



# Statistical surprise

ONE-THIRD OF RELIGIOUS JEWS ARE CHRISTIANS

➔ Next month Hanukkah, a minor Jewish holiday, will get major attention because of its proximity to Christmas. On the eight evenings of Hanukkah (Dec. 12-19 this year), some Jewish children can look forward to a slow stream of presents rather than a rushing torrent on Christmas morning: Not a bad deal.

The festival goes for eight evenings because Jews in 139 B.C., after defeating Syrian oppressors, entered the Temple in Jerusalem and lit the great candlestick, but had oil for only one day. The Babylonian Talmud (Tractate Shabbat) declares that a miracle occurred and the oil burned for eight days.

That story has become a metaphor for Jewish survival for two millennia, amid frequent persecution. But what I learned this fall could be flipped into another metaphor: Jewish Christianity has also survived, despite controversies among both Jews and Christians as to where Jewish followers of Christ fit in and what they should be called. (I'll use the term "Jewish Christians," with a request for grace from those who prefer another name.)

A 2013 Pew survey of Jewish Americans produced surprising results that the study itself buried and media reports overlooked. If you add up all the religious U.S. adults who identify as Jewish, about one-third are Conservative or Orthodox, one-third are Reform (liberals of whom only 29 percent feel certain that God exists), and one-third are... Christian.

That there are so many adult Jewish Christians—Pew survey statistics suggest 1.7 million—is a man-bites-dog story, a surprise. Furthermore, about 60 percent of the Jewish Christians surveyed said religion is very important in their lives, and 3 out of 4 said they are absolutely sure that God exists. The percentages are similar to those of Protestants and most Orthodox Jews, and far above those of Conservative or Reform Jews, or Catholics.

Religion reporters have an excuse for missing the story: Standard Jewish denominations



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have central organizations and educational institutions, but Jewish Christians are spread out among many dozens of denominations and theologies. Most are Baptists, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, or whatever. A minority call themselves "Messianic Jews" or use similar terms and attend services in sanctuaries like that of Congregation Beth Messiah (House of the Messiah) in Houston, where services on Saturday mornings and Jewish holidays take place partly in Hebrew.

I attended Beth Messiah's Rosh Hashana (Jewish New Year's Day) service on Sept. 21: About 200 were at the Thursday morning service, and 500 worshipped the evening before. Songs in English and Hebrew (transliterated on big screens) typically began with a dozen tambourine-waving women dancing around the central part of the sanctuary: More women and some brave men joined them as the moving circle expanded to 40.

The sermon was Christ-centered, and the readings were from both the Old and New Testament, referred to as the Old and New Covenant. Speakers instead of referring to Jesus used His Hebrew name, *Yeshua*, and spoke of *Ruach Ha-Kodesh*, Hebrew for the Holy Spirit. Pastor/Rabbi Michael Vowell says many members keep kosher but don't think God loves them more for that, and "we emphasize to never ever break table fellowship over matters of food."

Vowell wants his congregant members to act "out of a heart of love and contrition like the prodigal son returned back to the house of his father. Not like the elder son who was obeying him with self-righteousness and selfish motivation." Vowell himself was prodigal: Born in 1976, he moved as a Houston-area teenager from skateboarding to using and selling drugs. God started to change him 20 years ago: He married in 1999, then graduated from Moody Bible Institute and Dallas Theological Seminary. Vowell in 2013 began to pastor Beth Messiah, which has existed for 34 years and moved into its fine building eight years ago.

Vowell says relations between his church and Jewish leaders have improved: A rabbi and a synagogue president are regular attenders, and he can now perform funeral services within a Jewish cemetery. That echoes national trends: Orthodox rabbis have generally been hostile toward Jewish Christians, but in 2015 a group of Orthodox rabbis published a statement noting that "Christianity is neither an accident nor an error, but the willed divine outcome and gift to the nations." ☸