Torah as relevant Scripture. While reading the traditional *parashah* every week has certainly enabled many Believers to understand God’s Word in a deeper way, so has it also limited some people as that may be the **only part** of the Bible they read on a weekly basis. This is not good, as we have the responsibility to have a high regard for all of Scripture—most significantly as it **all unfolds** God’s plan of salvation history.

When we can grasp the broad themes of *both* the Torah and Tanach, we begin to have a worldview that reflects that of Yeshua and the Apostles. The Apostles understood the themes of redemption, holiness, and positively impacting society. This is very clear by any cursory reading of the Gospels or Book of Acts. But how they implemented these concepts in a community of Believers was certainly not easy. We need to know what they instructed the First Century saints to do, so that we might be effective in God’s service today. In “moving beyond”

the Torah, we do not move beyond the Torah so as to ignore it—we move beyond the Torah in order to implement its principles in real life situations. While the Torah forms the foundation of God's Instruction, implementing that Instruction in human life is described all throughout the rest of the Bible—and notably in the writings of the Apostles.

Congregational Questions That We Currently Face

As I have interacted with various Messianics over the years, among all of the issues and problems that people need council and advice about, one constant seems to be apparent. People frequently ask me about why they cannot seem to find the “right” fellowship or congregation. People want to know where they can fellowship with other Messianics, and be a part of a community where Yeshua is uplifted, the Scriptures are honored, and where their spiritual needs are met. Too many people have testimonies of, “I tried this group and it fell apart,” rather than, “I’m really being ministered to there.”

It should be recognized that there is no perfect “congregation” or “assembly.” Jewish and Christian history reveals that as long as human beings are in charge of things there will inevitably be problems. **People have problems.** Some people want to do things that other people do not want to do, and there are often different perspectives that need to be considered when issues arise. But even though there might not be any perfect congregation or assembly does not mean that we should not be striving for excellence. On the contrary, we should be maturing and we should approach controversy from a more rational framework than one dominated by emotionalism.

Many of the congregational issues that we face today start with the *Shabbat* service. How much music should we have? How much dancing? Should we use any traditional Jewish liturgy? How should the teaching be focused? Should we have multiple teachings? Must the teaching always be about the weekly Torah reading? How long should the service be? How short? Do we follow a set order of procedure—or should we be “led” by the Holy Spirit? Should we model ourselves after the Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform Jewish communities? Should we develop our own independent model? These are just a few of the questions that Messianic congregations have to answer as the bulk of what goes on happens sometime from Friday evening to Saturday afternoon.

But these questions constitute only the beginning. Should a congregation have a statement of faith? Should a congregation have membership procedures? Who should the leader or leaders of the congregation be? What kind of regulation goes on between the leadership and the people? What outreach programs does the fellowship have? What does the fellowship do during the regular work week? Is the congregation engaged with the local community? Is the congregation fellowshiping with others who serve the God of Israel in either the local synagogues or churches? What role do women play in the congregation? These questions are even more difficult to answer in today's emerging Messianic movement.

As I believe things stand today (in 2007), simply identifying that these sorts of questions exist is going to be difficult enough for many in the burgeoning Messianic fellowships and congregations that are developing. Being patient and allowing time to work as these issues present themselves gradually will mold us into a movement that can be more effective for the Lord's work in our communities. There are, however, some basic steps that we can begin to take—now—that will prepare us for the issues as they arise to the surface.

Ancient Congregations to Consider

A significant part of the Bible that is widely overlooked by too many Messianics today—for a variety of reasons—are the letters or epistles of the Apostolic Scriptures. The temptation is too great for people to refer to these texts as “the Book of Romans” or “the Book of Ephesians” or “the Book of Colossians,” when in actuality these texts and others are more than just “books” of the Bible. They are letters and make up a *very specific* literary genre that has to be examined in its own right. While these texts are inspired Scripture and compose the instruction of God, they were nevertheless letters written to individual congregations and groups of First Century Believers. We have the awesome and critical responsibility *to interpret what these letters meant to their original audiences first*—before we then begin to ask how they apply in a modern Twenty-First Century context.

This is something that we have to begin to take seriously in today’s current environment of Messianic growth. As more and more people enter into the Messianic community, more and more small fellowships and congregations will be forming. Many of the same issues that faced the early Messianic communities of the First Century, if they are not already facing us today, will be facing us sometime in the future. Understanding each of the ancient congregations as depicted in the Apostolic Scriptures will hopefully give us a framework with which to better understand our own present development and where we need to grow and mature. Each of the letters in the Apostolic Scriptures addressed a series of unique circumstances to groups all over the Eastern Mediterranean. Each one of these letters, when examined properly in its own right, often asks today’s Messianic Believers questions how best we are to accomplish the mission of God in the world. Some of these questions are admittedly difficult to answer.

I would like us to briefly consider some of the significant First Century congregations that we see described in the Apostolic Scriptures. Take important notice of both the spiritual *and* social dynamics that existed in each one of these groups. Consider the possible parallels that exist between these ancient assemblies and what we see today in the emerging Messianic movement. Note that I have not placed them in any chronological order, but have rather listed them regarding what I consider to be the degree of *negative circumstances* that each faced.

Philippi

The Apostle Paul visited the city of Philippi in Acts 16:6-40, the first major expanse of the gospel in Europe. While in Philippi, Paul and Silas met with a small group of Jews and God-fearers out by the riverbank, as the Jewish community in the city was not large enough to have a synagogue. The gospel message was met with great enthusiasm in this city, which was largely a Roman colony of retired soldiers. While ministering in Philippi, Paul and Silas encountered a demon-possessed woman who testified that what they were proclaiming was indeed the truth. She had the demon cast out of her, and as a result Paul and Silas were thrown into the local prison because of being Jewish. A massive earthquake occurred in the jail, and the jailor was stunned when discovering that Paul and Silas made no attempt to escape—and they even pleaded with him not to take his life, which the gods demanded if any prisoners break free on his watch. The city leaders of Philippi, upon discovering that Paul was a Roman citizen illegally arrested and beaten, have to carefully request that he leave the city—which they could not force him to do.

When Paul writes his letter to the Philippians from his imprisonment in Rome about ten years later (61 C.E.) he speaks candidly to these people as close friends and associates. The only negative rebuke we see is Paul admonishing two women, Euodia and Syntyche, to get along (4:2). Throughout Philippians, one sees that Yeshua the Messiah and Him alone is the center of

Paul's existence, as he identifies the Source of his righteousness being the Lord (3:8) and what he has endured for the Lord's service. Paul encourages the Philippians on the course they are on, only warning them about some obstacles that might be placed in their way (3:2).

What parallels exist between Ancient Philippi and some Messianic fellowships today? Consider the fact that the Philippians were a very small group in a significantly non-Jewish environment. We have many Messianic congregations being raised up in areas where there is not a large Jewish community. The Philippians were an assembly that Paul did not seriously chastise for problems. Are small groups and fellowships today difficult to chastise? The Philippians remembered that Yeshua and the work of the gospel were to be their prime emphasis. Do small Messianic groups today have Yeshua as the focus of what they do?

Philippis that exist today are Messianic fellowships and groups that are very small, and exist in places where there is not a large Jewish community. We certainly see many of them popping up more and more, and so the Epistle to the Philippians is undoubtedly a letter we need to understand so that these assemblages of people can grow and mature properly.

Ephesus

Ephesus is a unique case in the Apostolic Scriptures because it concerns a variety of Biblical texts. It is notable that the oldest manuscripts of the Epistle to the "Ephesians" only say "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 1:1, RSV). A blank space exists in many manuscripts, where others have "in Ephesus."¹ The most probable explanation for this is that Ephesians was originally a circular letter written to a group of congregations in Asia Minor (at the same time of Colossians and Philemon), and that Paul's courier Tychicus (Colossians 4:7-8; Philemon 9, 13, 17) was given the authority to write in a city's name as the letter was delivered. Over time as Ephesus gained some significant status among the early Messianic congregations, the Ephesian tradition of preservation won out.

Ephesians itself is a very general letter. Paul emphasizes the great blessings of believing in Messiah Yeshua, discussing some of the roles that individuals play in the Body of Messiah and the unity that Believers are to have. A significant part of Ephesians, noted by many Messianics today, is Ephesians ch. 2, which discusses the Commonwealth of Israel. Consequently, the overall message of Ephesians is something that is emphasized at many Messianic congregations that have a fairly large Jewish and non-Jewish makeup. Ephesians certainly speaks to many of the needs of the larger groups of Messianic congregations every bit as much today as it did in the First Century, as we recognize that Yeshua the Messiah is here to unite all people as one in Him.

But the instructions do not end with what is commonly called "Ephesians." The Apostle Paul wrote two mentoring letters to his loyal disciple Timothy whose responsibility was to oversee and monitor congregations and fellowships in the vicinity of Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:3; 2 Timothy 2:18). 1&2 Timothy are two letters that detail some important pastoral instruction on how the ancient congregations were to be organized and function properly. They instructed Timothy on how to deal with the unique dynamics that he faced as the assemblies surrounding Ephesus were growing and maturing, but were also facing some challenges. They should give

¹ Grk. *tois hagiois tois ousin [en Ephesō] (τοῖς ἁγίοις τοῖς οὖσιν [ἐν Ἐφέσῳ]).*

Cf. Kurt Aland, et. al., *The Greek New Testament, Fourth Revised Edition* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft/United Bible Societies, 1998), 654; Erwin Nestle, and Kurt Aland, eds., *Novum Testamentum Graece, Nestle-Aland 27th Edition* (New York: American Bible Society, 1993), 503.

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an interpreter some insight, when looking at Ephesians, as to how these congregations moved forward—or backward.

Likewise, we must also consider the late First Century letters of 1, 2, and 3 John, which according to ancient tradition were all composed around the vicinity of Ephesus. These letters too may give us a peek into the spiritual dynamics of the growth of the Ephesian congregations. 1 John is widely associated as being a letter that directly confronts the sin of antinomianism, or a denial of God's Law. Many commentators likewise believe that 1 John confronted some of the errors of proto-Gnosticism that were sneaking into the early community of Believers. 2&3 John, similarly, are short letters that warned these congregations about the traveling teachers who brought these errors, and how they were to be rejected.

Do we have any Ephesuses today? When we look at the Epistle of Ephesians, there are many Messianic congregations that emphasize the things that Paul emphasizes in this letter. They sincerely try to be places where Jews and non-Jews are united around the common hope of faith in Yeshua, and where all are able to function in their unique ministry gifts. At the same time, while Ephesus was a place where unity was present—we see some warnings present when we couple Ephesians with the later instructions given in 1&2 Timothy and the Johannine Epistles. Clearly, while Ephesus is a model that should be emulated among larger Messianic assemblies, particularly those with significant numbers of Jews and non-Jews, one needs to be on guard so that gross error does not enter into the camp as seen in 1, 2, and 3 John.

Rome

When writing his letter to the Romans, Paul had yet to travel to Rome. Paul's primary purpose for writing the Romans was to tell them that he was preparing to travel to see them on the way to Spain (15:24, 28). Paul's ministry work in the Eastern Mediterranean had been largely finished, and he was planning to use the city of Rome as a hub of support for reaching out to the Western Mediterranean. Many theologians have considered Romans to be the most influential letter ever written—particularly among the epistles of the Bible—because it is a refined treatise on what Paul considers the gospel message to be. An entire array of issues are addressed in Romans from the fall of humanity (ch. 1), to how sin has condemned everyone (ch. 3), to justification by faith (chs. 4-5), to the relationship of the Torah to the salvation process (chs. 6-8), to the role of Jews and non-Jews in the community of faith (chs. 9-11), to the role of civil government (ch. 13), to how to behave in the world (ch. 15). All of Paul's ideas have influenced not only religious leaders throughout the ages, but also government leaders and those in positions of power.

Romans itself was written against a very important historical background of the Jews in Rome having been cast out of the city by the Emperor Claudius (cf. Acts 18:2). Many believe that the upheaval that took place among the Roman synagogues was because the gospel message of Yeshua had reached the city. Not knowing how to discriminate against Jewish Believers or non-Believers, the Roman authorities simply ejected all the Jews out of the city. Congregations of Roman Believers in Yeshua, which likely included a Jewish leadership and non-Jewish sector of congregants, found the Jewish leaders leaving and non-Jews being thrust into positions of leadership. When the Jewish leaders returned several years later, they found that the places they had left had changed radically. The Jewish leaders were not necessarily welcomed back to their former positions.

In Romans 11:24, Paul addresses the non-Jewish Believers in Rome: "For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural *branches* be grafted into their own olive tree?" He effectively tells these people that ultimately they rely more on the Jewish

Believers and Judaism than the Jewish Believers rely upon the non-Jewish Believers. While being a masterful treatise on a whole array of spiritual and social issues, the thrust of Paul's letter to the Romans is that Jew and non-Jew would once again have unity in Messiah and respect one another.

The congregational model that we see in Romans is that of an assembly of people that is largely non-Jewish, with a distinctly Jewish element present. This undeniably parallels many of the Messianic congregations that are growing today where there are only a handful of Jews, but many non-Jews. When Paul's instruction is taken seriously, emulating the congregation(s) of Rome would be a good thing where we recognize the spiritual heritage that we have in Judaism, while at the same time also recognizing the value of other societies and cultures. In the long run, Paul's instruction to the Romans must be heeded by an emerging Messianic movement that is going to sit between the theological traditions and heritages of both Judaism and Christianity—and we seek to address the issues of the day by appropriating the best that these great religions have to offer.

Thessalonica

Paul and Silas visited Thessalonica after visiting Philippi in Acts 17:1-14. This was a city where they proclaimed the gospel for only three weeks, before being forced to leave because of pressure exerted on the local officials by some Jewish leaders. Nevertheless, Paul left an important impression on the Thessalonians.

From what we see in Paul's two letters of 1&2 Thessalonians compared to his brief stopover in Thessalonica, one would validly wonder: "What happened?" The major thrust of both 1&2 Thessalonians is for his audience to have a proper understanding of growing in the faith, and particularly to be mature in relation to Yeshua's return. 1 Thessalonians 5 is Paul's first major treatment on the subject of the Lord's Second Coming, and he tells the Thessalonians that they need not worry "that the day would overtake you as a thief" (1 Thessalonians 5:4).

For some reason or another, perhaps about six months later (51-52 C.E.) Paul must write a second letter to the Thessalonians because they misinterpreted some statements that he made in his first letter. Some errantly believed that Paul was saying that the Second Coming was imminent, and so Paul had to specify that certain things needed to precede the return of the Messiah (2 Thessalonians 2:1-3). The fervor regarding the Last Days had become so serious in Thessalonica that some people quit their jobs and were not performing any profitable work for their faith community. As Paul admonishes these people,

"For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies" (2 Thessalonians 3:10-11).

The Thessalonians are a perfect example of a group of people who got off of the daily responsibilities of God's Kingdom because of some end-time fervor. Throughout the centuries of our faith, many groups of people have followed in their wake and have likewise become enamored with the Last Days, believing that the return of the Messiah was imminent. Not surprisingly, there are many Messianic groups today which fall into exactly the same category of the Thessalonians. Fear of the End of the Age guides much of what they do, so that the daily, consistent work of ministry often falls by the wayside. 1&2 Thessalonians offers us some important lessons and warnings that we must heed as today's emerging Messianic movement balances consistent, daily living in Yeshua, and anticipates His return whenever it may come (whether in our lifetimes or not).

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Colossae

Colossians is an intriguing letter that was written from Paul during his first imprisonment in Rome (60-62 C.E.). Paul had never visited Colossae himself, but was instead visited by Epaphras (1:7), a Colossian Believer. Epaphras was apparently so disturbed at the things happening in the Colossian congregation that he made the journey to Rome to receive advice from the imprisoned Paul. While Paul had not visited Colossae, the city was located in the Lycus Valley of Asia Minor, and was adjacent to Ephesus.

The errors that the Colossians were entertaining very clearly related to vain human philosophy, and likely also some kind of proto/incipient-Gnostic and/or Jewish-Gnostic mystical beliefs (2:8). These cleverly crafted ideas were able to infect the Colossians and were causing them to question the Divinity, if not also the Messiahship, of Yeshua. Paul had to admonish the Colossians for these errors, while at the same time encourage them for the journey that they had already undertaken by receiving Yeshua into their lives and being transformed by Him (1:22-23). Colossians 3 issues instructions to this congregation to get back on the proper course of faith in gratitude toward God.

It is painful to say, but there are sectors in today's Messianic community which have errors present that are similar to many of the errors that the Colossians embraced. There are those who do not know what to do with Yeshua the Messiah because they have been influenced by the ideas of Jewish mysticism and people trying to find a so-called "hidden" level behind every facet of Scripture. Rather than growing in the love and grace of the Lord, such individuals are instead influenced by outside forces that will take them down some dangerous paths. In these sectors, Paul's letter to the Colossians has a message that is often, sadly ignored.

Galatia

Paul and Barnabas visited the Roman province of Galatia in Acts 13-14, with assemblies of new Messianic Believers arising in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. In the short period of time between his visit and him writing his letter to the Galatians (circa 48-49 C.E.), outsiders had entered in and said that Paul's emphasis on faith for inclusion among God's covenant people was invalid. These outsiders instead advocated that ritual circumcision and conversion to Judaism—keeping "works of the law"—was what was necessary. Paul writes his letter to the Galatians to combat this error. Inclusion among God's people was not to be obtained via ritual circumcision, but instead via faith in Israel's Messiah and what He had accomplished (2:16).

Galatians may be the first Apostolic text ever written, and as such it includes a very early perspective regarding some of the issues that the growing First Century Messianic community faced as it branched out beyond the Land of Israel. The issue of non-Jewish inclusion was a serious debate, with people such as Paul advocating that faith in Yeshua was sufficient for covenant inclusion, per the example of Abraham (3:7-9). Others advocated that ritual circumcision was required, and so the later Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 was assembled to finally address this issue.

Most Christian examination of Galatians has been affected by Martin Luther's appropriation of it for defending the early Protestant movement against Medieval Catholicism. Unfortunately, a major result of this has been assuming that First Century Judaism was no different than Medieval Catholicism, with people thinking that in Galatians Paul refutes the idea of Yeshua plus observance of the Law—when what he is really refuting is the idea of proselyte conversion to attain a righteous status before God. Paul's argument is not against the ethos of the Torah, as much as it is an argument against gross misuse of the Torah. Paul's words that "those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves" (6:13), also gives us

some clues that the dynamics he addresses included some ungodly motivations or practices on the part of those errantly influencing the Galatians.

Today, there are people in the emerging Messianic community making the same overall errors as the Galatians. They believe that faith in Yeshua and what He has done, is not enough for one to be considered a part of God's covenant community. They believe that ritual conversion to Judaism is necessary. Unfortunately, they have influenced some non-Jewish Believers to undergo ritual conversion so that they might feel "more spiritual" or "closer to God." But as a sad consequence of this, many deny Yeshua in the process. Paul's letter to the Galatians, particularly set against its ancient context, has much to teach today's Messianic Believers who need to remember that faith in Israel's Messiah is the only way to be reconciled to the Father.

Corinth

Among all the congregations that Paul writes to, the most amount of correspondence took place between Paul and those in Corinth. He originally visited Corinth in Acts 18, as the congregation had originally been a sector of those at the local synagogue, later being ejected and having to move to the home of Titius Justus. 1&2 Corinthians are the only two extant letters of among at least three (1 Corinthians 5:9) that Paul wrote to these people. While the Corinthian congregation had many good people with a heart for the Lord, there were likewise an entire host of problems in the Corinthian assembly.

One of the biggest problems present in the Corinthian congregation was sexual immorality. For some reason or another, given the cosmopolitan nature of Corinth, as well as gross factionalism among the Corinthian Believers, a great number of other sins were also allowed to enter in. The Corinthians seem to have had a fair number of both Jewish and non-Jewish members. The leadership of the Corinthian congregation, unfortunately, was largely inept and unable to combat what was going on. As Paul testifies, "each one of you is saying, 'I am of Paul,' and 'I of Apollos,' and 'I of Cephas,' and 'I of Messiah'" (1 Corinthians 1:12). Some were taking their fellow brethren to the Corinthian courts to judge lawsuits (1 Corinthians 6:1-7). Paul issues some serious doctrinal corrections to the Corinthians, as many were not performing the duties that they should have been. 1&2 Corinthians, while appearing to be difficult, can be rather straightforward letters that are easy to understand if one reads carefully and thoughtfully enough, as the circumstances behind them are relatively easy to reconstruct or formulate.

There are Corinthian-type circumstances present among today's Messianic congregations. Perhaps while sexual immorality may not be the major sin present, there may be another dominant issue or series of issues that should be addressed. Likewise, many of today's Messianic assemblies have factionalism, and the leadership—for whatever reason—is unwilling to do anything about it. Some of the factions that exist today actually include elements seen from the other congregations I have commented on, from those overly emphasizing the end-times, to Jewish mystical errors, to those having an unbalanced view of the spiritual gifts. 1&2 Corinthians have messages that we need not ignore if we are to have united congregations that can be effective in the ministry work of the Lord.

What Congregation Are You?

You have just been challenged to examine the First Century Messianic congregations in more detail. It is very easy to say that today (in 2007) not enough serious Messianic examination on the early First Century congregations has been performed because of an overemphasis—in

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certain quarters—on the Torah. Yet, the letters of the Apostolic Scriptures testify to the difficulties of integrating a Torah lifestyle in the community of faith. While we study the Torah on a consistent basis, why do so many of us wonder about the difficulties of integrating it into our lives—when the Bible has already given us examples to consider when we face criticism, factionalism, or division? Does your current Messianic assembly or fellowship mirror any of the positive, or even negative, traits that I have described from the ancient First Century congregations?

It has been my observation over the past decade that too much of the Messianic movement just tolerates the epistles of the Apostolic Scriptures. We need to make significant progress in this area. In the future, the Messianic movement that will begin to emerge—one that is more engaged with the major spiritual and theological issues of Scripture, and engaged with the major issues of society—will have a much more coherent approach to these texts. In the meantime, a great deal of research, discussion, and consideration will need to be made by today's Messianic Believers. Much of what we examine will determine what the Messianic movement will look like in the distant future.

The Bible includes a great treasure trove of information and instruction on how we should be effective servants in the work of the Lord. God's people are to be a light to the world, and the advent of the Messianic movement should indicate that He is in the process of restoring His people. But with this comes some great responsibility, and no one will have all of the answers all at once. While the burden for understanding the First Century congregations and the role they play today is immense—the rewards for appropriating the instructions given to them are even more immense. Let us be about the task of letting God's Word mold us into people who can positively make a difference in our communities, not falling into the same mistakes as those who came before us. Let us be those who have godly wisdom, discernment, and are transformed by His power and love, so that we can be effective in whatever diverse sphere of influence He has placed us!