

# THE DENNIS SUIT: AWAITING THE APPEALS VERDICT

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Those close to the General Conference president, Robert Folkenberg, have noted that, when he wishes to emphasize his commitment to push something through, he will say, “*This is a mountain I am willing to die on.*” Winning is important for the man.

However, certain mountains which he is “willing to die on,” have recently turned into volcanoes.

One example would be the president’s own theology. As we earlier reported (*An Appeal to the General Conference President [WM-836-837]*), in October 1997, a 48-page document was sent to Folkenberg, in which certain of his doctrinal positions were compared with those of Desmond Ford and Jack Sequeira. The parallels were shocking.

In that document, several very mature Advent believers appealed to him to reconsider and return to historic Adventism. But instead of doing this—or even defending his aberrant positions—Folkenberg, stalling for time, has maintained that he will not be put on the defensive.

This mountain could become an active volcano if our top church administrator continues to adamantly refuse to change his theological positions.

Then there is Folkenberg’s determination to exercise almost total control over everything done at world headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland. Over two dozen changes rammed through the 1995 Utrecht General Conference Session (plus several at the preceding 1994 annual council) provided him with an almost unbelievable control over the minds and actions of General Conference workers. But tremors are already being felt in that mountain.

Another one in which magma is rapidly heating up is the lawsuit brought by former General Conference Auditing Service director, David Dennis. This one may blow up more quickly than some of the others.

Sometimes breaks occur in the side of a volcano, causing some of the lava to spill out before the primary explosion occurs. The recent *Los Angeles Times* newspaper series has done just that.

Our contacts indicate that General Conference administrators, attorneys, and communications personnel are frantically working to explain away actions by Robert Folkenberg, which provoked these unprecedented articles by one of the nation’s lead-

ing newspapers.

In an effort to calm the members, reports are being mailed from world headquarters to officers, workers, and pastors, in an effort to place a favorable slant on the terrible disclosures made in the *Times* articles (see *The Los Angeles Times Articles [WM-850-851]*).

Laymen are stunned by the revelations; and, once again, efforts are being made to vilify Dennis as the problem,—when he was the only prominent whistleblower in the General Conference before his sudden firing in 1994. Director-in-chief for 18 years of the General Conference auditing department, it had been his job to oversee yearly reviews of financial statements on many levels. Dennis had repeatedly protested mishandling of church funds. But, instead of making needed changes, he was fired. It was thought to be the easier solution. Now the entire financial mess is on the verge of exploding in the faces of those who were content to let it exist so long.

Since July 22, 1981, one devastating financial disaster after another has occurred over the past 17 years, since Donald J. Davenport filed for bankruptcy at the Los Angeles Federal Courthouse. The money losses just keep occurring, because men stubbornly will not learn lessons and make needed changes.

And now we have the Dennis crisis as the capstone to an era of remarkable mismanagement. David Dennis threatens to cut open the top of this volcano. Instead of reducing the pressure within it, Robert Folkenberg sits on top of it, determined to hold it down. The official statement from headquarters is “be patient . . . wait . . . withhold judgment . . . the president will be vindicated . . . and then he will tell all.”

But, let us be realistic; how will the situation be vindicated, if the case is not permitted to go to trial?

Instead of allowing that to happen, Folkenberg has instructed his highly compensated attorneys to spare no tithes or offerings, given sacrificially by our members, in order to get the case thrown out of court. Three Washington-area law firms are being paid princely salaries, month after month, year after year, to keep a number of facts from being told.

In a clear abuse of the First Amendment religious freedom right, Folkenberg made a special appeal to a three-person appeals court in Annapolis, Maryland.

*His defense is that the church is above the law! It cannot be tried in a civil court for any of its actions. To do so would be a separation-of-church-and-state violation!*

In order to intensify the secrecy, the General Conference has the legal papers “under seal” with the court. However the legal arguments were open to the public; and, as stated above, they are astounding: Even though, according to the David Dennis accusations, it may be guilty of wrongdoing—the General Conference declares it is entitled to *absolute immunity!*

This would mean, of course, that any crimes or torts would be outside the perview of secular justice. Tom Wetmore, a General Conference-employed attorney, under Folkenberg’s orders, has written this: “The U.S. Constitution makes it acceptable for the Church to defame individuals.”

Such are the concepts being filed with a court of law, as the primary defense used by Robert Folkenberg and his associates. Have we returned to the Dark Ages?

A couple hours ago, a book someone sent us on the Spanish Inquisition arrived in the mail. That monstrous engine of the papacy could only develop over a period of time—*because the Church considered itself above law, and therefore free to do as it pleased.* Centuries of persecution led to armed attack, murder, and finally that systematic annihilation of populations—the iniquitous Inquisition.

Thank God for whistle-blowers, such as David Dennis, who will speak up! Without such men, the downward path would accelerate and be much steeper.

*Who else do you know who believes he is above the law?* Aside from the pope, we cannot help calling to mind two U.S. presidents. Richard Nixon claimed “immunity,” but the courts rejected that claim. Bill Clinton, in an effort to escape court scrutiny, has also pled that he has “immunity.” But even he has not dared to claim the kind of blanket immunity—absolute immunity—which the General Conference is now seeking.

One influential church member, a retired long-term minister, commented, “Folkenberg’s activities would make Bill Clinton blush.”

While the Appeals Court deliberates its decision on this matter, the battery of attorneys hired by the General Conference are doing everything behind the scenes, that large sums of money can do—to buy a decision favorable to Folkenberg.

Like that other president, a few miles away, Folkenberg is panic-stricken at the thought that he may have to provide answers to questions in a courtroom.

When the Dennis lawsuit began, Folkenberg sent out a message over worldwide internet, declaring that

he could not speak publicly on the matter at this time, because of the court case; but he was anxious that it be over quickly so he could disclose it all—showing that all the charges were false. That internet memo was sent out about 15 days before the Utrecht Session convened in 1995. The promise helped get him reelected.

Yet now—over three years later—his attorneys are still stalling the outcome of the trial; trying, ever trying, to keep it from going to court.

It is evident that the General Conference president has no intention of providing the “independent inquiry” he promised in that 1995 memo—and for precisely the same reason that the president in the White House has sought to avoid disclosure. Neither wants a number of facts to be publicly known.

It is extremely unusual for an appeal to be requested before a jury trial decision is made! Yet this is exactly what has happened.

We, here at Pilgrims Rest, frequently receive letters inquiring as to the present status of this case. The present status is exactly what it has been for years: The General Conference is trying hard to keep the members from knowing what is going on.

We do not know when the Appeals Court will hand down a final decision. It is most likely to remand the case back to the lower court to be heard, but it may dismiss the case entirely. As soon as we learn what that decision is, we will prepare a report for you. Why do we do this? So you can pray more intelligently. So you can plead more meaningfully for changes which need to be made. God never intended that His people be ignorant at a time when such weighty matters were occurring. Our church is in a crisis, and you need to know about it. You need to pray about it. There is work to be done—warning, exhorting, pleading. We are not in heaven yet.

Worldly attorneys from three law firms have been very willing to follow Folkenberg’s advice, to devise ways to do whatever it takes to keep the case from going to court. Large amounts of money, from sacred church funds, are pouring into their law firms as a result. Lawyers know how to milk the money cow, and there is a lot in this one. The church members are not likely to complain, because they are not going to be told how much is being spent.

How much will those leaders ultimately be willing to pay to keep the matter out of court? The reserve funds seem bottomless. We have it on good counsel that, already, the payments to the three outside law firms have mounted to nearly \$5 million, in a struggle that has been going on since 1994—nearly four years!

So far they have a lot to show for their investment: a long stall, no information given, no depositions taken, and no questions answered.

# THE MESSIANIC JEWS

***It is a remarkable fact that there are thousands of Sabbathkeeping Christians today, which did not exist a few years ago. It is equally remarkable that they belong to a distinct group of Christians, of which there were almost none a few years ago. Lastly, still more remarkable—they are all Jews!***

We, who are so well-acquainted with final events as delineated in the book *Great Controversy*, cannot but find this fact significant. We know that the final crisis will be fought over the keeping of the Bible Sabbath—and yet there is a rapidly growing, vibrant group of Sabbathkeepers—which you and I hardly knew existed!

This is the story of the Messianic Jews.

Messianic Judaism is now the fastest growing stream of faith within the Jewish community. In 1967, there were no Messianic Jewish congregations in the world. Today there are over 350 of them.

In A.D. 150, Justin Martyr wrote to Tryphon the Jew, “You can be a Jew or a Christian, but you cannot be both.” And for centuries, that was pretty much the way it was. Few Jews became Christians. The animosity between the two groups was intense.

The Messianic Jews call Him *Yeshua*, yet it is the same Jesus Christ of the New Testament that you and I call our Saviour. *Yeshua* is merely the Jewish form of the word. As one might expect, Messianic Jews use many Hebrew words and phrases; indeed, many are fluent in modern Hebrew. Just as with Orthodox Jews, modern Hebrew is the language which unites Messianics.

In 1967, before the Jewish people regained control of Jerusalem, there was not a single Messianic Jewish congregation anywhere on the planet, and only several thousand Messianic Jews worldwide. In contrast, an extensive 1990 survey found 350 Messianic Jewish congregations, with 50 in Israel alone. In the United States there are well over one million Jews who express some sort of faith in *Yeshua*. Sid Roth, of the Messianic Vision radio and TV program, estimates that more than 100,000 Jewish people in the former Soviet Union alone have made professions of faith.

The father of Messianic Judaism is Joseph Rabinowitz, a Russian Jew who lived from 1837 to 1899. One day, as Rabinowitz sat on Mount of Olives, pondering the history of his beloved people, he was struck with the fact that the problem was their rejection of Jesus Christ. Accepting Christ as his Saviour,

Rabinowitz returned to Russia and established a Jewish Christian synagogue in Kishinev, Russia.

A few years after Rabinowitz’ death, Mark Levy, an English Jew, had a similar experience which led him to accept Christianity. He moved to America and began making converts.

In April 1915 at a New York City conference, the *Hebrew Christian Alliance* (HCA) came into existence. According to an early resolution, they sought to unite and encourage Jewish believers to come out “openly and boldly” in their confession of the Messiah.

Ten years later, in 1925, a second Jewish Christian organization, the *International Hebrew Christian Alliance* (IHCA) began operations.

Although Levy was very influential in getting Hebrew Christian organizations started in the United States, he had one concept which was largely rejected back then. Levy insisted that Jews be allowed—even encouraged—to practice the worship and customs of their forefathers.

In the 1930s, Sir Leon Levison, president of IHCA, declared that Levy’s concept was the right one: “Paul stood out against Judaizing the Gentiles; and now we must plead against Gentilizing the Jews!”

The rampant Christian anti-Semitism in the 1930s encouraged Christian Jews to start congregations separate from the Lutherans, Methodists, and other Christian denominations. Then Hitler arose, and Christians in Europe failed to wholeheartedly oppose Hitler’s efforts to destroy the Jews. As the Nazis slaughtered the Jews, far too many Christians merely stood back and watched.

The result was the gradual growth of a people who were separated both from orthodox and other traditional Jews, and regular Christian churches.

The idea of assimilation into Gentile Christian churches, as a prerequisite to becoming Christians, began to be challenged. “Why could we not,” these Christian Jews thought, “retain our Jewish roots as we embrace the Messiah as our Saviour?”

In 1955, the IHCA held the World Congress of Hebrew Christians in Chicago, but little growth followed until 1967—when everything changed!

As a result of the Six Day War, Jerusalem was returned to Jewish control. Jews remembered the Holocaust, and felt that the Jewish State had a future. Yet, although they wanted to be identified with it, a growing number were accepting Jesus Christ as their Saviour.

Jamie Cowen, rabbi of Tikvat Israel, a Messianic Jewish congregation in Richmond, Virginia, says: “The whole thrust of Messianic Judaism is to restore the

roots of the faith as a belief in Jesus as a Jewish Messiah. We see our mission as being two primary things: to help Jews understand Jesus as their Messiah and to help the Christian church understand her Jewish roots.”

*How are Messianic Jews like us?* They keep the Bible Sabbath, from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday. (Worship services are held on Friday evening and Sabbath morning.) They read the whole Bible. They do not believe in having crosses on their churches. (Jews everywhere recall, all too well, how the religionists carried crosses as they came to persecute and slay their ancestors.) They are opposed to statues and wall paintings, and have nothing to do with Easter and Christmas. They believe that Christ is going to return the second time—and soon.

*How are Messianic Jews different?* They call their gathering places “synagogues” (sometimes “congregations”), but not “churches.” Instead of the cross, you find the six-pointed “star of David”—and lots of them. Participants at each service are offered a prayer shawl and a *kappa* (head covering). A sizeable part of each service consists of dancing. Children and some adults dance together in organized Jewish dances at the front of the synagogue as the worship team leads the congregation in singing. A Protestant, looking at it, might think it was a charismatic, almost Pentecostal service. We would view it as a Celebration service. On the platform is an “ark,” containing a scroll of the Torah (the five books of Moses). They blow the ram’s horn and keep the feast days, especially Passover.

During the main service, the children are present and active in the dancing. Then they separate to their own classes for instruction.

The songs are filled with Jewish allusions to customs and past history. A liberal amount of Hebrew words and phrases are in the songs, the services, names of vestments, and a host of other things.

This need not surprise us: We speak in English, but they are used to Yiddish and modern Hebrew.

When they speak of the apostle Paul, for example, they call him “Rabbi Shaul” (pronounced “Shaw-ool”).

When they write, English-speaking Messianics spell “G-d” for God, and “L-rd” for Lord. They do not say “Jesus,” but always “Messiah.” Why? It is more Jewish, and less Christian. They cannot forget what Christians did to their ancestors.

In addition, most of them believe that it is the will of God that they remain a separate people—distinct from Gentiles until the soon return of Christ.

A primary objective of Messianic Jews is to get rid of centuries of Gentile additions. Doing so, of course, eliminates a lot of the pagan baggage Rome bequeathed to Protestantism. But many Old Testa-

ment rituals, are retained, which we recognize to be shadow ceremonies done away at the cross. (Here is a brief Bible study: Heb 10:1-12 ; Col 2:14; Eph 2:15; Heb 9:9-10; Matt 27:50; Dan 9:27; Heb 7:18-19.)

Yet there is still a lot of diversity from one Messianic Jewish congregation to another. In 1975, the *Fellowship of Christian Testimonies to the Jews* (FCTJ) passed a resolution stating, “Christian faith is consistent with, but not a continuation of Biblical Judaism, and is distinct from rabbinical Judaism.”

However, in a separate 1975 resolution, the FCTJ declared that the practice of wearing *yarmulkes* and prayer shawls, or “any practice of culture, Jewish or non-Jewish, must be brought into conformity to New Testament theology.” Other Messianics reject that idea. Many Messianic Jews will state forthrightly, “I’m not a Christian, I’m a Messianic Jew.”

As Rob Kirsch a Messianic physician put it: “Christian means Gentile. Since I’m not a Gentile, I’d rather avoid a label that carries that connotation.”

Messianic Jews “feel an obligation of loyalty to their people to remain Jewish,” writes *Jews for Jesus* founder Moishe Rosen with his wife, Ceil, in their book, *Witnessing to Jews*.

On December 25, 1989, the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that Messianic Jews cannot make *aliyyah* (immigrate to Israel). They are not wanted.

Right now, a more stringent bill is in committee in the Knesset, which has the backing of Netanyahu and his cabinet: It would give a three-year jail sentence and NIS 50,000 (\$13,700 US) fine for “anyone preaching with the intent of causing another person to change his religion.” So now the Israelis are entering on the path of persecution of those with minority religious views.

The largest Messianic Jewish organization in America is the *Messianic Jewish Alliance of America*, with some 85 to 90 congregations. The *Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations* is next, with about 70. The two are very close in their stand-apart views. The *Federation of Messianic Congregations* has about 12 congregations, and has closer relationships to Gentile churches. These three account for about 90 percent of Messianic congregations; the rest are independent.

Two of the three major Abrahamic religions are merging in the form of Messianic Judaism. (The third “Abrahamic religion” is Islam, which pays lip service to Abraham as the father of their faith.)

Last year’s million-man Promise Keepers rally in Washington, D.C. (“Stand in the Gap”) began with Messianic leaders blowing the *shofar* (ram’s horn) and standing with Gentile Christian leaders on the platform. Times have changed.