

## CHAPTER 5: THE CHURCH AS MESSIANIC SOCIETY: CREATION AND INSTRUMENT OF TRANSFIGURED MISSION – Larry Miller P. 130-150

Larry Miller, “The Christ is as Messianic Society: Creation and Instrument of Transfigured Mission,” *The Transfiguration of Mission*, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993),

### MESSIANIC GROUPS

Jesus chose as his mission strategy the creation of a new community composed of people already living transformed lives. While the original group of most intimate disciples was itinerant –most others-apparently composed of sympathizers in given localities- were less mobile. They multiplied relatively rapidly, spilled over the boundaries of Palestine, and spread across much of the Roman Empire by the turn of the century. These groups were directly or indirectly created by the Messiah, and the task of continuing his mission fell to them (Shenk p. 136-137).

### MICROSOCIETY

The first Christians were not simply human individuals interacting with superhuman powers. When reading the New Testament text in socioreligious and sociopolitical context, messianic groups look as much like small societies as other first-century religious communities (Shenk p. 137)).

Like any society, **messianic groups** were concerned not only with religion but with all of life. They were totalistic in a way no pagan cultic association was. Their goals, having to do with “salvation” in a comprehensive sense, were less segmented. Almost any reading of Scripture shows them to be people with a common social life shaped by common convictions, values, and models. Their life together included potentially every category of human relations; peoplehood, friendship, family, politics, economy, education, piety, ritual, festival, and all the rest (Shenk p. 137).

Viewed sociologically, messianic groups constituted – more or less consciously, explicitly, comprehensively, and radically – **an alternative** to the established socioreligious order. In New Testament perspective, it was the only viable alternative in a broken and dying world (Shenk p. 137).

**Alternative society** meant *alternative* peoplehood, friendship, *alternative* family, *alternative* politics, *alternative* economy, *alternative* education, *alternative* piety, *alternative* ritual, *alternative* festivals. Messiah’s followers were to live life in another manner that it was normally lived in macrosociety (Shenk p. 137-138).

**Messianic community was told to live a transformed life. Schlabach interprets the Sermon on the Mount as a form of transformed life:**

The most concisely formulated vision of this **different approach to life** is the **Sermon on the Mount**. “You have heard that our forefathers were told .... But what I tell you is this ....., “Messiah repeatedly said (Matt. 5:21-48). Does established society tell you not to commit murder? I tell you not even to nurse anger against your brother. Does society tell you not to commit adultery? I tell you not even to look at a woman lustfully. Does Society tell you not to break your oath? I tell you not even to swear at all; plain “yes” or “no” is all you need to say. Does society tell you to love your neighbor? I tell you to love also your enemy. Does society use charity and piety as means to social recognition? I tell you to do good, to pray and to fast

secretly. Does society encourage you to accumulate possessions or wealth? I tell you not to do so; seek God's justice and you will receive what you need (cf. Matt. 5-7) (Shenk p.139).

1. Alternative peoplehood. "Once you were not a people at all; but now you are God's people," Peter wrote to messianic groups in Anatolia sometime during the middle third of the first century (I Pet.2:10). Pagan, too, soon came to view Christians as somehow forming another people, neither pan nor Jewish. A "third race" was their expression for the Christian movement which brought together typical people in atypical ways (Shenk p. 138).

The "otherness" of messianic peoplehood was not only religious or ethnic. People previously separated by social or economic boundaries united in messianic groups. Luke's description of the micro society in Jerusalem (acts 1-6) suggests that city folk with some financial resources soon joined the core group of rural, relatively poor Galileans. Hellenists – Greek speaking Jew of the Diaspora – converted and entered the first messianic community; culturally, they were probably a far cry from the simple Galileans and looked down upon by many Jews. This sort of heterogeneity continued to distinguish the messianic movement as it spread across the Roman Empire (Shenk p. 138).

Messianic groups gathered most under privileged people in that society. Few members of messianic groups came from the dominant layer of the established order. In Greek and Roman cultural settings, the extreme top of the social scale seems absent in the messianic group (except Paul); most of the members of the messianic groups from the Empire were slaves, freedmen, freeborn Roman citizens of low rank, non-Romans (Shenk p. 139).

Community gatherings and agape meals: For many members, especially those of the humbler social strata, the Christian assemblies and meals provided a more than adequate substitute for benefits, both physical and social, than they might otherwise have obtained from membership" in other groups or from the municipal festivals and (Meeks, 1983: 104). They were a family. They were children of God and also of apostle. They were brothers and sisters: they refer to one another as "beloved" (Shenk p. 139).

## FROM THE FIRST CENTURY TO THE TWENTY-FIRST: MESSIANIC CHURCHES IN MESSIANIC MISSION

A sociologically informed reading of the New Testament suggests that it was churches which took the form of a messianic movement clustered in interdependent messianic groups whose members were present in and continually interacting with the established societies of the day. Mission done today in Messiah's way still leads to the creation of churches of the same type. As long as mission has something to do with the renewal of all things, the churches it produces will resemble little societies whose life together potentially addresses all areas of human existence in this world. As long as mission has to do with an introduction to a new way of life destined to replace all other ways of life, the churches it spawns will be alternative societies, incarnating a system of values in tension with established systems. ... As long as this kind of mission calls converts to witness in the world rather than to withdraw from it, new churches themselves will be missionary – in lifestyle, in action, and in word. And as long as mission calls believers to follow the path of the suffering Messiah, mission churches will respond peacefully to repression, preferring martyrdom to violence (Shenk p. 149). However, today's churches try to prosper

instead of emptying, live instead of dying and conform or bought to established society instead of being an alternative society that present alternative life style that Jesus taught us to live.

Larry Miller conclude that only churches which are alternative societies, transformed in relation to existing society because they are already conformed to Messiah's vision of the future, can demonstrate the nature of life in the coming kingdom. Churches which reproduce life as lived in the present order reveal only what the world is already like, not "what the world could be like if it, too, repented and submitted to God's will" (Shenk 150).