

Good books, though rare enough, are more common than important books. Mark Kinzer has written a good and important book. Kinzer writes lucidly and argues his case clearly and cogently. He is fair-minded and judicious in dealing with the evidence he covers, even when treating data that create difficulties for his position, and he is careful and nuanced in his description of other thinkers and movements, even with positions that he does not endorse. When required by the evidence, he is suitably modest and proportionate in the claims he makes. He covers a broad and varied terrain with a sure foot, going into appropriate detail at numerous points without losing sight of the main path and final destination. These strengths and others make this a good book.

Still, Kinzer's book is even more important than it is good. I think it is fair to say that the most intrinsically significant doctrinal development to have shaped Christian life over the past several centuries has been the churches' reconsideration of its theological posture toward the Jewish people, as reflected, for example, in the official rejection of the teaching of supersessionism by many church bodies. It is as though a crucial process of Christian thought that went into deep freeze some eighteen centuries ago has in our day begun to thaw and put out new shoots. Nevertheless, I sense that even theologically-educated Christians find it difficult to make progress in thinking through the logic and practice of a post-supersessionist Christian theology, especially in the areas of ecclesiology and missional practice. Our grasp of the challenges is often more existential and rhetorical than theologically and scripturally reasoned and conceptually clear. One reason for this is that Christians generally have been slow and hesitant to recognize and admit that this whole set of issues cannot be thoroughly understood, let alone addressed, without a profound engagement with *Jewish Christian identity*, its nature, practice, and mystery. And even when Christians have recognized this, they have faced an obvious limitation. Most of them are not themselves Jewish-Christians, have little familiarity with the Messianic Jewish movement and know relatively little of its origins, development, and contemporary forms and debates.

Thus the importance of Kinzer's book. Having thoroughly grasped the theological challenges posed by the rejection of supersessionism, he has carried the discussion forward in a bold yet carefully reasoned and scripturally supported way, proposing a renewed vision of the nature of the ekklesia as a bilateral communion of "the ekklesia of the nations" and "the ekklesia of the circumcision" united to each other by faith in Christ. Moreover, he advances this proposal from within the movement of Messianic Jews and is able to show how his proposal represents one sensitive and plausible "reception" of the inheritance of Jewish-Christian experience over the past two centuries. I am sure that everyone who finishes the book will acknowledge that

Kinzer's proposal raises issues of fundamental significance not only about the legitimacy and importance of Messianic Judaism, but about the nature of the church's own identity.

I found the book persuasive in many of its core claims, much as I recall having found the work of the Orthodox Jewish theologian Michael Wyschogrod convincing when I first read him many years ago (indeed, Kinzer frequently cites Wyschogrod in support of his position). I think that Kinzer convincingly shows that a conception of the church as a bilateral communion of Gentile disciples and Torah-observant Jewish believers is directly supported by significant New Testament passages and is broadly consistent with most of the rest of the New Testament. (Unlike Kinzer, however, I think some texts resist accommodation to this vision, especially Ephesians 2, see below). I found especially illuminating Kinzer's treatment of Mark 7 and analogous passages in Matthew and Paul regarding the status of the dietary law among Jesus' disciples. Perhaps in part because Kinzer inhabits a sociological and ecclesiological location that is more similar to that of the New Testament writers than has been the case with most Christian exegetes down through the centuries, he can read these texts in ways that are not merely fresh and arresting (as we are wont to say today), but that have greater plausibility on standard exegetical grounds than more familiar alternatives.

As in my reading of Wyschogrod, however, I found myself wondering about the deeper evangelical significance of this ecclesial vision. How and in what sense does this proposal for ordering the life of the ekklesia propose to give a fuller and more faithful corporate form to the truth of the gospel than do more familiar visions from which it departs? Here it seems to me Kinzer's central answers are three. First, by affirming that Jewish followers of Jesus remain obligated to some substantial measure of Torah observance, his proposal cuts out the deepest root of unscriptural supersessionism and gives bodily testimony to the continuing validity of God's covenant with Israel. Second, by affirming the bilateral constitution of the church, his proposal gives social and ecclesial form to the peace wrought by Christ, as a unity of mutual blessing between those who are different. Third, by defining Jewish-Christian identity as Messianic Judaism that is "home" in Judaism and "home away from home" in the church of the Gentiles, it conceives of Messianic Judaism as a bridge community between Judaism and the church of the Gentiles that can heal the schism between these estranged parts of the one people of God, even prior to the end of days. My impression is that Kinzer devotes the most time to arguing for and expanding upon the first point, less to the second, and still less to the third. Here I wish he had struck a more even balance. In particular, it seems to me the third point finds the least direct support from the exegetical case he makes, and so needs to be more extensively supported by further warrants (scriptural, theological, prudential etc.) if it is to be fully convincing.

Let me say more about what I just called the deeper evangelical significance of Kinzer's vision. I think the scandal (in the best Pauline sense of the term) of his proposal is the seriousness with

which it takes the ekklesia's vocation to be the social embodiment of messianic peace between Israel and the nations, as a sign of Jesus' identity as Messiah of Israel and light of the nations. Here I think he rightly points out the dangers of two alternative conceptions of messianic peace: on the one hand, a unity that is socially "thick" but achieved at the cost of erasing the distinction of Jew and Gentile (e.g., medieval Christendom and its radical intolerance of Jewish-Christian identity), and on the other hand, a unity that accepts the distinction of Jew and Gentile but only in a socially "thin" way that leaves out the covenantal, communal, and transgenerational dimensions of Jewish Christian existence (e.g., contemporary missions-oriented Jewish evangelism). Kinzer goads us to imagine the ekklesia as a bolder (and more biblical) sign of messianic peace that unites the best of both: a peace that is "thick" enough to encompass the covenantal dimensions of Jewish Christian existence and, I would want to add, the corresponding social dimensions of gentile Christian existence, yet "broad" enough to bring them into genuine communion with each other, and with non-messianic Judaism. In all of this I think Kinzer pushes the Christian imagination in a profoundly scriptural and evangelical direction.

At the same time, I was left with questions about how Kinzer would deal with the more traditional, but nevertheless wholly justified, ecclesial concern to express messianic peace through visible unity. Especially if one thinks of the church as a bilateral communion, close attention will have to be given both to the practices that maintain *difference* in unity and *unity* in difference. These are challenging issues for any ecclesiology, of course, and I think that it is reasonable for Kinzer to have placed the emphasis where he did (maintaining *difference* in unity) given the longer shadow of Christian history. But the long-term viability of Kinzer's proposal depends, I would think, on showing how it can convincingly address the other side of the equation, too. I'm sure Kinzer has given thought to this issue, and as a way of turning the conversation back over to him, I would like to raise some questions relating to each of the five basic principles of his ecclesiology:

**1.** The perpetual validity of God's covenant with the Jewish people. Granted the truth and importance of this affirmation, one might ask on what basis it is true. Non-messianic Jews undoubtedly affirm this proposition for non-christological reasons. Are Gentile Christians and Messianic Jews united in the belief that the deepest foundation of this perpetual validity is messianic and christological? If so, how does their common confession come to visible expression?

**2 & 3.** The perpetual validity of the Jewish way of life rooted in Torah and embodied in the oral law. Here I have two questions. Kinzer's book seems to me to make a convincing case for the perpetual validity of Written and Oral Torah as governing norms for Jewish life, rather than for the perpetual validity of "the Jewish way of life" as such. When he speaks of "the Jewish way of life," does Kinzer simply mean obedience to Written and Oral Torah, or something else, and if so, what? Second, what modifications, if any, does Kinzer understand Jewish obedience to Written and Oral Torah to undergo in response to Jesus as teacher/embodiment of Torah? Or, to put it another way, to what degree are disciples from the nations and Messianic Jews united

by a common obligation to interpret all ethical and religious norms in light of Jesus' messianic authority?

4. The bilateral constitution of the church. Acts 15 gives convincing expression to the church's bilateral constitution, but other texts just as forcefully articulate a mandate for visible unity. Indeed, Eph 2 articulates this unity so forcefully that it seems to place the bilateral constitution of the church under extreme pressure, *pace* the valiant but finally unpersuasive exegetical efforts of Kinzer following Markus Barth. Rather than attempt to force this passage to fit the mold of Acts 15, would it not be better to take up the passage's challenge by addressing how a bilateral church could order its common life to give visible expression to the vision of unity so powerfully expressed in Ephesians and elsewhere?

5. The ekklesia as a bridge of solidarity between the redeemed nations and the people of Israel as a sign of future confirmation. If I understand Kinzer correctly, this principle assumes that Messianic Jews will identify Judaism as their primary religious "home," for only so do they form a genuine bridge between Gentile Christians and non-messianic Jews. But when there is a potential conflict between the visible unity of the ekklesia (comprising Jews and Gentiles) and the visible unity of the Jewish people (including Messianic Jews), how are such conflicts to be adjudicated? What authority takes precedence on which issues and why?

These questions will, I hope, be taken as one more expression of my profound appreciation for Kinzer's book.

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