

A Community or a Congregation? For What are We Striving? Part One

Tim Hegg • TorahResource • March 2007

In our modern world, many voices vie for our attention. Whether it's tele-marketers, email blasts, television, billboards, print media, or whatever, we are being called by many voices in many different directions. The situation is not much different even if we narrow the circle to the religious sphere of our society. One encounters messages from every possible angle, whether it's an appeal to "Acquire the Fire," "Become Prosperous," "Find Your Inner-Self," "Find the Answers to Life," or "Get the Plain Truth about the Last Days." If you want a three day seminar led by famous athletes that promises to "change your life forever," no problem. Just check the calendar at your local Sports Arena or Christian Bookstore. Or if you're hankering for Christian Rock, Christian Gangsta Rap, or whatever, you're in luck! Check the reader board of your local mega-Church.

No wonder people are either running in circles like chickens with their heads cut off or just plain checking out of anything that smacks of "religion."¹ The Church has gone to school on the advertising success of the world. I don't know about you, but frankly I'm fed up with all of the junk mail (both printed and electronic) from religious organizations that fill up my mailboxes. Oh, I know, it's really not that difficult to toss them into the trash or just hit the delete button. The unfortunate thing is that there are some good people out there with an honest message of truth who, if they are to be heard in our day, have somehow to make their voice known over the clamor of the "religious market."

One would think that things might be different within the very small circle of what has commonly become known as the "messianic movement." But sadly, such is not the case. The Messianics are a microcosm of the larger religious milieu in our society. In this movement you'll find everything from truth to heresy; from being "slain in the Spirit" to black-hat Orthodox Judaism, and most everything in between. If we're not big enough to actually match the "world class" antics of the Christian Church, we can't be faulted for not trying. We hype our seminars with the same billboard flash: music concerts galore, promise of "Spirit-filled" experiences, and all the amenities to make the time a dazzling vacation. Even more, we're tickled pink when we're invited to that Christian seminar housed in the sports arena so that we can put on a tallit and blow the shofar. What unity! And hey, we *are* making progress! One of the largest Christian book distributors lists two items in the "Messianic" section of their catalog: a tallit with the prayer of Jabez embroidered on the collar and "messianic shofars" (can someone please tell me what makes a shofar "messianic"?!). Wow! Maybe we're finally being accepted!

Some of you are probably saying "this sounds like sour grapes to me!" Well, believe me, it all leaves a very sour taste in my mouth! I left "the-show-must-go-on" mentality of the Christian Church a long time ago and I have no desire to return. What has become very clear to me in recent days, however, is that many leaders in the Messianic movement have never really grasped the difference between a Torah Community and a Christian Congregation. In other words, one of the reasons that the current Messianic movement so much resembles the Christian Church and why so many Messianic Congregations seek acceptance within Christendom is that most of the leaders in this movement have never been able to think

¹ Audrey Barrick, "Study: U.S. Unchurched Population Nears 100 Million," Christian Post Reporter, March 20, 2007 (accessed at: http://www.christianpost.com/article20070320/26418_Study:_U.S._Unchurched_Population_Nears_100_Million.htm)

outside of the box of Christian ecclesiology.² Or to say it another way, the model we have of a “Messianic Congregation” is essentially the Church model with some different traditions and theological perspectives. The building’s structure is the same, we’ve just put in new windows and replaced the siding. And in some cases, it appears we’ve used vinyl siding.

In the same way that the Torah Movement is the result of recovering the biblical view of Torah, it is equally imperative for us that we recover a biblical ecclesiology. Instead of simply presuming that the way Christianity does “Church” is the proper model for us, we must endeavor to recover a thorough-going, biblical ecclesiology. The restoration of Torah must be accompanied by a restoration of a biblical ecclesiology if we ever hope to make the Torah Movement a generational reality. If we remain in our current mode, the Torah Movement will quickly morph into another hybrid Church among the myriad of Churches that now exist in our times.

I’m not saying that the basic ecclesiology of the Christian Church is entirely wrong—it isn’t. Many aspects of the Christian Church are based squarely upon the Scriptures. We certainly do not want to throw the baby out with the bath water! But what I am saying is that within the traditional Christian ecclesiology there are core, foundational tenets that are not biblically based but have evolved over time. Put simply, we cannot accept the Christian ecclesiology *carte blanche* and also expect to build Torah Communities. In the overall scope of things, the two are incompatible.

I should also add that recovering a biblical ecclesiology cannot be done by emulating the modern Jewish synagogue model, though we can certainly learn a lot from the way Jewish communities have “done Synagogue” through the centuries. Yet in many ways, the contemporary synagogue (especially those of Reform and Conservative Judaism) has been heavily influenced by the Christian Church, even if they don’t want to admit it. Leadership structures, meeting formats, and even some Siddurs show the influence of the Christian Church.

In seeking to express the need for recovering a biblical ecclesiology, I want to use the terms “congregation” and “community” to communicate an essential difference between what I perceive as the current Christian ecclesiology and a Torah ecclesiology.³ While a number of important things differ between the two, at least in my thinking (and I hope to delineate these in future sections of this paper), the foundational difference is this: a “congregation” is primarily concerned with the present and near future; a “community,” while concerned with the present, always has a generational element at its core. To put it simply: a community takes seriously the repeated phrase “throughout all your generations” found often in the Torah. It is this generational perspective that drives a community to be what it ought to be. Likewise, this generational aspect affects every major decision of the community, for the highest goal of a community is to remain faithful to its core values from generation to generation.

Obviously, a congregation may have this same desire, that is, to remain faithful to its core values from generation to generation. What distinguishes a congregation and a community is the method by which each intends to reach this goal. A congregation puts the majority of its efforts into cognitive endeavors: getting people to agree with the truth is thought to assure longevity of the core values. A community also stresses the need to confess the truth (cognition) but believes that the truth cannot endure apart from life-to-life interaction that spans generations (relationship). Therefore, even the manner in

² The word “ecclesiology” is a theological term derived from Systematic Theology. It commonly describes the “doctrine of the Church,” including the theological basis for the Church as well as basic components and structures that define the Church.

³ I recognize that the two terms, “congregation” and “community” are often used interchangeably in our times. I also recognize that in terms of strict lexicography, the two terms overlap. But I want to distinguish the two terms in order to convey what I see as essential differences between the current Christian ecclesiology and what I will call a “Torah ecclesiology.”

which the truth is delivered differs between a congregation and a community. While a congregation teaches its core values (truth) as having an independent existence, a community recognizes that its core values (truth) exists in the context of a generational expression of that truth. At the risk of being overly simplistic, I would say that a “congregation” is essentially the product of our Western, Greek worldview, while a “community” is based in an Eastern, Hebraic worldview. For the “congregation,” truth is what we know (cognitive); for a “community,” truth is what we demonstrate by our lives (relational). For a “congregation,” the core values (truth) are summed up in a doctrinal statement; for a “community,” the core values (truth) are seen in the life of the community.

Let me try to give an example to explain what I’m saying here. If one looks at nearly every historical doctrinal statement of mainline, evangelical Christian denominations, one will discover a strong emphasis upon the Sabbath concept (even if the term “Sabbath” is interpreted to mean “Sunday”). For example, we find this explicitly stated in the Westminster Confession,⁴ in the London Baptist Confession of Faith (1677/1689),⁵ and even in the early Baptist Faith and Message.⁶ Yet if one were to attend the congregations that have these historic confessions as their basis, they would find precious few who recognize and observe Sunday as a Sabbath. Ask whether they still hold to their confession of faith as “truth,” some might be shocked to discover that they even have such a confession. Many would admit, however, that while they still “believe” the confession to be a statement of their “core values,” most no longer live out the reality of Sunday as Sabbath. In other words, a person can agree with the confession as being true (cognitive) and yet disregard it in terms of how one lives. In a congregation, this is acceptable because truth is envisioned as existing independent of the congregation itself. Not so in a community. The life of the community is the true statement of its faith. The core values do not reside in a written confession but in the daily lives of its community members. The congregation attempts to pass its confession of faith to the next generation; the community seeks to pass its life to the next generation. The one is based in cognition; the other in relationship.

Thus, one of the foundational differences that I see between “congregation” and “community” is the method each employs to promulgate the truth. A congregation puts most of its energies into explaining and teaching the truth. A community also emphasizes teaching the truth, but realizes that the truth will best be understood in the context of life-to-life relationships. For a community, explaining what is true is not enough. The truth of the core values must be experienced and seen in the daily facets of life in order for it to be passed to the next generation.

The bigger question, of course, is how we can go about recovering a Torah ecclesiology. The following are some of the necessary steps that are obvious to me as we engage in such an endeavor.

Step 1: Restore Biblical Leadership

The Pastor, Church, and Torah Community

Perhaps one of the most obvious tenets of Christian ecclesiology that needs to be jettisoned by a Torah Community is the traditional Christian view of The Pastor. The Christian perspective can be traced back to the early centuries of the emerging Christian Church. In the Apostolic Scriptures, we are met with three terms that designate leadership positions within the early assemblies of believers (*ekkle-*

⁴ Chapter XXI: Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day.

⁵ Chapter XXII: Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day.

⁶ See the 1925 Baptist Faith and Message, Article XIV, which is repeated verbatim in the 1963 update. The 2000 Baptist Faith and Message, however, changed this article significantly.

sia): overseer (*episkopos*), elder (*presbuteros*), and deacon (*diakonos*). Obviously missing from the list is “rabbi,” since this title did not gain a technical sense of an office of congregational leadership until the 2nd Century CE, well after the “parting of the ways” between the emerging Church and the established Synagogue had taken place.

In the earliest writings of the Church Fathers, *elders* and *overseers* (often translated by the English word “bishop”) were equated. Elders were overseers, and overseers were elders, the two terms used interchangeably.⁷ But it was not long until the overseer became an office distinct from and superior to that of the elder. In each congregation, a single elder was elevated to the office of overseer, and this “bishop” exercised authority over the elders of that local assembly. Eventually bishops were appointed to oversee a given geographical region, meaning they had authority over a number of bishops who ruled their respective congregations. It was not long until the title “Universal Bishop” was developed which designated one bishop as the ruler over all the bishops. It was this office of the “Universal Bishop” which eventually became the Pope.

This hierarchical scheme of leadership and authority solidified the tradition of one bishop per local congregation, who submitted to the authority of a regional bishop, who likewise submitted to the authority of the “Universal Bishop.”

But no such hierarchy can be found in the Apostolic Scriptures. In Acts 14:23, the apostles appoint “elders (plural) in every *ekklesia* (singular).” Granted, the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) appears to make authoritative *halachah* for all of the assemblies of believers, but even here it is not the rule of a single bishop but the collective counsel of a group of leaders that formulates the decisions. Though James is portrayed in Acts 15 as the acting moderator of the Council, there is no indication whatsoever that his voice carried more weight than any of the other Apostles or elders who gathered to resolve the issue. When the written edict is finally drafted, it is sent out as the conclusion of the Council, not the pontification of James or any other individual.

Moreover, an indication of the local, plural leadership that existed in the early communities of The Way can be seen in the opening of Paul’s epistle to the Philippians. He does not send his epistle to a given individual (The Pastor) who governs the believing community (*ekklesia*) at Philippi. Rather, he addresses his epistle to “all the saints in Messiah Yeshua who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons” (Phil. 1:1). Note carefully that even though the overseers and deacons had positions of leadership and authority, they are addressed as members of the “saints” at Philippi. In other words, they are viewed as indigenous to the community itself, not as professionals who had been “hired” or “commissioned” to be leaders. Equally important is the fact that in this single community there are overseers (plural) and deacons (plural). There is no hint of a single individual leader who stands as authority over the others. This is in harmony with the notice of Acts 14:23 that the apostles appointed “elders (plural) for them in every assembly (singular).” We find the same language in regard to the elders (plural) at Ephesus. In Acts 20:17 we read, “From Miletus he [Paul] sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders (plural) of the assembly (*ekklesia*, singular).” Having gathered the elders together, Paul explains to them that he is on his way to Jerusalem where he expected to be bound and even killed, and that they would not again see his face. So he exhorts them to “shepherd the assembly (*ekklesia*) of God which He purchased with His own blood” (v. 28). Here, the overseers (plural) are to shepherd the assembly (singular) of God. They are to guard the flock from false doctrine and false teachers and feed them from the “word

⁷ See, for instance, 1Clem 42:1 where “deacons and overseers” is used to describe the appointing of “elders” by the Apostles (cf. Acts 14:23), cp. 1Clem 44 and *Epistle of Polycarp* 5 where “presbyters and deacons” is used, apparently equating this designation with “bishops and deacons.”

of God's grace" (vv. 29–32). The role of community leadership is clearly in the hands of a number of overseers, not the responsibility of a single leader or Pastor.

Indeed, one searches in vain to find any instance in the Apostolic Scriptures where a local community of believers is led by an individual "Pastor." Rather, the pattern clearly delineated in the Apostolic Scriptures is that the leadership of any local community of believers is invested in a group of leaders who function together in the Hebraic fashion as a council of elders.

Furthermore, there is nothing in the Apostolic Scriptures to warrant the idea that the office of overseer or elder was filled by men from outside of the community. In other words, overseers and elders were indigenous to the community itself, as would be the normal procedure among a Jewish community. The idea that a community would look outside of itself for a trained professional to come into their community and assume the role of a leader is foreign not only to the Apostolic ecclesiology but also to the Jewish culture in which the early Apostolic congregations were founded. This is highlighted by the fact that the overseers or elders of the early congregations were spoken of as "shepherds." Our English word "pastor" is actually the Latin word for "shepherd" and became common in the Christian Church through the use of the Latin Vulgate. Actually, the noun "shepherd," referring to a leader in the believing assembly, is found only one time in the Apostolic Scriptures, in Eph 4:11–12:

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Messiah;

The verb, "to shepherd," is found twice as a description of overseers in the believing community:

Acts 20:28 "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the assembly (*ekklesia*) of God which He purchased with His own blood.

1Pet 5:2 shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness;

Even though the use of "shepherd" to describe the role of an overseer is found only these few times, it still gives us an important clue as to how the Apostles viewed the office of overseer in the early communities of The Way. For a shepherd is someone who knows the sheep and one whom the sheep know. He is not a stranger who has no connection to the community that he helps lead and guard. In this regard, Yeshua is called the "Chief Shepherd" (1Pet 2:25) because the sheep belong to Him and He has given His life for them. But the fact that Peter refers to Yeshua as the Chief Shepherd means that there are other lesser shepherds who are to emulate His example as a Shepherd.

In John 10 our Messiah gives to us a clear picture differentiating a true shepherd from a hireling. The true shepherd knows the sheep and the sheep know his voice. For example, he knows the lamb that has a crooked leg because he was there when that lamb was born. He tends to the wounds of a sheep that was almost killed by wolves because he was the one who came to that sheep's aid and ran off the predators. He knows to pay careful attention to the ewe who is ready to give birth because he has marked the weeks of her pregnancy. And when he calls to the sheep, they follow him because they trust him. He has been with them, fed them, led them to pasture and water, and protected them from danger.

Not so with the hireling, the shepherd who is paid to look after the sheep. When the difficult times come; when the wolf appears, he'd rather not risk his own skin to save that of the sheep. When the going gets rough, the hireling flees. He abandons the flock to the whims of predators.

One has to wonder what kind of shepherd would put himself out for hire. In the ancient world, it

must have been someone who knew how to tend a flock but had no flock of his own. Yet it seems inconceivable that a true shepherd would abandon his own flock to look after the sheep belonging to someone else! Still, given the illustration that the hireling abandons the flock when the wolves appear, there exists the possibility that the hired shepherd was “looking for work” because he had previously left the last flock he was hired to tend. The point is quite simple: you can’t trust a shepherd you hire because you don’t know him. And from an Hebraic perspective, you don’t know a person by his words; you know him by his deeds (cp. Lk 6:43f). Knowing a person by his deeds takes time, more time than just a few months or even a few years. This is why in the Apostolic Scriptures, the leadership of a given community is always envisioned as indigenous, being part of the community they lead rather than being brought in from the outside to fill a job opening. When the Apostles appointed elders in every assembly (Acts 14:23), these were men who were already members of their respective communities, not those who were sent to them from the outside. Indeed, in the Jewish community of the 1st Century, “elder” referred to older men who were part of that community.

This is obviously not the norm in the Christian Church today. The “Pastorate” is viewed as a job and “filled” in a number of ways. In some denominations, the hierarchy of the denomination itself makes the “Pastoral decisions” for each congregation in the denomination, including how long a Pastor will stay and where he will go next. Typically among denominations that function this way, a Clergyman will have an average of four Pastorates before retiring. For most denominations, however, the decision of who will be the Pastor in a given congregation is decided by the congregation itself. “Applicants” for the job send in their resumes or “candidate” by invitation of the “pulpit committee.” Then the qualifications of each are weighed and the one found most desirable is offered the position. If salary and benefits can be sufficiently negotiated to the satisfaction of all, the man arrives as the congregation’s new Pastor. The average stay for a Pastor chosen this way is around three to four years. So the majority of congregations have come to accept the fact that Pastors come and go.

This highlights a foundational difference between a “congregation” and a “community.” At the bedrock foundation of a community is its generational character. Community decisions and direction will always take as a major factor what effect they will have on the next generation. A driving question will always be: “how will this affect our children?” and “how will this enable our children to embrace the faith of Yeshua within obedience to the Torah when they are the adults of this community?” It is apparent that if you have rotating Pastors, you cannot expect to have generational continuity. If leaders “move on” when they see “greener grass,” why should we expect our children to develop any kind of enduring commitment within the community? The reality is this: the modern view of “Church leadership,” which has been accepted as normative by a majority of “Messianic Congregations,” may work for *congregations* but it will never successfully build *communities*. Congregations are primarily concerned about the present; communities consider both the present and the next generation as equally important. Therefore, communities are not willing to make accommodations to achieve success in the present if such accommodations might in any way undermine the ability of the community to exist in continuity with the next generation.

Here, then, is one of the first things we must restore if we are to embrace a biblical, Torah-centered ecclesiology: *we must abandon the idea of hiring shepherds from outside of the community and commit ourselves to indigenous leadership committed to generational community*. Thus, as we disciple and train men to take the responsibilities of being overseers and deacons, *we must instill within them the biblical picture of community leadership*, namely that a true shepherd does not abandon the community but puts the needs of the community above their own desires and ambitions.

As I have said, one of the essential truths about Torah Community is that it is generational. The life

of Torah is to be לְדוֹר וָדוֹר, *leDor vaDor*, “from generation to generation” (cf. Ex 12:42; Lev 3:17; 23:14, 21, 31; Num 15:23; 35:29; Ps 33:11). How can we expect to make this a reality if leaders, who should be the first to model this “generational aspect” of Torah, move from one congregation to another? When an overseer abandons a congregation to take up responsibilities elsewhere, he is essentially saying that he has no responsibility to the next generation of the families he presently shepherds. He has demonstrated by his leaving that “Torah as a generational reality” is just words, nothing more.

Does this mean that someone in a leadership position within a given Torah Community is there for life? Yes, this would be the norm, but there may be exceptions. For instance, we discover in Acts 13 that Paul and Barnabas, who must have been leaders in the community at Antioch, were sent out by the community to the Apostolic work of helping other Torah Communities to form and become established. But notice well the essential characteristics of this sending. First, the community as a whole, along with all of the established leaders, were in agreement about the need to send Paul and Barnabas out to do this work (Acts 13:3). Second, they were all convinced it was what God wanted:

While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. (Acts 13:2)

Third, they did not commission Paul to go out by himself nor Barnabas by himself. Following the pattern of Yeshua, Who sent out the talmidim two-by-two (Lk 10:1), they sent Paul and Barnabas together. Fourth, they did not send Paul and Barnabas to become overseers or elders in another community. Throughout Paul’s itinerant ministry, he would go to a given location, help establish a community of believers or strengthen an existing community of believers, and then leave to do the same work elsewhere. Once leaders were established within a given Torah Community, the job of Paul and his team of workers was finished and they left to begin it all over again in another location. Thus, even the idea of a community “releasing” an elder or overseer to take up a position of leadership in another community finds no basis in the Apostolic Scriptures themselves.

Could we envision a scenario in which leaders from a Torah Community might be sent to help establish a community elsewhere, discipling and training men within that community to take on the responsibilities of leadership? Yes, this would follow the pattern set by Paul and the Apostles themselves. But the pattern outlined in Acts 13 should serve as a guide: (1) such a mission should meet the approval of the community as a whole including the other leaders; (2) it should be undertaken only when the community is convinced that it is the will of HaShem; (3) there should be a minimum of two sent out at all times; (4) the goal of the mission would be to establish indigenous leaders in the other community, at which time their mission for that community would be completed and they would return home or duplicate their discipling and training mission in yet another community, and (5) they would be sent out only if sufficient overseers remained to effectively guard and feed the sending community. But for our current study the important point is this: *there is nothing in the Apostolic Scriptures, either by way of example or stated halachah, to warrant the notion that an overseer or elder leaves his own community to become an elder or overseer in another community.*

“But,” someone might counter, “what if an overseer or elder has a real sense that God has called him to go elsewhere? Shouldn’t he following the leading of the Lord in this?” The answer to this oft encountered question is, in my thinking, very obvious. If HaShem is actually moving in such a way, then the pattern given to us in the Apostolic Scriptures will be followed. The community as a whole will recognize God’s leading, at least two will be selected to go, sufficient leaders will remain to care for the community, and the mission will be viewed as successful when those sent out return to the community that

sent them. It is amazing to me how often a leader who has encountered problems suddenly is “called” by God to go elsewhere. When the going gets rough, he finds a way to rationalize his swift exit. Call it whatever you want, it’s the way of the hireling not that of a true shepherd.

Thus, the first important step a Torah Community must take in recovering a biblical view of the *eklessia*, the community of Messiah, is to recover a biblically based understanding of community leaders. We can never hope to build generational communities if we remain stuck in the leadership patterns of the Christian Church. We must seek to encourage men within the community who have shown themselves faithful and who have a willingness and even a desire to fulfill the office of an overseer, to prepare themselves to take up this responsibility. And we must begin now to encourage, challenge, and prepare our young men to take up future leadership roles within the community, viewing such work not only as essential to the life of the community but also as a high privilege in the service of Yeshua, the Chief Shepherd. If we do not grasp a biblical view of community leadership and if we fail to raise up indigenous leaders to guard and teach the community in the next generation, our efforts will be short lived indeed.

A Community or a Congregation? For What are We Striving?

Part Two

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In Part One of this study, I tried to express what I see as important issues in building Torah Communities and particularly the difference between a “community” and a “congregational” mentality. Foundational to such an endeavor is a reformation in the way we think about Leadership within a Torah Community. My focus in Part One was upon the office of Overseer and my appeal was that we seek to recover a biblical view of the office, one in which men who accept this high privilege and responsibility do so as a commitment of their lives to the generational viability of the community itself. Instead of viewing their leadership position as a “career” in which one congregation is a stepping stone to the next, they see their role as shepherds who guard, protect, and feed the sheep regardless of the personal cost. When hard times come, they do not abandon the community as the hireling would, but remain faithful to the community of which they are themselves a part. Only when Overseers make such a commitment will the Torah movement as we envision it gain stability and have the hope of maintaining generational viability.

But while such a reformation in community leadership is “Step 1” in recovering a biblical “ecclesiology,” it is surely not the whole story. In the same way that leaders must have an unremitting commitment to the community they lead, the members of the community as a whole must likewise undergo a radical rethinking of what it means to be committed to their community. Or to put it another way: we must strive to build communities, not congregations.

Step 2: Strive for Communities not Congregations

The difficulty we all have in approaching this discussion is that we lack a working understanding of what constitutes a “community.” While in bygone eras the very concept of “community” would have been naturally understood as the common experience of society, in our times society has become so fractured that the very idea of community is a distant and vague notion. As a result, we hardly can envision “community” as valuable, not to mention necessary. Within the Christian Church, religious life has become so individualized that its essential elements can be summed up in “a personal relationship with God.” The congregation exists as a means of strengthening the individual in his or her faith. The ministries and services of the Church primarily have the individual in mind.

Such individualism is not entirely wrong-headed. The Scriptures make it clear that saving faith and the relationship it procures between the believer and God is the result of the divine prerogative worked out within the individual. That is to say, the forgiveness of sins that brings eternal life is the result of personal faith in God’s Messiah Yeshua and does not come as a benefit of group membership. In fact, just the opposite is true: it is not through group membership that the elect are saved, but they, having been born again through the work of God within each individual, are then added to the *ekklesia*, the community or body of Yeshua. Membership in the community of believers is the result of their salvation, not the means by which they obtain it.

But is being part of a local assembly (*ekklesia*) really necessary for salvation or is it just one of the “add-ons” that comes in the “salvation package?” Unfortunately, a growing voice within the Christian Church would equate forgiveness and salvation, teaching that “being saved” is one and the same with

being forgiven. Or to put it in theological terms: salvation is summed up in justification. From such a perspective, being part of a local assembly of believers may have its benefits but it's not essential. "If I'm forgiven, that's all I really need. Everything else is optional." The practical evidence of this mentality can be seen in the growing phenomenon of the so-called "unchurched Church." Of the 75 million adults who comprise the "unchurched," 62% claim to be Christians, and 44% claim to "have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today."⁸ In an advertisement for her book, *Becoming Unchurched*, Sonya Anderson writes:

Thousands across the world have a very strong relationship with the Father without stepping foot in church on a Sunday morning. Are they truly saved? Can they survive without a connection to a group or denomination? How does Yeshua feel about their independence? These are questions I've been compelled to ponder. We've been trained to believe that in order to secure a strong relationship with the Father we must attend church services weekly. However, a look into Scripture reveals that the organized church as it exists today, wasn't in existence then. For those who've left the system for whatever reason and are now facing the future with only your relationship with the Father to validate who you are - this book is for you.

What the "unchurched" movement is saying is that a person who has a genuine faith in God does not need a "faith community." But is sanctification an integral part of our salvation, and if so, what place does a "faith community" play in bringing about that sanctification?

Consider Hebrews 12:14 – "Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord." For the author to the Hebrews, eternal salvation includes sanctification (the process of becoming holy), not merely justification (being declared "not guilty" in the court of the Almighty). Paul likewise teaches that justification never stands alone, but that one who is justified is inevitably sanctified:

For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. (Romans 8:29–30)

Here, the purpose of God in saving the elect is that they should be "conformed to the image of His Son," language that surely bespeaks sanctification. Likewise, Paul makes it clear that salvation is wrapped up in being one with Messiah in His death and in His resurrection:

Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Messiah Yeshua have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Messiah was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection (Romans 6:3–5)

In other words, our justification is procured through Yeshua's sacrificial death on our behalf, for by His death He has paid the penalty of our sins. But Yeshua did not remain in the tomb. He arose! And thus if we who are believers were united with Him in His death, we are also united with Him in His resurrection, meaning that we "walk in newness of life." This makes it amply clear that justification and sanctification are inseparable in the same way that Yeshua's death and resurrection are inseparable.

But what does this brief foray into soteriology (the doctrine of salvation) have to do with our discus-

⁸ Taken from The Barna Group website (<http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=Topic&TopicID=38>).

sion of community as an essential characteristic of a biblical ecclesiology? It is simply this: membership in the community of believers is one of the primary means by which those who are justified progress in their sanctification. Or to say it simply: one of God's primary means of sanctifying those He justifies is their membership in the community of believers, the *ekklesia*.

If, then, both justification and sanctification are equally important components of our salvation, and if the community of believers is an essential means by which God effects sanctification in His children, membership in such a community is not an option—it is essential for our growth in holiness.

As people who have come to love the Torah as God's gracious instructions in righteousness, this assertion makes perfect sense. For as one studies the Torah, it becomes evident that certain of the *mitzvot* cannot be obeyed apart from community involvement. The very fact that the Shabbat as well as the Mo'edim (Appointed Times) require a "sacred assembly" (מִקְרָא קֹדֶשׁ, *mikra' kodesh*, cf. Lev 23:4–5) points conclusively to this fact. Or consider the *mitzvah* of wearing *tzitzit*. This command involves not only wearing *tzitzit* but also looking upon them: "It shall be *tzitzit* for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the LORD, so as to do them... (Numbers 15:39). The "you" in this sentence is plural in the Hebrew as are the following verbs "to look," "to remember," and "to do." In other words, a person cannot fulfill the commandment of *tzitzit* by himself or herself—looking at them means looking at others who are wearing the *tzitzit* and this requires a community. In fact, when the Torah is studied as a whole, it becomes entirely evident that living in accordance with the Torah can only be accomplished within a community that is committed to obey the Torah's commandments. From a Torah perspective, community is an absolute essential, not an "add-on."

Paul speaks directly to this issue in his epistle to the Ephesians:

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Messiah; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Messiah. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Messiah, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love. (Ephesians 4:11–16)

Here, the phrase "the fullness of Messiah" is very similar to Paul's language in Romans 8 in which he speaks of being "conformed to the image of Messiah." And how is it that each member attains "to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Messiah"? It is through the "proper working of each individual part," causing the community as a whole to be built up, which is another way of saying "become sanctified." For Paul, the sanctification process which must go on in every true believer is bound up with the proper working of the community of Messiah of which he or she is a member.

This, then, is the first and most important step in recovering a biblical perspective of community: to recognize that community is essential because apart from community it is impossible to obey God and grow in holiness.

Community vs. Congregation

"But," you might say, "how does this make a distinction between 'community' and 'congregation'? Couldn't a congregation affect the sanctifying process just as well as a community?" My answer to that

is “no,” and here’s why: the sanctification process often involves persevering through difficult circumstances (cp. Rom 5:3–5; James 1:2–4). Those who view themselves as part of a community have made a long-term, generational commitment to that community and therefore are willing to endure difficulties and circumstances that require greater faith, humility, patience and the exercise of genuine love to others (which often involves forgiving others). In other words, a commitment to community includes a willingness to persevere through trials which in turn advances the progress of personal sanctification. Of course, such a commitment to the community flows from one’s personal commitment to become more like Messiah (i.e., to be conformed to His image).

In contrast, the whole matter of commitment within a congregational mentality remains on the personal level. Members are encouraged to have a “personal commitment to God,” but this is often considered a private rather than a public matter. With such a “congregational mentality,” if the individual becomes dissatisfied with what the congregation has to offer or if difficulties arise, the normal response is to seek attendance elsewhere, in another congregation that better suits one’s expectations. Instead of persevering through the difficulties, the individual leaves to find “greener grass” and therefore the spiritual growth which would have come by remaining and working through the difficulties is lost.

Perhaps an illustration might help to explain the narrow way that I am defining “community” as over against “congregation.” Consider a business that has employees. The owner of the business views the whole enterprise quite differently than do the employees. The owner plans to be involved in the business long-term while the employees are there primarily to receive a paycheck. As long as the employees receive their pay and the working environment is suitable to them, they remain content and do their job. But if hard times come and the employer announces that the hourly wages are going to be cut, employees naturally think about finding employment elsewhere. In such a scenario, the owner may work longer hours to make up the difference, or make other difficult decisions to keep the business afloat. But the owner has too much invested in the business to ever think of abandoning it. Employees may come and go, but the owner remains. His commitment to the business stems from the fact that he hopes the business will benefit him in the long-term.

I think the analogy to our discussion of community vis-a-vis congregation is obvious: the owner of the business represents a community mentality. He’s in for the long haul because he has ownership of the business and he is willing to sacrifice his own interests in order to make the business succeed. The same is true for members of a community. They have a vested interest in the community—an ownership, if you will, because they see the future of their families wrapped up in the on-going viability of the community. They are in for the long haul and are willing to sacrifice their own interests in order to maintain the community. The employees represent a congregational mentality. They arrive at work each day because they are paid to do so. The same is true of a “congregational mentality.” People come to a congregation in order to be personally benefited. As long as they are satisfied, they stay. If things are not to their satisfaction, however, they begin to look around for a different congregation to attend.

Thus, what differentiates “community” and “congregation” (as I am using these terms here) is the kind of commitment each requires of its members. Community membership requires a commitment to the generational success of the community, meaning that the core values of the community take priority over personal preferences. Congregational membership encourages commitment to one’s “personal faith” and seeks to accommodate the diversity that such “personal faith” may express.

This difference in commitment between a community and a congregation is highlighted when one considers the manner in which a community affects sanctification in its individual members. It does so through the “working of each individual part.” The level and kind of commitment will determine whether one will allow such inner workings of the group to affect personal sanctification.

Consider this scenario: as a member of a local Torah community, you are regularly bothered by this person or that one whose mannerisms, personality, or social ineptitude rub you the wrong way. You seek to avoid them when in the community setting, but eventually it's just too much for you. So what do you do? Do you begin visiting other groups to see if you can find one you like better? Or do you stop to consider that those people who "rub you the wrong way" may be the very "parts" of the body that will teach you humility, patience, love, and humble service? If you have a "community perspective," you will seek to find ways to express genuine love and concern for these people. If you have a "congregational mentality," you'll start "shopping" for somewhere else to attend.

Consider a second scenario: someone in the community approaches you in private and expresses concern with the clothes you wear because at times, as far as that person is concerned, your clothing is less than modest. They might remind you that the community as a whole has adopted modesty standards and call you to conform to them. What is your response? If you have a community mindset, you'll be grateful that someone took the initiative to approach you and you'll give his or her words due consideration. After all, you are part of the community, and if the manner of your attire is causing some difficulties, you'll be willing to make changes for the good of the whole. On the other hand, if you have a "congregational mentality," you might consider the whole thing to be a bother. You will probably be offended and wonder why anyone would have the right to pass judgment on the clothes you wear. You might decide to start looking for another congregation that is not "living in the dark ages."

Last scenario: A member of your community is caught in the sin of adultery. He is confronted in accordance with Scripture, but refuses to admit his sin or to turn from it. Eventually the Overseers bring the matter to the whole group and, with remorse, announce that the offender is unrepentant and has therefore been dismissed from the community. Some of the people, however, think the leaders acted harshly and that more time should have been allowed before such strong measures were taken. As a result, some people began to speak against the leaders and eventually leave the community. They encourage you to join them since they are beginning a new congregation that promises to be "more understanding and not so rigid." What do you do? If you have a community perspective, you understand that the good of the whole community takes precedence. As difficult as it may be, dismissing one member in order to preserve the integrity of the community is the right thing to do—"a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough" (1Cor 5:6f). On the other hand, a congregational perspective focuses upon the feelings of the individual rather than the good of the whole community. If this is your perspective, you may express to others that the group should be more accepting of people and less judgmental. Eventually, you'll probably join those who have left.

What I hope to illustrate by these various examples (even if they are not perfect illustrations) is that the sanctifying effects of community come about not only by the positive things that a community offers (encouragement, edification, companionship, the opportunity to live out the *mitzvot*, and so forth) but also by the hardships that come through unpleasant and even disturbing events that take place in the life of the community. The "hard part" of community (forgiving those who offend, seeking forgiveness from those we offend, loving the hard-to-love, grieving with those who grieve, suffering with those who suffer, and so forth) constitutes a very real means of sanctification for those who are committed community members.

Members of One Another

In Ephesians 4:25, a verse that opens the concluding exhortations of the Apostle as he has described the local community of believers after the analogy of the human body, he writes:

Therefore, laying aside falsehood, SPEAK TRUTH EACH ONE of you WITH HIS NEIGHBOR, for we are members of one another.

Paul has been describing the manner in which the community of believers causes a growth in sanctification until each member matures “to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Messiah” (v. 13). In v. 25, he describes one way in which this takes place: we are to lay aside falsehood and speak the truth to each other. He basis this on a quote from Zech 8:16 –

אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשׂוּ דְבַרְוּ אִמְת אִישׁ אֶת־רֵעֵהוּ אִמְת וּמִשְׁפַּט שְׁלוֹם בְּשַׁעְרֵיכֶם	These are the things which you shall do: speak truth each one with his neighbor; <i>therefore</i> truth, justice and peace will have judged in your gates. ⁹
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But why would anyone be compelled either to speak or listen to one’s neighbor in this whole interchange of truth? Paul tells us why—“for we are members of one another.” This is community language! He does not say “we have a relationship with each other,” though the phrase certainly includes this. Nor does he say “we like or appreciate each other,” though that too may often be the case. He uses the same “body” metaphor he has employed earlier: “we are members of one another.” In other words, each one is necessary for the life of the other because by God’s providence, He has placed each one within the local community to bring about His sovereign purposes. Living in the realm of falsehood within the community is like stabbing yourself because in the analogy of the body, the others who are affected by such falsehood are in reality as close and necessary as one’s own limbs. No one in their right mind would knowingly wound themselves!

Do you see that Paul’s words here can only be rightly understood in the context of what I have been calling “community?” Viewing the other members of the group as vital to my own spiritual existence is community language, not congregational verbiage. It presupposes an enduring commitment to the other members of my community because they are necessary and vital to my own life in Messiah. I could no more entertain the notion of abandoning them than could I consider cutting off an arm or a leg. And Paul does not have some ethereal “universal Church” concept in mind here. He’s not talking in esoteric, theological categories, but in the daily “nuts and bolts” of life. When he talks about speaking the truth to one another, he envisions a community in which people converse and share life together. In short, Paul presumes that groups of believers who ban together under the headship of Messiah with the purpose of helping each other grow into the full stature which belongs to Messiah, will do so by developing an indefatigable commitment to one another which alone can establish them as a community.

This, of course, is the goal for which we are to strive. I recognize that no community will entirely achieve this goal, for there will always be those who attend the gatherings of the community who either have no real commitment to the community itself or whose commitment is minimal at best. But it is to be our goal, nonetheless, and if we hope that our current Torah communities will remain viable into the next generation, then we must apply all diligence to move toward the goal of being genuine communities under the headship of Yeshua. If we remain content merely to form congregations, it is very probable that the Torah movement will be a one-generation phenomenon.

⁹ This is my own translation, taking אִמְת וּמִשְׁפַּט שְׁלוֹם as the compound subject of שַׁפְטוּ. The Stone Tanach takes שַׁפְטוּ as an imperative: “There are the things that you should do: Speak the truth with one another; and in your gates judge with truth, justice and peace.”

A Community or a Congregation? For What are We Striving?

Part Three

Tim Hegg • TorahResource • June 2007

In the first two parts of this study, I sought to emphasize our need to restore a biblical “ecclesiology”—a biblical understanding of what the “body of Messiah” truly is. Such a restoration necessarily begins at the leadership level, requiring those who accept the office of Overseer to recover a biblical perspective of what it means to be a shepherd patterned after Yeshua Who is the “Chief Shepherd” of the *ekklesia*. This involves a commitment that puts the community’s needs above one’s own desires for recognition and advancement. Secondly, there must be a renewed commitment to one another on the part of each member of the community with a goal to passing on to the next generation the life of faith in Yeshua. Thus, both for the leaders of the community as well as for each member within the community, a commitment to the next generation is an essential and driving motivation to stay together. When difficulties arise (and they inevitably will), the commitment to a generational viability for the community creates the impetus to work through the difficulties rather than leave the community.

But the question I want to ask in this part of the study is this: what is it that can produce such a commitment? How can we foster a commitment to one another within a community of faith that triumphs over the divisive circumstances that would otherwise separate us? Here we go to the very foundation of the community itself, which is our faith in Yeshua that binds us together in the first place. This faith, while surely having a personal dimension, also has a corporate one. Recognizing and accepting this corporate aspect of our faith enables us to strengthen our commitment to the community as an expression of that faith. This, then, is another step in recovering a biblical “ecclesiology.”

Step Three: Recognize the Corporate Aspect of Your Faith

As I noted in Part Two of this study, our faith in Yeshua consists not only of being declared righteous before God (justification) but also in being conformed to the image of Yeshua (sanctification). Moreover, one of the most significant means utilized by the Spirit in this process of sanctification is the life-to-life interaction experienced within the community of faith. Recognizing that “we are members of one another” (Eph 4:25) and that each member of the community functions as an indispensable part of the whole, we commit ourselves to the community which in turn produces a maturing of our faith. For it is the living out of our faith in the context of loving one’s neighbor as oneself that requires our faith to grow.

We may note how the Ten Words (Commandments) form a general paradigm for this process of sanctification. The first four Words speak to one’s personal faith in and submission to God as the one and only true God. The fifth commandment forms a natural bridge between love for God and love for one’s neighbor because honoring one’s parents is the first step in the practice of loving others. The final five Words extend this outward expression to the wider community. In other words, loving God (one’s personal commitment of faith) inevitably produces love for one’s neighbor (one’s corporate commitment of faith). But love for one’s neighbor also requires a growing love for God, for it is one’s relationship to God that forms the desire and ability to persevere in loving others. The Ten Words (the summation of the whole Torah) is therefore a cycle of growth in faith. Loving God proceeds to honoring one’s parents, which in turn proceeds to loving one’s neighbor, which requires a growing love for God. In the process

of loving one's neighbor as well as being loved by one's neighbor, one's love for God is tested and strengthened, and the cycle begins again. We could illustrate this with the following diagram:

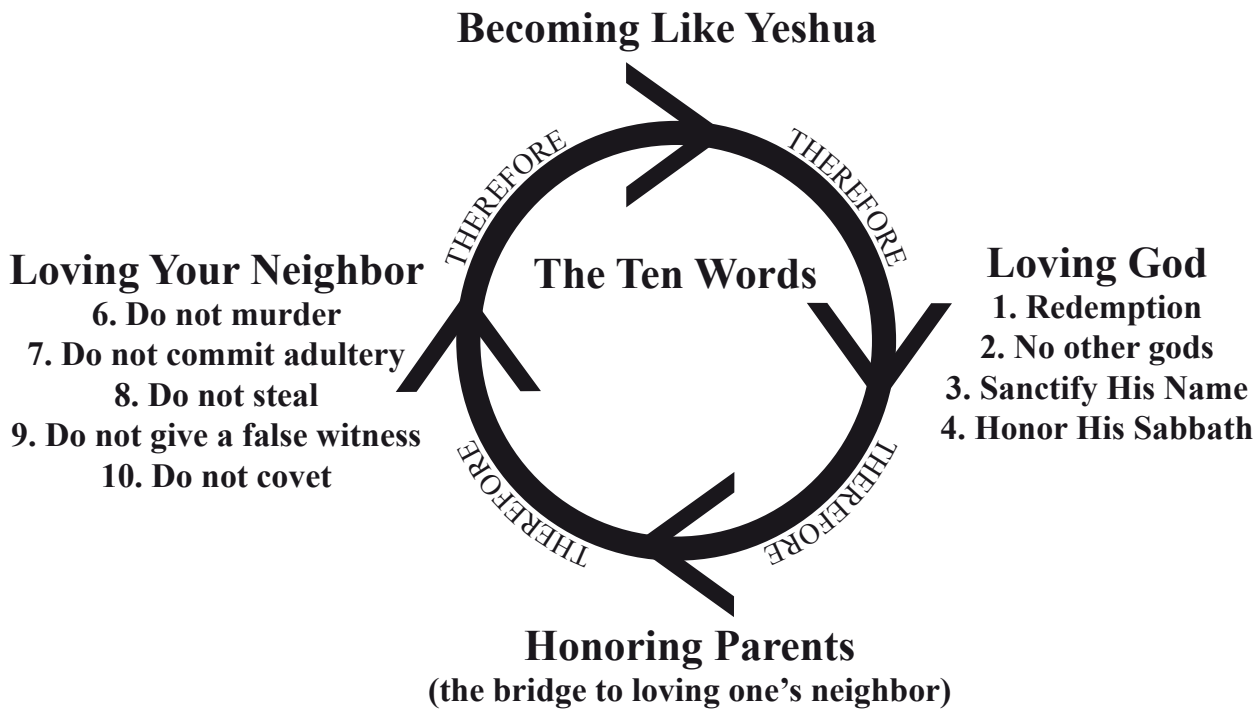


Figure 1

Given this understanding of how God sanctifies those who are His, we should have a greater appreciation for the common opening of nearly every traditional blessing: “Blessed are You, Adonai our God, King of the universe, Who sanctifies us with His commandments (*mitzvot*)....”¹⁰ Surely it is God Who works within us to conform us to His will (Phil 2:12–13), but He uses means to accomplish this task of sanctification, and His commandments play a central role in this process.

As we seek to become like Yeshua, therefore, we must abandon the idea, so prevalent in our times, that this growth in sanctification is summed up in one's personal relationship with God through Yeshua. Surely it begins there but it cannot remain individualistic. True salvation is manifest in one's growth in holiness, a growth that requires our love for God to be demonstrated in the way we love each other. The way that the world will know that we are truly Yeshua's disciples is when our love for each other is manifested: “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). Such love is tested when difficulties arise; when bearing one another's burdens is required (cf. Gal 6:2); when offenses occur which require repentance and forgiveness (Eph 4:31–32); when we are called to love those who are difficult to love (Eph 4:2); and when we consider our fellow community members as more important than ourselves (Phil 2:3; Rom 12:10). In God's way of salvation, there are no “lone rangers.”

Sometimes within our own community we remind ourselves that the reason living in community is often so difficult is because it is so important. Very often the most important things in life require greater

¹⁰ Note that this is cast in the plural (“our God,” “sanctifies us”), for the Sages were well aware of the fact that obeying the Torah requires a community. The requirement of a minyan (ten adult males) in order to establish a synagogue likewise indicates the necessity of community in the theology of the Sages.

effort and self-sacrifice. We have come to realize that life calls us not merely to enjoy the fatness of the earth but to exult in heights attained after the toil of climbing. In short, we have come to value the high priority of community life as one of God's primary means by which He intends to conform us to the image of His own beloved Son and by so doing, to enable us to fulfill the very reason for which we were created: to sanctify God's Name upon this earth by being fully satisfied with Him.

But what keeps us striving for such a lofty ideal? What is the spiritual dynamic that continues to energize us toward the goal of being like Yeshua? The answer to this question is two-fold: 1) our old self has been crucified with Messiah, and 2) a new self has been created so that we truly desire to please God (cf. Eph 4:24; Col 3:10). Consider Paul's words in Rom 6:5–6,

For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin.

In other words, in striving to become like Yeshua, we are acting in accordance with who we are and who we are becoming. This does not mean that the path of sanctification is automatic, which is why I chose the word "striving," for we still have the sin nature which must be denied and put to death (cf. Col 3:5). In fact, Paul uses metaphors that incorporate real struggle when he describes the process of sanctification. He compares the believer to a soldier in battle (1Tim 2:3–4; Eph 6:12f) or to an athlete running a race or boxing in the ring (1Cor 9:24, 26; 2Tim 2:5). What these metaphors all have in common is that the subject of each example has a goal befitting their life occupation and it is the attainment of that goal that drives them forward regardless of the cost. The same is true for those who have believed in Messiah, Yeshua. We have died and risen to a new life, a life of being disciples of Yeshua. Our goal is to sanctify the Name of God upon the earth by walking in His footsteps—by living as He lived. And the Spirit of God Who indwells us is committed to bringing us to that goal by comforting, encouraging, convicting, and strengthening us in accordance with the will of God.

This process of sanctification described by Paul, in which the "old man" is put to death and a "new man" reborn within the believer, accords with the promise God made through the prophet Ezekiel that He would cleanse Israel, taking the heart of stone out of her and replacing it with a heart of flesh, and put His Spirit within them to bring about their sanctification.

Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances. (Ezek 36:25–27)

Thus, those who are now being sanctified are the first fruits of a final harvest that will see the sanctification of Israel on a national scale. Or to say it another way, the remnant in each generation, made up of all who come to God through faith in His Messiah, stands as a clear demonstration of God's faithfulness to His promise to eventually save and sanctify Israel as a whole.

It is, then, this process of sanctification—the work of the Spirit of God within the life of each and every true believer in Yeshua—that energizes the soul to persevere in the ways of faith, and in this struggle for holiness, to see the great value and necessity of being part of a believing community. It is our love for God and His word, our loyalty to Yeshua as our Master, Savior, and Messiah, and the abiding presence of the Spirit within us that keeps us fervent in our resolve to "preserve the unity of the Spir-

it in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3).

What this means for us as we seek to build Torah communities is evident: our success in establishing communities that will span generations is directly related to the measure of genuine faith each community member possesses. It is from our loving God with all our heart, soul, and might that we will be enabled by His grace to love our neighbor. If we are weak in the former, we will fail in the latter.

This highlights another important truth in our quest for recovering a biblical ecclesiology: Yeshua, Who is the head of the community (*ekklesia*) and the very object of our faith, must always receive the pre-eminence. As the object of saving faith, there exists a one-to-one relationship between the Messiah and each individual who has believed in Him. Each one may rightly say with the Psalmist, “Adonai is my shepherd, I shall not want” (Ps 23:1) as well as with Paul, “I have been crucified with Messiah; and it is no longer I who live, but Messiah lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me” (Gal 2:20). As individuals who have come to faith in Yeshua, surely He must be seen as pre-eminent in our lives for our goal is to become like Him.

But Yeshua must not only receive the pre-eminence in our lives as individual believers. He must also receive the pre-eminence in the life of our communities, for He is the head of the *ekklesia*. Paul makes this clear in his Epistle to the Colossians: “He is also head of the body, the *ekklesia*; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything” (Col 1:18). The corporate reality of our faith can rightly be expressed only when Yeshua is seen to have the pre-eminence within our respective communities.

Some might question how this could possibly be otherwise. After all, as “messianics” surely the person of Yeshua is what defines us. But while this may be true in word, in some cases it is sadly lacking in reality. Some have denied that Yeshua is the only way to the Father (cf. Jn 14:6), suggesting that other means of gaining righteousness before God exist. Others have denied His deity and in so doing have undermined the authority of the Scriptures and brought into question Yeshua’s ability to secure an infinite atonement for sinners. Still others are suggesting that Jewish believers in Yeshua should meld back into the traditional Jewish community, leaving the pre-eminence of Messiah as the duty of the Gentile Church. In more subtle ways, some leaders have made their position so prominent within the congregations they lead that the authority of Yeshua as the “Senior Pastor” (Chief Shepherd) is greatly diminished or even eclipsed. They appear to have forgotten the principle announced by Yochanan the Baptist: “He must increase but I must decrease” (Jn 3:30).

In summary, if we are to build Torah communities that remain vibrant for the coming generations, we must see our faith in Yeshua as both personal and corporate, not diminishing one for the other. And we must give Yeshua “first place in everything.” As we live out our faith with this perspective, we may trust that Messiah Himself will build His *ekklesia*, and even the power of Hades will not prevail against us (Matt 16:18). For as He builds, He will use us as “living stones,” being “built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Yeshua Messiah” (1Pet 2:5).