

**PLANTING MESSIANIC GOSPEL COMMUNITIES  
IN A MILLENNIAL WORLD  
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In the last couple decades, “church-planting” has been “en vogue,” but the ever-changing cultural climate makes the endeavor more challenging and more uncertain than it has been in the past.<sup>1</sup> Planting a new congregation is much like creating a startup company. It is the religious entrepreneurial venture with the promise of a blank canvas. In this world metaphors abound, from the world of aerospace with the launching of rockets and traveling to uncharted planets to the botanical setting with the cultivation of new organisms. The process of planting a new church is simultaneously trailblazing and plodding the same well-worn, two-thousand-year-old path.

These two simultaneous, yet divergent, aspects makes initiating a conversation about church-planting for Messianic Millennials daunting. The topic is vast and undefined, which makes limiting the subject tricky. I can’t say everything; therefore, there is apprehension I may miss a critical element or may not place the emphasis on the needed component. At the same time, the subject has been thoroughly explored in recent years, with the publishing of countless books and the development of graduate programs devoted to the topic. I don’t want to spill unnecessary ink to express the same thing that others have already said in various ways.

In the messianic world, discussing the matter becomes more complicated. Starting a new congregation requires considering the congregation’s nature, which involves contemplating various options, including whether to create a messianic congregation or a more “traditional” church. The process also necessitates determining the purpose of planting a congregation, which is a particularly animated discussion in messianic circles. Do messianic congregations exist as evangelistic and missional outposts or do they exist to preserve Jewish identity through covenantal fidelity by maintaining a distinctly Jewish life?<sup>2</sup> Envisioning a congregation addresses the practical aspects of liturgy, tradition and Torah that can shape the ethos of a community. All of these are necessary and defining matters, but beyond the scope of this current study.

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<sup>1</sup> Church-planting in the context of this paper will refer to the act of starting of new congregations, whether the congregation is a messianic congregation or a traditional church. From a messianic standpoint, using conventional Gentile terminology is problematic, since it has both cultural and theological implications. At the risk of being misunderstood in the messianic community, this paper will utilize more traditional Christian language, due to the lack of a suitable replacement. Attempts to use differing terminology will likely result in making the argument more obscure and less intelligible.

<sup>2</sup> This has been an ongoing and evolving discussion within the messianic community, introduced by Mark S. Kinzer, *Post-Missionary Messianic Judaism: Redefining Christian Engagement with the Jewish People*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005).

Instead, this discussion will examine the unique contours of the Millennial religious climate. Although religious participation in America continues to decline with a sizeable percentage of the Millennial Generation without any religious affiliation, there is reason to hope. Yet, it is only promising if the Body of Messiah is willing to adopt a posture of introspection and ask why the emerging generation remains largely uninterested in its message. Therefore, this paper will examine why Millennials are leaving the “Church” and look at how to create a climate in which they will return. The purpose is not to present a church-planting formula or a blueprint for a successful Millennial congregation; rather, it will propose key attributes and values in congregations seeking to captivate the hearts and minds of Millennials. A few years ago, Andrew Root, in a *Christianity Today* article, asked whether or not anxiety over Millennials is about a real concern for young people, or is it about a concern to possess a youthful spirit. “Do we want departing Millennials and nones to encounter the gospel – or to merely become members? Are we worried more about their spiritual health or about the health of our institutions?”<sup>3</sup> Root’s question provides a great framework for this dialogue. In order to effectively engage the emerging generation, the messianic community must not retreat to a position of protectionism, seeking its own preservation and interest. This requires abandoning practices and ideologies that shroud the gospel by creating gospel communities that provide a foretaste of God’s Kingdom and embody the message and ministry of Jesus.

### **The Religious Decline in America**

Religion in America is on the decline. This makes starting new churches not only crucial, but also more demanding, because it requires engaging a culture that has very little interest and understanding of rudimentary religious concepts. Although the statistics are conclusive, they are not necessary to persuade even the most casual observer that the religious landscape in America is on the decline. Olson, citing research published in *The American Church in Crisis*, concluded only 17.5 percent of the American population on average in 2005 attended a worship service.<sup>4</sup> Coupled with non-Christian religions, this number increases slightly to 19.5 percent.<sup>5</sup> These numbers on their own do not indicate a trend, but when compared with similar studies from 2000 and 1990, they demonstrate a three percent decline in religious attendance in just fifteen years.<sup>6</sup> According to Olson, if the trend continues, “by 2050 the percentage of Americans attending church will be half the 1990 figure.”<sup>7</sup> The recent 2014 U.S. Religious Landscape Study by the Pew Research Center shows a similar three percent decline in attendance at religious services from 2007

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew Root, “Stop Worrying about Millennials: And Learn to Love them Instead,” *Christianity Today*, 59 no. 1, (Jan/Feb 2015), 32.

<sup>4</sup> David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 28-29. For similar conclusions see: C Kirk Hadaway and Penny Long Marler, “How many Americans attend worship each week?: an alternative approach to measurement,” *Journal For The Scientific Study Of Religion* 44, no. 3 (2005): 307-322.

<sup>5</sup> Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, 29.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 36.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 16.

to 2014.<sup>8</sup> The same study also demonstrates a nearly 8 percent drop in the Christian share of the U.S. population from 2007 to 2014.<sup>9</sup> At the same time the “unaffiliated” category, which includes “atheist,” “agnostic” and “nothing in particular,” gained a 6.7 percent increase in the share of the American population.<sup>10</sup>

While these statistics are both fascinating and perplexing, they are only peripherally useful in understanding the religious tendencies within Millennials. Recent surveys have focused specifically on the religious habits and beliefs of the Millennial Generation. Stetzer provides a slightly different picture of religious attendance among the eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-old population from 1972 to 2006. While there has been a gradual decline since 1972, there was a slight increase in attendance beginning in 2000.<sup>11</sup> It is not clear if this is an anomaly in the study or the initial glimpse into a growing trend. However, subsequent statistics generated by the General Social Study, cited by Stetzer, demonstrate a continual decline in religious service attendance following the brief increase after the turn of the century.<sup>12</sup>

The 2014 U.S. Religious Landscape Study suggests an even more dramatic downturn in attendance among Millennials. The study differentiates between younger and older Millennials. While the “Younger Millennials” were too young to participate in the 2007 survey and therefore have no comparable data to measure change, regular attendance of “Older Millennials” at religious services dropped seven percent from 2007 to 2014.<sup>13</sup> While it is possible religious attendance of Millennials will increase as more get married and have children, the baseline is dramatically lower than previous generations. The 2014 survey indicates twenty-seven percent of “Older Millennials” and twenty-eight percent of “Younger Millennials” regularly participate in religious

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<sup>8</sup> Alan Cooperman, Gregory A. Smith and Stefan S. Cornibert, *U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious*, Pew Research Center (Nov 3, 2015), 229. The Pew Research Study shows a higher rate of attendance (with 39 percent in 2007 and 36 percent in 2009) than the American Church Research Project cited in Olson’s work. The methodology in the two separate studies explains the discrepancy. The Pew Research Study relied upon data gained through self-reported attendance; whereas, the American Church Research Project utilized actual attendance accounts. Since individuals are inclined to overreport their church attendance for various reasons, the numbers for the Pew Research Study are likely artificially inflated. The Pew Research Study accurately reports their findings, but it is the data that has an inherent flaw, because those being interviewed do not always accurately depict reality. Despite the inaccuracy due to the use of self-reporting, the data is still significant, because it measures the religious commitment and convictions of the participants. Regardless, both studies are invaluable tools to understand the trends in American Religious Participation, since they each offer multiple years of comparable statistics to paint a picture of religious trends.

<sup>9</sup> Alan Cooperman, Gregory Smith and Katherine Ritchey, *America’s Changing Religious Landscape*, Pew Research Center (May 12, 2015), 4. The “Christian” category includes Catholic, Mainline Protestant, Evangelical and Historically Black. There was slight decline in the Evangelical segment, at .9 percent, but it was not as significant as the Mainline Protestant and Catholic.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 4.

<sup>11</sup> Ed Stetzer, Richie Stanley and Jason Hayes, *Lost and Found: The Younger Unchurched and the Churches that Reach Them*, (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 4-5.

<sup>12</sup> Cooperman, Smith and Cornibert, *U.S. Becoming Less Religious*, 131. The *General Social Study*, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, “gathers data on contemporary American society in order to monitor and explain trends and constants in attitudes, behaviors, and attributes” since 1972.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 24.

services.<sup>14</sup> These numbers are significantly smaller than older generations with Generation X at thirty-four percent, Baby Boomers at thirty-eight percent and the Silent Generation at fifty-one percent.<sup>15</sup>

While there is hope participation of Millennials will increase as they grow older, establish roots and start their own families, the current trajectory does not suggest the generation will strengthen its religious involvement. The recent studies demonstrate how Millennials are becoming less, not more, religious as they grow older. As they reach their late twenties and early thirties, their religious involvement has considerably diminished. Millennials have grown-up in less religious homes than previous generations; therefore, they are less likely to look to established religion when seeking existential answers. Michael Hout, Professor of Sociology at New York University, in an interview by David Masci, says, “Many Millennials have parents who are Baby Boomers and Boomers expressed to their children that it’s important to think for themselves – that they find their own moral compass.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, a significant percentage of Millennials have been raised to question and challenge the traditional metanarratives. Across the board, regular participation in religion is on the decline. This means there is no reason to expect an increased religious involvement by Millennials unless something dramatically changes. It is actually more likely, as Millennials grow older, that the downward religious trajectory in America will intensify in the coming years. This is not a call to alarm, but an opportunity to change. The changing cultural climate provides an occasion to rediscover the gospel and to creatively think about how the gospel speaks to a new generation.

### Who are the Millennials?

To gain insight into how the gospel can speak to the new generation, it is necessary to understand the nature of this emerging cohort. The borders for the generation are perhaps as ambiguous as the generation itself. Although some researchers may establish boundary markers outside the consensus range, according to most demographic studies, the birth of Millennials spans approximately twenty years from the early eighties until about the turn of the century. Today, the older Millennials are in their late thirties, while the youngest in this generation are starting to graduate high school. While the name of the Baby Boomers refers to the dramatic increase in births after the war, there was an even more substantial spike in births during the twenty-year span of Millennials, making this generation the largest in American history.<sup>17</sup>

Millennials entered a rapidly changing world, unlike any time in human history. This generation arrived during the advent of the personal computer and the emergence of the Internet. By the time most Millennials reached high school, they had an email address

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 24.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 24.

<sup>16</sup> David Masci, “Q&A: Why Millennials are Less Religious than Older Americans,” *Fact Tank: News in the Numbers*, Pew Research Center, January 8, 2016, Web. Feb 23, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Thom S. Rainer and Jess W. Rainer, *The Millennials: Connecting to America’s Largest Generation*, (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2011), 2. They comprise approximately twenty-five percent of the American population. See: Jeff Fromm and Christie Garton, *Marketing to Millennials: Reach the Largest and Most Influential Generation of Consumers Ever*, (New York: AMACOM, 2013), 1.

and were quite adept with various forms of technology. Through social media, they are not only highly connected with friends and family, but also connected to a shrinking global community. In the same way that World War II and the Vietnam War shaped the Silent Generation and Boomers respectively, September 11 has impacted Millennials. Yet, Howe, who studied the generation long before 9/11, says, “Big events like 9/11 don’t so much shape a generation as reveal a generation. Generations are shaped by their place in history, and it’s an orientation that starts in childhood.”<sup>18</sup> Howe believes the Millennials were already on the path to become a unique cohort, distinct from the previous generations. While it is possible that no single event has changed the course of this generation, the sudden and shocking attack at the heart of New York’s business district left the generation with both a feeling of vulnerability and a desire to be a force for good.<sup>19</sup>

Popular notions about Millennials portray the generation as lazy, apathetic, materialistic, entitled and transient, but these stereotypes, as with most stereotypes, misrepresent reality. The reality, in this case, is that the Millennial Generation embodies far more positive attributes than negative. For instance, self-identified Christian Millennials are more conservative on many moral issues, like abortion, viewing pornography, drugs, using profanity, and recreational marijuana, than previous generations.<sup>20</sup> In a Pew Research Center study on Millennials, they found positive indicators in the priorities of the cohort, with fifty-one percent saying one of their main priorities is being a good parent, thirty percent wanting a successful marriage and twenty-one percent identifying helping others in need as one of their primary concerns.<sup>21</sup> In comparison, these priorities ranked higher than owning a home or having a high-paying career. Despite expressing many values that are similar to religious communities, this generation exhibits a demonstrable trend toward the unaffiliated category, with over twenty-five percent identifying as religiously disconnected.<sup>22</sup>

These stats are not surprising. Millennials tend to be highly relational, with a desire for a connected family and a longing for parental involvement.<sup>23</sup> This gets

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<sup>18</sup> Amanda M. Fairbanks, “Post-9/11 Generation: Millennials Reflect On Decade Since Terrorist Attacks,” *College*, The Huffington Post, November 09, 2011, Web. Feb 28, 2017. Neil Howe is one of the pioneering researchers on Millennials. See: Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> Amanda M. Fairbanks, “Post-9/11 Generation: Millennials Reflect On Decade Since Terrorist Attacks,” Web. Feb 28, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> The Barna Group, *Making Space for Millennials: A Blueprint for Your Culture Ministry, Leadership and Facilities*, (Barna, 2014), 26-27. In each of these examples Millennials expressed more conservative beliefs than both Boomers and Gen X. While the Silent Generation indicated more conservative positions on some issues, Millennials demonstrated more conservative moral views on abortion and profanity than each of the three previous generations. As would be expected self-identified Christian Millennials are not as conservative as earlier generations on all issues. They, as would be anticipated, demonstrate more progressive views on LGBT related matters.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Taylor and Scott Keeter, eds. *Millennials: A Portrait of Generation Next*, Pew Research Center, (February 2010), 2.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 85.

<sup>23</sup> Rainer and Rainer, *The Millennials*, 19, 31-34.

expressed through high social media participation that allows Millennials to value the input of their peers.<sup>24</sup>

Millennials represent the most diverse generation.<sup>25</sup> The ethnic and racial diversity of this generation enables those within the cohort to see life from various perspectives. It has caused the generation to be more open-minded, which, in turn, leads a majority to self-identity as liberal and tolerant.<sup>26</sup> The diversity of the generation, coupled with the strong connection to social media, allows the generation to be conscious and concerned about global matters. Millennials are the most educated generation, but also have a strong desire to learn.<sup>27</sup> They are far more likely to be involved in environmental issues and to think that it is important to invest in sustainable solutions.<sup>28</sup> While generalizations are helpful for understanding a large group of people, they are ultimately inadequate, particularly with Millennials, since the cohort is by no means homogeneous. In reality, they are an extremely diverse generation, which makes any broad overview problematic.

Despite coming of age in an era marked by the attack on the World Trade Center, economic uncertainty, numerous conflicts and the growing instability in the Middle East, Millennials are surprisingly hopeful.<sup>29</sup> Many believe they can do something significant with their talents and want to participate in making the world a better place. “Nine out of ten Millennials believe it is their responsibility to make a difference in the world.”<sup>30</sup> It is true that this is the least religious generation in America, but the longing for a better world and the belief that it is possible, suggests there is a way to engage the generation in the message and work of Jesus. There is an intrinsic longing within this generation for the same hope as the ancient rabbis when the Messiah will arrive to introduce a time of peace and justice (b. Sanh 97a; b. Ketub 111b; 2 Bar 29).

### **The Millennial Exodus**

Before venturing into how to engage Millennials it is first important to briefly explore why Millennials are leaving. While there is no “one” reason and each individual has his or her own rationale, there are some over-arching explanations as to why large segments of this generation are abandoning traditional religious involvement. On some of these issues it is difficult, if not impossible, for the Body of Messiah to adapt to the changing culture, because it requires appealing to a pluralistic world with an exclusive message.<sup>31</sup> Yet, it is possible to make the necessary adjustments on most of these concerns. Many Millennials are leaving, because, from their experience, worship services

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<sup>24</sup> Fromm and Garton, *Marketing to Millennials*, 12-20.

<sup>25</sup> William H. Frey, “Diversity Defines the Millennial Generation,” *The Avenue*, The Brookings Institute, June 28, 2016, Web. March 2, 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Taylor and Keeter. *Millennials*, 1, 13.

<sup>27</sup> Rainer and Rainer, *The Millennials*, 3, 20-21.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 42-43. The Nielson Global Survey, “Green Generation: Millennials Say Sustainability is a Shopping Priority,” *Global*, Nielson, Nov 5, 2015, Web. March 2, 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Rainer and Rainer, *The Millennials*, 16-18.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>31</sup> David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving Church...And Rethinking Faith*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011) 169-184.

are shallow and irrelevant with boring and confusing biblical teaching.<sup>32</sup> Others are leaving, because faith communities are not safe environments to express their doubts and crises in faith.<sup>33</sup> Sam Eaton gives a list of reasons why young people are leaving the church, these include: nobody listens when they speak, helping the poor isn't a priority, there is no place for outsiders, distrust over the allocation of resources, longing to be mentored and a need to be valued.<sup>34</sup> Rachel Held Evans says, "We want churches that emphasize an allegiance to the kingdom of God over an allegiance to a single political party or a single nation."<sup>35</sup> These are not the only reasons why young people are abandoning traditional religion. They are not looking for cooler and hipper worship services. Rather, they want something with substance. Millennials want to find faith communities where they experience a transformational encounter with Jesus.

### The Gospel and the Church

Before entering into a discourse about how to effectively engage with the Millennial Generation about God, religion, the gospel and Jesus, it is helpful to examine the fundamental nature of what it means to build a gospel community. Terminology, particularly within the Messianic community, frequently obscures this discussion with debates over nomenclature and the distinction between "church" and "messianic congregation." This is not intending to say the distinction is unimportant, or to dismiss the crucial role of Messianic Judaism in its embrace of both the Jewish people and its religious tradition.<sup>36</sup> Rather, it is an invitation to return to the irreducible basics in order to discover the timeless nature of the Church, the single most important component that creates a shared identity and unifies the community of Jesus followers.<sup>37</sup>

In the summer of 1961, legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers, Vince Lombardi, addressed the team at the beginning of training camp. He held up a football and declared, "Gentlemen, this is a football."<sup>38</sup> Everyone present knew that it was a football. They were professionals, who lost the championship the previous season by a

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 113-130.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 185-200.

<sup>34</sup> Sam Eaton, "12 Reasons Millennials are Over Church," *Faith, Recklessly Alive*, Sept 29, 2016. Web. March 7, 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Rachel Held Evans, "Why Millennials are Leaving the Church," *Belief Blog*, CNN, July 29, 2013. Web. Feb 24, 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Kinzer outlines the three aspects needed to create an "integrated, faithful and non-supersessionist ecclesiology" within Messianic Judaism. Mark S. Kinzer, *Post-Missionary Messianic Judaism*, 13-16.

<sup>37</sup> The term "Church" in this context should be understood theologically, rather than culturally or historically. It refers to the Body of Messiah, or *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία), the universal gathering of Jesus followers through the ages. Granted, the term carries a significant amount of cultural baggage in the messianic community, considering how the Christians have treated the Jewish community throughout Church History. The use in this context emphasizes the unity of the Body of Messiah. While Kinzer's *bilateral ecclesiology* seeks to differentiate between the Jewish and Gentile *ekklesia*, it still recognizes one *ekklesia* of Messiah as two distinct, but united communal networks. See: Ibid, 177.

<sup>38</sup> David Maraniss, *When Pride Still Mattered: A Life of Vince Lombardi*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 274.

mere four points. Some of the players likely stared at him incredulously. Yet, Lombardi did not assume a shared approach and relentlessly returned to the basics. Sports and faith are not always analogous, but in this case the metaphor works; it offers a vivid image of what it is like to revisit the most basic element to shaping the Body of Messiah and what is indispensable in starting new communities. In a word, it is the gospel. The gospel is so vital to this endeavor that it is fitting to refer to each individual congregation as a “gospel community.” Thus, the goal in planting is the establishment and multiplication of new, thriving gospel communities. Stetzer, church planting guru and researcher, speaks about how the gospel fuels the enterprise of starting new congregations. “Church planting is effective when leaders make a decision to engage an unchurched world with a radical message: the gospel.”<sup>39</sup>

On the one hand, this sounds simple and straightforward, even rudimentary and painfully obvious, but, on the other hand, there is significant confusion over the definition and the precise meaning of the gospel, which can lead to detrimental consequences. One popular and rather influential Christian website, which shall remain nameless, summarizes a common teaching concerning the gospel by describing it as “*the message that God will give us pardon from our sins and eternal life with him in heaven.*” While Jesus does offer forgiveness of sins and eternal life, this is not the gospel, at least not the gospel in its totality (Luke 5:24; John 6:40). There are three significant misconceptions expressed in the definition. First, it offers “eternal life,” a future event, as the central element to the good news. Second, it focuses upon a distant and immaterial realm. Third, it presents the offer as a predominately individualistic experience. The gospel is bigger and better than this understanding.<sup>40</sup>

### *The Nature of the Gospel*

The term gospel was a common image in the ancient world. Jesus, nor the New Testament writers, invented the concept. They borrowed it from their culture. The word derives from an Old English word meaning, “good news,” a translation of the Greek εὐαγγέλιον.<sup>41</sup> Since the ancients did not have cell phones or the Internet, it was common practice to dispatch messengers to travel over larger distances to announce and disseminate exciting news. For example, it was used in Roman politics when Octavian beat Antony and Cleopatra. Following a long and bitter civil war across the Roman Republic, Octavian’s army finally defeated Antony’s forces at Actium and Antony fled to Alexandria, where he committed suicide alongside Cleopatra. The victors sent messengers throughout the Empire spreading the “good news” of Octavian’s victory, proclaiming the inauguration of his kingdom and a time of peace. The *Priene Calendar Inscription* announces the arrival of Augustus as “good tidings,” because he ends war and

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<sup>39</sup> Ed Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches: Planting a Church That’s Biblically Sound and Reaching People in Culture*, (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 18.

<sup>40</sup> For a popular, yet scholarly, discussion of this important matter, see: N. T. Wright, *Simply Good News: Why the Gospel is News and What Makes it Good*, (New York: Harper One, 2015).

<sup>41</sup> BDAG, 402. The verbal form εὐαγγελίζω describes the act of announcing good news.



brings hope with benefits for all humanity.<sup>42</sup> In other words, the arrival of a new king is gospel.

### The Gospel in Ancient Israel

The Hebrew term *בְּשֵׂרָה*, meaning *good tidings*, along with its corresponding verbal form, *בָּשַׂר*, carries overtones similar to the Greco/Roman world, with political implications.<sup>43</sup> In both Hebrew and Greek the announcement of good news frequently addresses the proclamation of a political or military victory. Prophetic literature borrows from this political and military backdrop to announce the joyous news of God's victory over the forces oppressing God's people (Isa 40:9; 41:27; 52:7). As the nation experienced the subjugation under Babylonian tyranny, Isaiah looks forward to the restoration of Israel under God's new king (Isa 40:10; 43:15; 44:6). The herald proclaims "good news" for the poor and freedom for the captives (Isaiah 61:1-3). Good news reported the arrival of God's Kingdom and the resulting liberation of those oppressed under the previous regime.

### The Gospel of Jesus

When the New Testament writers record the life of Jesus and talk about his announcement of the gospel, they borrow from the established cultural understanding of the term. While the Greek noun and related verb appear more than 100 times in the New Testament, most occurrences do not clearly specify what Jesus meant by the gospel. Consequently, it is easy to misinterpret what it means by supplying a definition based upon a predetermined understanding of the concept. Fortunately, there are a few unambiguous explanations of what Jesus meant when he announced gospel and these examples reflect the broader political overtones of the term in Jesus's day.

Mark introduces his readers to Jesus by describing an encounter between Jesus and John (Mark 1:9-13). John led Jesus through Jewish ritual water purification (*הַטְּבִילָה*) when a voice, from the sky, announces, "you are my Son" (1:11). While it is easy to read right past this sentence, Mark records this quote for a reason. God's declaration of Jesus as the "son" signifies he is the anticipated king, because to be God's Son is synonymous with being the king of Israel (2 Sam 7:14; 1 Chron 17:13; Psalm 2:7). Right after this episode, Jesus travels throughout Galilee proclaiming good news, the gospel (1:14). Then he defines what he means by the gospel when he immediately declares "The Kingdom of God has come near" (1:15). Mark presents the gospel as the announcement of the arrival

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<sup>42</sup> For a copy of the Greek text in its entirety see: W. Dittenberger (ed.), *Orientalis Graecae Inscriptiones Selectae* (2 vols., Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1903-5; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1960) 2.48-60. For an excellent comparison between the Priene Calendar Inscription and Mark's Gospel see: Craig A. Evans, "Mark's Incipient and the Priene Calendar Inscription: From Jewish Gospel to Greco-Roman Gospel," *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism*, 1 (2000): 67-81.

<sup>43</sup> HALOT, 1.163-164. The verbal expression of the term does not occur in the Qal. The standard form is Piel (*בָּשַׂר*). The Modern Hebrew infinitive, *לְבַשֵּׂר*, means "to bring good tidings" or "to gladden with news."

of the anticipated king, who will establish God's long-awaited kingdom. It is a political announcement.

Luke has a similar way of introducing Jesus as the long-awaited king of Israel. The angel announces his birth as "good news" (Luke 2:10). It is good news, because he is the Messiah (Christ), the moniker for the rightful king of Israel, supported by his place of birth, the City of David (2:11). In the next scene, Luke describes John's role as a herald, telling the nation to prepare for the arrival of the king and his kingdom (Luke 3:1-19). Then a voice from heaven declares Jesus is God's son, a title reserved for the king of Israel (Luke 3:22; 2 Sam 7:14; 1 Chron 17:13; Ps 2:7). Without understanding the importance of this symbolism, it is easy to read quickly through this episode in Luke's account of Jesus's life, but God's declaration at Jesus's baptism represents a watershed moment in the story. For Luke, it signifies Jesus's inauguration as the rightful king. Jesus's first public act after his inauguration was to walk into his hometown synagogue and recite a small portion of the Isaiah Scroll (Is 61:1-2), which proclaims "good news" for the marginalized and oppressed, because the restoration of the Kingdom has arrived.

*"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:16-19).*

Jesus leaves and continues to speak in the surrounding villages. Crowds followed him and pleaded with him to stay. He responded, "I must proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God to the other towns too, because this is what I was sent to do" (Luke 4:43). Jesus describes his purpose as declaring the gospel, which is declaration of the arrival of God's Kingdom. His disciples were right to see the political implications of this message, although they misunderstood it to mean the end of the Roman Empire was at hand (Luke 19:28-38).

For Jesus, gospel means the proclamation of the arrival of God's Kingdom (Luke 8:1; 16:16). This is entirely in keeping with the Roman cultural understanding of the term. For the Romans, the announcement of the good news was the broadcast of Augustus's victory. It announced the arrival of a new era and a new empire, which included an era of peace and justice. Luke presents Jesus as the long-awaited king of Israel. The declaration of the entrance of the king and his kingdom is spectacular news.

If the arrival of the Kingdom of God is gospel, then understanding the nature of God's Kingdom provides the key to unlocking what it means. Misunderstanding concerning the nature of the kingdom begins with the assumption that the kingdom is merely a future ethereal phenomenon. While Paul speaks about the immaterial aspect of the kingdom (1 Cor 15:50), this is not quite the same emphasis as Jesus in the Gospels (Matt 11:12; 12:28; Luke 17:21).<sup>44</sup> Jesus presents the Kingdom of God as a physical, tangible reality (Luke 9:27). His teaching is consistent with Jewish tradition and the Hebrew Bible, which does not depict a material separation of God's Kingdom from earth. Jesus's expectation of "a political kingdom on earth sufficiently reveals the physical

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<sup>44</sup> Craig A. Blasing and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, (Grand Rapids: BridgePoint, 1993), 248-249.

nature of the kingdom which he taught.<sup>45</sup> It is a realm reserved, not for the powerful and wealthy, but for the weak, the poor, the outcast and the oppressed (Matt 5:3-10; Mark 10:13-31). For Jesus it was not a distant and future location, but a new era, here and now, commencing with his arrival (Matt 4:17; 12:28; Mark 1:15).<sup>46</sup> Jesus's reign promises the restoration of all things, including: justice for the oppressed, healing for the sick and peace from conflict.

God's Kingdom has begun.<sup>47</sup> Jesus burst onto the scene and initiated the renewal of all things (Matt 19:28). This is the message of the gospel. When Jesus conquered death, through the resurrection, God launches the beginning of a restored creation (Col 1:18; 1 Cor 15:20-22). God's Kingdom has arrived; renewal has begun. Jesus offered his followers an alternative kingdom to the Roman Empire and those in power viewed him as a threat. It was both a political and subversive message then and remains a political and subversive message today. The popular notion of the gospel presents it as an immaterial, future and individualistic message, but this emphasis obscures the gospel Jesus declared. Jesus spoke of a present, physical and communal kingdom.

### **The Shaping of a Gospel Community**

This belabored discussion about the gospel has attempted to establish the foundation for what it means to plant a gospel community. The goal in planting is not to establish a new institution, a set of programs or some corporate structure, but to offer a taste of God's Kingdom, in other words, a *Gospel Community*. Planting a congregation requires the discovery of what it means to embody the gospel in different contexts and changing environments. The advent of the Millennial Generation represents the tangible manifestation to a prolonged and unavoidable cultural reality, the death of Christendom. Christendom represents domination of Christianity over Western Civilization beginning with the Edict of Milan and continuing into the twentieth century.<sup>48</sup> While some mourn and fight this cultural reality, because it signifies the fact that the "Church" no longer occupies the places of power or prominence, the demise of Christendom represents an opportunity to return to the gospel and rediscover how it is distinct from Western culture. As stated earlier, planting thrives by actively engaging a culture disconnected from God with the radical message of the gospel. This is why Stetzer concludes "the gospel must be

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 241. See: Walter C. Kaiser, "Kingdom Promises as Spiritual and National," in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg, (Westchester: Crossway, 1988), 289-307.

<sup>46</sup> The phrase ἔφθασεν ἐφ' ὑμᾶς, has overtaken you, in Matthew 12:28, suggests both the suddenness and the presence of God's Kingdom. This statement indicates that the kingdom is not merely expected, but already here and in process.

<sup>47</sup> The theology concerning the Kingdom of God is complex, about which barrels of ink have been spilt. This paper is not disregarding the future nature of God's Kingdom; rather, it is has emphasized its present reality as a means of cultural engagement. See: Darrell L. Bock, "The Kingdom of God in New Testament Theology: The Battle, The Christ, The Spirit-Bearer, and Returning Son of Man," *Looking into the Future*, ed. David W. Baker (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).

<sup>48</sup> Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church*, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003), 8-9.

addressed in fresh ways to the ever-changing population that's disassociated itself from 'pseudo-Christian' roots."<sup>49</sup>

The goal of this discussion is not to present a "how-to manual" on planting congregations for Millennials, nor is it intended to provide a detailed blueprint of the ideal congregation, rather it is an invitation to think creatively about how new gospel communities can accurately reflect God's Kingdom in a way that engages and captivates the Millennial imagination. IKAR, עיקר (essence, root, principle), an innovative synagogue in Los Angeles, has reimagined the shape of Jewish community. By doing so, it has inspired and awakened the hearts of young, disengaged Jews. While IKAR is not a "gospel community," it has discovered crucial elements needed to catalyze this generation. In a recent TED Talk, Rabbi Sharon Brous, founder of IKAR, shares what she has learned in her journey to confront "religious routine-ism," which is when institutions and leaders are "stuck in a paradigm that is rote and perfunctory, devoid of life, devoid of vision and devoid of soul."<sup>50</sup> She identifies four commitments that have allowed her, and IKAR, to recapture the heart of Jewish tradition, "to help make it meaningful and purposeful again in a world on fire."<sup>51</sup> First, she speaks of "wakefulness," which is the act of keeping hearts and eyes open to the brokenness and injustice in the world, without falling into indifference. Second, she identifies the critical role of "hope," by standing against a culture of despair and giving people a sense of purpose, to know that their dreams matter. Third, she draws on a rabbinic tradition to illustrate the importance of "mightiness." Mightiness recognizes the ability of each individual to make a difference. No one person can do everything, but each person can do something in order to be a force for good in the world. Fourth, Brous mentions the reality of "interconnectedness," and human dependence on one another. The world is growing smaller; therefore, faith communities cannot retreat to places of isolation and radical individualism. When one group or region experiences pain and sorrow it impacts all people. Messianic communities miss the "interconnectedness" nature of the gospel when they focus solely on Jewish matters. Surprisingly, focus on the Jewish community alone is not a very Jewish trait. The Jewish community has been extensively involved in global matters and is looking for a gospel that is concerned with global renewal. IKAR connects to Millennials by remaining focused on these four commitments.

#### *Attributes of a Flourishing Millennial Gospel Community*

Rabbi Brous's discovery of the essence of what it means to return to the heart of her Jewish tradition helps frame a discussion about how to more authentically reflect the gospel for Millennials. Making a congregation that connects with Millennials is not about better marketing with a more attractive presentation, but learning what it means to embody the gospel.

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<sup>49</sup> Ed Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches*, 19.

<sup>50</sup> Sharon Brous, "It's Time to Reclaim Religion, *TED*, Oct 2016, Lecture. Web. Feb 17, 2017

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

## Kingdom-Minded

The gospel, at the simplest level, is the declaration of the arrival of God's Kingdom. The Body of Messiah exists as a foretaste to God's Kingdom and should participate in God's work in the world. As Alan Hirsch describes it, "It's a scratch-and-smell experience for the people around. When people rub up against the church, a Kingdom aroma should waft from it; they should catch a glimpse of life as God intended it to be lived in the first place."<sup>52</sup> The initial community of Jesus followers grew exponentially even though they experienced a very tangible threat of imprisonment and execution at the hands of the Roman authorities. They did not occupy positions of power or prominence, but sat on the societal margins, as the outcasts. Roman threats could not contain the growth of this community. As a result Constantine attempted to channel the popularity of the emerging movement by making it the dominant force in the Empire. Since then the "Church" has sat upon the seat of the power brokers and as a result has confused "earthly kingdoms" for God's Kingdom. Jesus advanced the Kingdom through humility and affliction, not through political or economic might (John 12:23-32; 2 Cor 2:14-17). Millennials are suspicious of the religious establishment, who seem to crave power and control. Gospel communities, which authentically embody God's Kingdom, will reinvigorate a millennial curiosity in Jesus and his message.

## Tangible

God's Kingdom is tangible. John begins his narrative of Jesus's life by explaining how Jesus took on human flesh and made God visible in a very tangible way (John 1:14). Jesus made God's Kingdom visible by addressing the physical needs of those he encountered and restoring God's creation to its intended design (Luke 9:11). When individuals present the gospel as an ethereal and future reality, they misrepresent the nature of the gospel. Millennials crave a tangible gospel, a gospel that makes a difference in the here and the now. Stearns express this well, although perhaps with language that is foreign for the messianic community,

*"Christianity is a faith that was meant to spread – but not through coercion. God's love was intended to be demonstrated – not dictated. Our job is not to manipulate or induce others to agree with us or to leave their religion and embrace Christianity. Our charge is to both proclaim and embody the gospel so that others can see, hear, and feel God's love in tangible ways. When we are living out our faith with integrity and compassion in the world, God can use us to give others a glimpse of his love and character."*<sup>53</sup>

Gospel communities are crucial element in the proclamation of the gospel, because they make God's Kingdom tangible by seeking the good of the city (Jer 29:7).<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Alan Hirsch, "Alan Hirsch: What is a Missional Community," *The Verge Network*, Web. Feb 26, 2017.

<sup>53</sup> Richard Stearns, *The Hole in the Gospel*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 18.

<sup>54</sup> Timothy Keller, *Center Church*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 171. Rainer and Rainer, *The Millennials*, 259-261.

## Communal

Evangelism in America has often presented the gospel through highly individualistic language, speaking about one's personal salvation and personal relationship with God. As has been shown earlier, Millennials live exceedingly connected and social lives. They long for dynamic, life-transforming relationships.<sup>55</sup> The gospel is not about the individual, but about transformational, sacrificial community (John 17:20-23). While many American worship services imply the community exists for the individual, gospel communities cultivate a culture where the individual exists for the community, a process Hirsch describes as *communitas*.<sup>56</sup> Millennials are tired of the shallow, consumer oriented religious expression. They want something more substantive and authentic. Gospel communities create space for intentional mentoring, in which older generations speak into the lives of younger generations and younger generations have value to offer both their talents and energy to the older generations.<sup>57</sup> Millennials want to be in a community where they are invited to participate.

## Justice

The gospel declares the arrival of justice, צדקה (Isa 61:1, 8; Mat 12:17-21; Luke 4:18). Gospel communities are not involved in matters of justice, because it is trendy or as a means of appealing to Millennials. Instead, gospel communities pursue issues of justice, because it faithfully reflects God's heart. Justice is a central element of the gospel. God not only judges his own people for being instruments of injustice (Ezek 9:9), but he also judges foreign nations for abusing their power and oppressing those who are weak (Amos 1:3-15). This means it is not only appropriate, but also compulsory for gospel communities to confront injustice by prophetically speaking truth to power in a political and social context. Doing so requires wisdom, because, on the one hand, the "Church" has alienated others from the gospel when attempting to impose moral values politically, while, on the other hand, they have concealed the gospel by being silent about matters of injustice. In the messianic world involvement in justice is especially important, because the Jewish community values justice and any gospel proclamation that neglects justice will be not resonate as "good news."

## Conclusion

This is merely a glimpse of what it means to embody the gospel in a culture that is constantly in flux. Despite watching a steady stream of Millennials leaving traditional religious expression, by providing a foretaste of God's Kingdom, gospel communities can captivate the hearts and minds of this generation. In an era where populism, xenophobia and unquestioned nationalism flourish, gospel communities must challenge these cultural trends by embodying a kingdom-mindset. Not only are these political

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<sup>55</sup> The Barna Group, *Making Space for Millennials*, 7.

<sup>56</sup> Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 220.

<sup>57</sup> The Barna Group, *Making Space for Millennials*, 7. Rainer and Rainer, *The Millennials*,

trends contrary to the gospel, they are also repelling for many Millennials. The syncretism of faith in Jesus with Western Culture will ultimately erode the gospel and destroy any evangelistic endeavor by the messianic community. This means creating a safe and welcoming environment where young people encounter Jesus. The gospel challenges God's people to move from the places of power and prestige into a life on the margins, with commitments to justice, mercy and compassion. These are not overly produced congregations with heavy emphasis on style, but authentic communities that are dedicated to the holistic aspect of the gospel. Millennials are looking for religious communities that challenge them to radically follow Jesus by living holy and sacrificial lives. They do not want consumer-oriented congregations, but communities where they can participate in being forces for good and instruments for the formation of God's Kingdom.