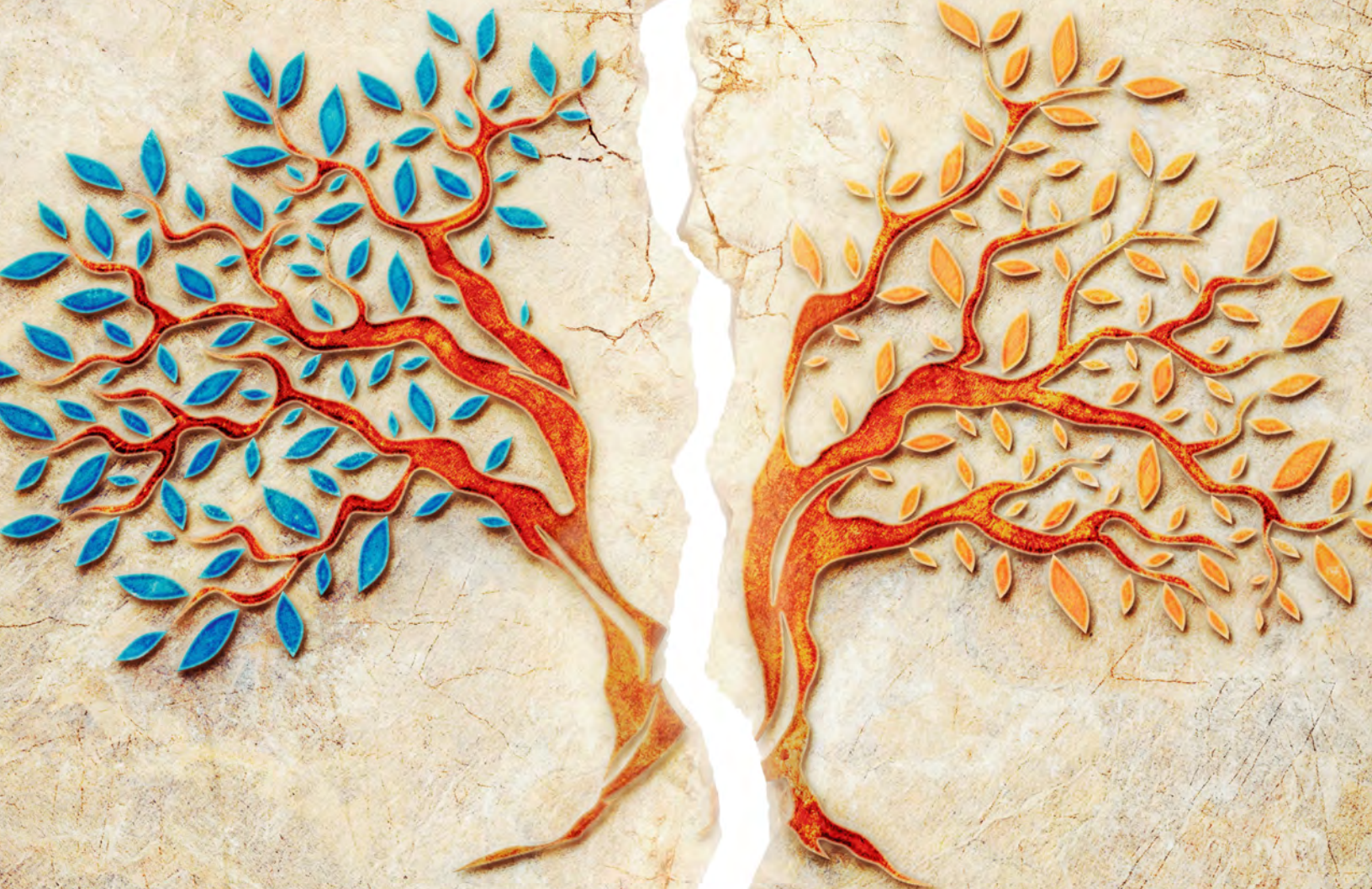




# The Cowardice of Disassociation

By Glenn Harris, M.Div.

Excluding Gentiles from Messianic synagogues is morally wrong, strategically unwise, and reflects negatively on all Jewish ministries.<sup>1</sup>



*Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came [ostensibly] from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. (Galatians 2:11-13 NKJV)*





Some years ago, I was waiting in line at a Tim Horton's. When I got to the front of the line, I placed my order, and as the cashier went to get it, the man behind me in line said (with a lovely Canadian-British accent), "I appreciate how you did that." I asked what he meant, and he said, "You were polite; you said, 'please' and 'thank you' to the young lady." I hadn't really thought about it. But then he went on to say, "I find most Americans lacking in courtesy." Suddenly, his compliment meant nothing to me. I replied calmly, "You'll forgive me if I decline to accept your compliment at the expense of my countrymen."

Loyalty is a big deal in my book. It is my conviction never to accept a compliment at the expense of a friend or brother, nor should we ever disassociate from one person or group in order to gain the approval (or avoid the disapproval) of another. When it comes to relationships, loyalty is paramount. Together with love, steadfast loyalty is the tandem idea undergirding the word *chesed*.

In 2008, a paper was presented to the LCJE<sup>2</sup> arguing that, as a matter of relevancy and authenticity, Messianic synagogues should only permit Jewish believers and intermarried couples (Jewish-Gentile) to hold membership. To my knowledge (and I specifically asked about this), there hasn't been anything presented recently to refute that policy. Perhaps a refutation was deemed unnecessary because only a tiny handful of congregations employ it or because it was too far removed

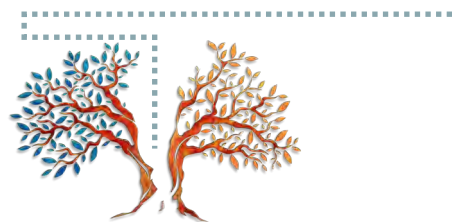
from the world of Jewish missions and evangelism to warrant attention. Or perhaps it was regarded as so obviously contrary to the biblical pattern that it could be ignored as a fringe view and not taken seriously.

Indulge me, if you will, with this refutation, since errors like this ought not to go unanswered. I believe that Jewish evangelism and Messianic congregational life are not separate endeavors but are intrinsically connected, as Rabbi Paul affirmed: *If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together* (1 Cor. 12:26, ESV).

### Statement

The policy of limiting or altogether excluding Gentile participation in Messianic congregations, however well-intentioned, is morally indefensible, strategically flawed, theologically shortsighted, and destined to fail. Five points will be made in support of this statement.

## I. A Flawed Model Biblically



The policy of limiting or excluding Gentile participation in Messianic congregations fails to appreciate God's ultimate intent to unite humanity in the faith. This is attested to in passages such as:

**A. Genesis 9:27, ESV** (Japheth is to dwell IN the tents of Shem.)

*May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem...*

Though shrouded in antiquity, Noah's prophecy nevertheless speaks to the union of Jews and Gentiles, saying that togetherness was to occur within the tents of Shem, not Japheth. To apply it to the present dispensation, the expectation is that Gentile believers (Japheth's descendants) are to be welcomed into Messianic Jewish congregations rather than Jewish believers (Shem's descendants) being expected to assimilate into Gentile congregations. There ought to be freedom in both directions. To exclude or even marginalize Gentile believers is to ignore the intent of this prophecy, which expresses the will of God to gather, not separate us.

**B. Isaiah 56:3, 6-8, NASB** (God welcomes people from all nations into His house.)

*Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, "The Lord will surely separate me from His people..." the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to Him, and to love the name of the Lord, to be His servants, everyone who keeps from profaning the sabbath and holds fast My covenant; even those I will bring to My holy mountain and make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar; for My house will be called a house of*

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a paper that the author presented to the North American Conference of the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism in Anaheim, CA, in February 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Lausanne Consultation of Jewish Evangelism



prayer for all the peoples.” The Lord God, who gathers the dispersed of Israel, declares, “Yet others I will gather to them, to those already gathered.”

The fact that Messiah quotes this passage in Mark 11:17 to express what God expected in His house even at that time implies that people from all nations were invited to join in the worship of the God of Israel even at that time. It was not something to be set aside until the time of His millennial reign nor relegated to *Olam-Ha-Ba* (“the World to Come”).

The next two passages reinforce one another and, taken together, demonstrate the divine intention to bring Jews and Gentiles together in unity. Messiah Yeshua’s purpose was to create from the two groups one flock, one new people, one body.

**C. John 10:14-16, NLT** (Messiah stated His purpose explicitly.)

*I am the Good Shepherd; I know My own sheep, and they know Me, just as My Father knows Me and I know the Father. So I sacrifice My life for the sheep. I have other sheep, too, that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They will listen to My voice, and there will be one flock with one Shepherd.*

It might be argued that Yeshua was speaking of the one worldwide community of all believers and not necessarily of local assemblies. Strictly speaking, this is true. However, to exclude Gentile followers from a local Messianic congregation reflects a

willing disregard for the *spirit* of His words, which speak of our unity in Him.

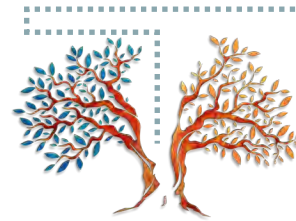
**D. Ephesians 2:14-19, NLT** (Paul emphasizes Messiah’s purpose.)

*For Messiah Himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in His own body on the cross, He broke down the wall of hostility that separated us... He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in Himself one new people from the two groups. Together as one body, Messiah reconciled both groups to God by means of His death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death. He brought this Good News of peace to you Gentiles who were far away from Him, and peace to the Jews who were near. Now all of us can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Messiah has done for us. So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God’s holy people. You are members of God’s family.*

How can we justify the exclusion of Gentile believers from Messianic synagogues in light of the above teachings of Messiah Yeshua and Paul? Would not ignoring such passages constitute the hermeneutical fallacy of *selective citing*?<sup>3</sup> The paper previously presented in favor of excluding Gentiles cited heavily from the Torah and one particular passage in Nehemiah, the contexts of which no longer

apply (Gentiles are not universally heathen polytheists as they were at that time). Further, the author made no mention of the passages cited here. Thus, it is our contention that those who employ a policy of Gentile exclusion do so, not in the light of God’s Word, but in contravention of it.

## II. A Flawed Model Morally and Philosophically



### A. It repeats the error and hypocrisy of Peter (Galatians 2:11ff).

The Holy Spirit saw fit to include this embarrassing episode in the New Covenant Scriptures.<sup>4</sup> A group of Jewish believers acting, it appeared, in defiance of the decision of the Jerusalem Council<sup>5</sup> arrived in Antioch, apparently still insisting that Gentiles be circumcised in order to become disciples of Messiah. Upon their arrival, Peter quickly disassociated from his Gentile brothers and sisters for fear of the Jewish delegation’s disapproval. Paul described it as an act of hypocrisy, one whose implications were serious enough to warrant a public rebuke.

### B. It alienates our brothers and sisters in Messiah.

If we take seriously Paul’s teaching about the fully equal standing of Jew-

<sup>3</sup> See: James W. Sire, *Scripture Twisting: 20 Ways the Cults Misread the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> The brutal honesty of Scripture, even revealing deeply flawed “heroes,” is a mark of its authenticity.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 15 (esp. vv. 24-29).



ish and Gentile believers in Messiah,<sup>6</sup> how can we justify a segregated model of life for Messiah's holy community? Perhaps in light of the Golden Rule, we ought to imagine ourselves walking in Ruth's sandals.<sup>7</sup> Don't we rejoice that she who was a foreigner found favor in the eyes of Boaz and was welcomed in Israel? Wouldn't we want that for ourselves? Why then, in the present circumstances, would we deny it to others?

### **C. It is premised on *Yirat Adam* (fear of man's disapproval).**

Though couched in nuanced terms such as "relevance" and "authenticity," is the root of this policy a desire to win the approval (or avoid the disapproval) of the larger Jewish community? The fear of man is a grievous foundation upon which to develop policy. Whether it proves successful or not is immaterial. The end does not justify the means. And what is the end goal? Respect from Jewish unbelievers achieved through an artificially controlled demographic?

### **D. It borders on ethnocentrism (a form of idolatry).**

At the risk of stating the obvious, many Jewish people are preoccupied with their own ethnic or cultural identity. While Jewish ancestry is something that we ought to appreciate and thank God for, it is very nearly an obsession for some people. It is the first (and sometimes only) thing that they want to know about *you*. Such people might well be put off by the presence of Gentiles in the midst of a Messianic

synagogue, but should we exclude Gentiles in order to cater to such prejudices?

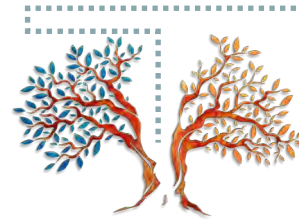
We all come into the kingdom with various kinds of "baggage" that must sooner or later be jettisoned if we hope to mature in Messiah. That baggage takes the form of sinful habits, attitudes, and prejudices. Preoccupation with one's own Jewishness is an attitude that ought to be left behind in one's new life with Messiah Yeshua. This isn't to suggest that we jettison our identity (indeed, in 1 Corinthians 7:17-20, we are exhorted not to), but when we come to Messiah, all things become new. There is no place for ethnocentrism, nor should we cater to it by excluding those deemed a "hindrance."

### **E. It sends the wrong signal to the Body of Messiah (namely, that Messianic Jews don't believe in the "one new man").**

We will take this up again in section V. But to the extent that Messianic Jews and Messianic congregations are scrutinized by the larger body of Messiah, this policy of excluding Gentile believers conveys a kind of disdain that will reflect badly on the movement. It suggests that we are merely paying lip service to the "one new man" teaching of Messiah Yeshua and of the New Covenant Scriptures.

For the above reasons, we believe that the policy of excluding Gentiles from membership or participation in the life of a Messianic congregation is morally indefensible and philosophically flawed.

## **III. A Flawed Model Theologically**



### **A. It is inconsistent with the revealed character of the living God.**

Those who would keep Jews and Gentiles separated from one another appeal to a long-obsolete paradigm. In antiquity, God commanded the Jewish people to be separate from the other nations, not on account of ethnicity but to keep them from the detestable religious practices of those nations. There is no equivalence whatsoever between modern evangelical Christians, who love and worship the God of Israel, and the Canaanites and other ancient peoples that surrounded Israel.

As stated previously and hearkening all the way back to Noah's prophecy, God repeatedly expressed the intent to bring people from every nation, tribe, language, and culture to know Him and to worship with Israel. The Psalms are replete with the invitation to all nations to come worship together with His people.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, the Prophets anticipated this.<sup>9</sup>

God has made clear His desire to unite humanity together under the headship of Messiah. Therefore, those who exclude non-Jews from their congregations are acting in opposition to His will and disdaining His purposes.

<sup>6</sup> Galatians 3:26-29.

<sup>7</sup> This writer takes the story of Ruth as not only historical but anticipatory (a *remez*).



**B. It is the Holy Spirit, not our strategies, that transforms hearts and minds.**

We don't doubt the sincere motives of those who desire to be an authentic local expression of Jewish people following Jesus. Nevertheless, our strategies are not a substitute for the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. We regard it as very unlikely that He would endorse, with His presence and power, any congregation that by policy excludes Gentile brothers and sisters in Messiah from membership or marginalizes their participation in the life of that congregation.

**C. Shouldn't we live, even now, with a view to Messiah's reign and the World to Come, when Jew and Gentile will enjoy even greater unity?**

We are reminded of the words of the prophet Zechariah describing the ongoing pilgrimage celebration of Sukkot during Messiah's reign, during which people from all nations will come and worship with Israel:

*Then it will come about that any who are left of all the nations that went against Jerusalem will go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to celebrate the Feast of Booths (Zech. 14:16, NASB 1995, emphasis added).*

And of those of the Apostle John during his glimpse into eternity:

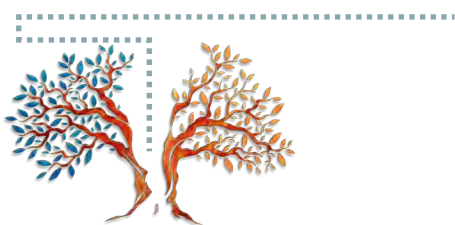
*After these things, I looked, and behold, a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all the tribes, peoples, and languages, standing before the throne*

*and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Rev. 7:9-10; see also Rev. 15:4, NASB).*

Doesn't it stand to reason that Messianic congregational life should reflect not only what Messiah Yeshua has accomplished but also the anticipation of a glorious and united future under the Kingship of Messiah Yeshua? Should we not express that coming glory in our present community life?

That beautiful blending of Jews and Gentiles in worship of the living God shows forth the better things to come. Why would we discourage that union when it is one of the greatest pieces of evidence of God's goodness, love, and grace, and the wonder and joy of our glorious future with Him?

**IV. A Flawed Model Evangelistically**



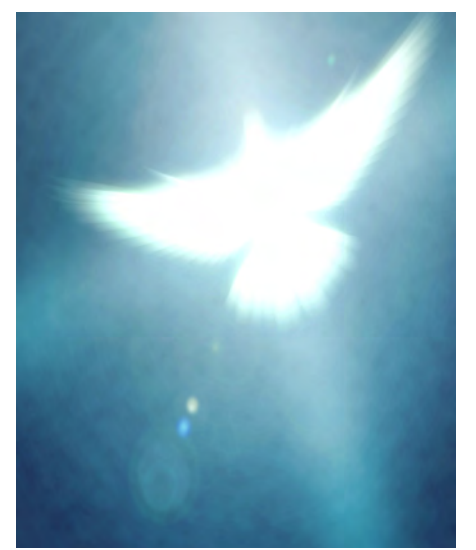
To begin with, it is entirely unrealistic. The attempt to artificially control congregational demographics isn't going to lessen the Jewish community's distrust for Jews who believe in Yeshua. Perhaps some of us need to relearn the fact that disapproval from our Jewish people is an inevitable part

of being His disciples. *If they have called the head of the house "Beelzebub," how much more the members of His household! (Mt. 10:25, NASB).*

To exclude the "wild olive branches," a most vibrant part of Messiah's community, is to forfeit their vital evangelistic contribution.

Of all people, we are in the best position to equip zealous, biblically-minded Gentiles to witness to their Jewish friends and neighbors and then invite them to our congregations. To turn these faithful brothers and sisters away in an attempt to appear "authentic" in the eyes of the unbelieving Jewish community is terribly shortsighted.

In view of the fact that the vast majority of modern-day Jewish believers in Jesus came to faith through the faithful and loving witness of Gentile believers, to now exclude Gentiles from congregational participation is not only evangelistically shortsighted but, in our opinion, an appalling show of ingratitude.



<sup>8</sup> Examples include Psalms 67:7, 72:11-17, 86:9, 87:4, and 117:1.

<sup>9</sup> Examples include Zechariah 8:20-23, Jeremiah 3:17, Isaiah 60:10-11, and Micah 4:1-2.





## V. Left Unaddressed, It Will Reflect Poorly on Jewish Missions



### A. It diminishes our reputation (having the wrong alliances).

Ignoring this exclusionary policy legitimizes otherwise unwarranted criticisms leveled at the movement. For example, some years ago, Will Varner, on behalf of The Master's Seminary, wrote this:

"Messianic Judaism tends to promote divisions that the redemptive work of Jesus has torn down... It has sometimes been charged that Messianic Judaism is rebuilding this wall of partition... by its emphasis on laws that have no continuing spiritual relevance for either Jews or Gentiles, (it) is creating an appearance that the wall still separates the two groups."<sup>10</sup>

We cannot afford to validate such allegations through our collective silence. If we who are engaged in gospel witness to Jewish people regard as irrelevant the policy of exclusion or marginalization of Gentiles in certain prominent Messianic congregations and fail to address this policy, are we not tacitly condoning it? What will happen if it becomes more widely known? Who could blame our critics for viewing with greater ambivalence the movement as a whole?

I will grant that this is a fringe practice and that comparatively few congregations employ this policy. Yet, the fact remains that some thought leaders within the Messianic movement have advocated for it, citing the need for "authenticity" or "relevance." These men are extremely bright, articulate, nuanced, and persuasive, and I fear that they are influencing up-and-coming congregational leaders.

Do Messianic Jews truly believe that Yeshua desires us to be "one new man"? I am confident that the vast majority of us do. And precisely so that the world knows it, I believe it is necessary that we stand apart from the few who do not, and publish to that end, though I take no delight in doing so. These are, after all, my dear brothers in Yeshua.

### B. We potentially forfeit the friendship and advocacy of churches and denominations that have historically supported Jewish missions.

Should such practices (though representing a very tiny minority) become more widely known within the body of Messiah, the entire Messianic movement will be viewed with suspicion. We will be seen as advocating for, or at least tolerating, practices that

divide Jews and Gentiles. Who could blame anyone for withdrawing their support or advocacy in light of this?

### C. It displeases God, who will not allow our ministries to flourish when they cut directly against His redemptive and reconciliatory plans.

Even if, for arguments' sake, such an approach were to succeed in attracting more Jewish people, it would be *in spite of* God's purpose, not in concert with it. God's nature and purposes are intrinsically linked. In His perfect and immutable love, He desires our reconciliation to Himself and to one another. The old enmities are taken away in the redemptive work of Messiah Yeshua. Why would He allow any ministry to flourish that operates contrary to His purposes?

### D. Given our history, it is hypocritical.

Across the years, the Messianic community has rightly faulted Christian leaders for insisting that Jewish believers jettison their Jewish identity and assimilate into Gentile culture. But how are we any better if our response is to exclude Gentiles from participating in our congregational life?



<sup>10</sup> William Varner, "Do We Need Messianic Synagogues? Biblical, Historical and Pragmatic Issues," *The Masters Theological Journal*, 14 no. 1 (2003), pp. 54-55.





**A final word about another serious and related error:** We should also mention that some congregational leaders, desiring to maintain a Jewish majority yet not wanting to *appear* discriminatory, have attempted to get around this by creating a “conversion” process whereby Gentile believers become “Messianic Jews.” This practice is a violation of 1 Corinthians 7, in which Paul exhorts his Jewish hearers to remain Jewish, and his Gen-

tile hearers to remain Gentile, since we are fully co-equals in Messiah. It is unbiblical and merely an attempt to exclude Gentiles without *appearing* to do so, by turning them into something else.

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*If one member suffers, all suffer together;*



*if one member is honored, all rejoice together*  
(1 Cor. 12:26, ESV).