

How Does Division Destabilize and Destroy Torah Communities?

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Undershepherd --in concert with all SAM Community Members

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The first and foremost answer to this question is that it is indeed often very subtle! Out and out blatant “attack” on the unity of a fellowship would most likely be recognized and would cause people to join together in Messiah.

Still, in America today, the fragmentation of fellowship and congregational Messianic communities is so prevalent that there must be another process at work.

We present one way to identify and further understand this issue here, in light of the stage of development any given community is in at the time of the trouble. You will find the description of these stages in various places throughout both of our websites: www.set-apart-ministries.org/communitydefinition.html and www.plantandgrowmessianicfellowships.org

You will also see another more in-depth discussion of *The Importance of Echad in Community* in our third foundational teaching, also on our sites.

Stage 1 Casual Infrequent Gathering

X,Y,Z symbols represent individuals/couples who have different perspectives or beliefs but share enough agreement in enough different aspects in order to be able to meet together sporadically for study or fellowship.

X X X Z Z Y

X X X X Z Z X X Y Z X X X Y

Z Z X Y X X X X X X X X

X X X X Y Y

They come and go fluidly, as it is convenient for them. They may meet in different homes and some have even told me that they observe a different way of doing things according to the host/hostess of each place they use. Differences don't really ruffle feathers too much as it is not hard to accommodate varying beliefs when there is no particular established group identity. There is no accepted agreement that one belief or practice is more “correct” than another and thus no one who has any kind of authority to address X vs Y or Z so all are attempting to be mutually supportive of one another and accommodating. This can definitely be workable...at least for a season.

In this setting, someone new coming into the gathering who has a quite different understanding might be represented by A, B or C

XXX A ZZ Y BB XXX

YY XXXXZZ X Z YX XXX

XXX ZZ YY XXX XX XX YY

C XX YY ZZ XXX

OUTCOMES:

- 1) Their different perspective COULD be melded in with the group as part of a wider mutually agreeable perspective. So instead of XYZ mutual understanding, it becomes XYZABC mutual understanding.

This could be good or not so good, depending on how far afield it goes.

This is a common occurrence in casual groups because there is a desire to accommodate all and make all feel welcome, adapting themselves to whatever “new” people might need or believe. XYZ understanding has just been tacitly agreed upon anyway, without any structure or maybe even intent, to keep it clear. This is usually seen by the participants as their way of being loving and gracious.

- 2) The ABC different perspectives could actually be attractive to some of the XYZ people enough so that they break away from the original gathering to go along with them. In a casual gathering of people, it may not even SEEM like a break away because all are fluid anyway, and able to move around as they desire to do.

This could leave us with two or more groups that might look like this-- a predominant blend of the original XYZ group here and a new group predominantly like the ABC perspective over there :

XXX YY AAA BBXX

AA BB XX Y Z BB B CC

YY ZZZ XXX YY XY C

ZZZ ZX AB BBBB AA Z

XXX YY XXXXXXXX YZ

CCC AC YYY XX AB

AA XX YYYYYY ZX

XXX YY BBB CCB AZ BZ

- 3) Another possible outcome is that the new ABC perspectives MIGHT be so upsetting to some of the XYZ people that it becomes contentious and argumentative. In the absence of any clear understanding or agreed upon perspectives this difference can easily become a battle and can get very ugly with no one in a position to function as any kind of universally accepted moderator

or decision-maker. There is no agreed upon “central” pillar of belief or practice to work with, but rather just all the composite positions of each individual/couple.

In this kind of situation, often the group really just flies apart, and people choose to “stay home” and study alone rather than deal with such difficulties. They may wait a number of months until they feel less agitated by it all and then begin to venture out again to try to meet with just a few people, but clearly they are even more concerned if any kind of difficulties arise because they don’t want to go through such upheaval again, and so often leave even more quickly if any differences rise to the surface.

Here is where the abundance of Torah teachers available now comes in as potentially divisive force, because it is easier to just depart from a troubled group rather than allow the sanctification process to occur, when one can just depend on the media for teachers. Few seem to understand as yet that teaching that occurs outside the context of relationships is not really complete or compatible with Torah pursuance. (More on this in our *Messy Expectations* series)

Stage 2: Casual group status but meeting more regularly

This stage looks very much like the first stage, but because the group is meeting together more frequently they may have a more clear idea of what they believe and have fallen into some mutually acceptable roles within their framework. Still, none of this understanding has been formalized in any way but remains as a “covert” or tacitly understood set of assumptions between them. This, too, may be very workable for a season. The trouble comes in when new people or new understandings begin to influence some people and not others.

How does such a group work through conflict? Their only experience so far has been in quiet, tacit agreement with those who are of like mind and maturity enough to function well together. It is at this point that any underlying immaturity issues will likely arise and impact their ability to successfully resolve conflict, often resulting in the contentiousness or flying apart noted earlier.

What happens, too, if the “new understandings” fly in the face of or abolish Torah? Who will be in the position to identify this? Is it every man for himself, assuming everyone has equal wisdom and understanding to be able to discern?

From our perspective, if this were so, why did both Moshe and Yeshua identify the problem of people who are harried and helpless without a shepherd to guide them?

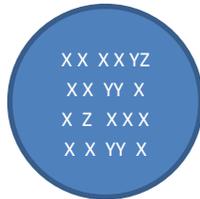
Stage 3: Developing Covenant Relationship Community

At this stage, there has been a firming of boundaries of the group, more active work has been done to overtly establish the calling, the identity, the mission, the boundaries and structure of the group as in halachah, leadership/authority roles, moedim observance and practice and so forth. The Scriptural model that we practice and recommend is that of a plurality of elders/shepherds who have been called by YHWH, not man. A mutually accepted foundation of Torah understanding is being addressed as a group and shared understanding is growing. **Unity is the issue but not uniformity.** Such a group

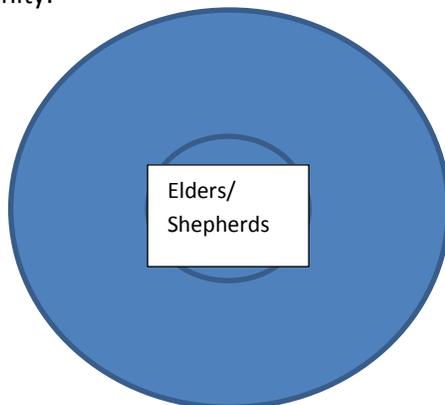
recognizes that they have a long term commitment to one another in Messiah but may not yet be in the position of living in close proximity to one another or working together in some kind of mutual employment or activity to support the community, as in a kibbutzim or moshave arrangement. We see ourselves as between stages 3 and 4 in our local community at this writing.

This diagram will then look different than that of stages 1 and 2. It will have a border, or boundary around the group. Though there will still be an assortment of people with some degree of variation of belief, there will also be a stronger group identity and agreement of purpose and all of the above mentioned things that are solidifying into a Torah pursuant community which has established roles, authority and boundaries; an established halachah in other words.

The circle represents a physical picture of the reality of the group identity that has a boundary within which the members identify themselves.



We would further add that a community that has boundaries and leadership also has a sort of double ring structure....with the leaders at the center, "in the midst" of them, and the members surrounding them. This internal boundary is a *fluid* one as we recognize that there needs to be mutual accountability and exhortation in both directions; not just one way! Still those in leadership bear the accountability with YHWH to tend His sheep as well as the authority to address and maintain the needs of the stability of the community.



Moving from stage 3 to 4 has more to do with physical proximity and degree of interrelatedness in every matter of life, as those who live near one another and work together daily. The degree of commitment to the fellowship grows exponentially from nearly no commitment at stage 1 to higher commitment at stages 3 & 4.

We don't think that such commitment should ever be made lightly or too quickly, without prayerfully seeking out understanding about doing so as well as being familiar enough with the community and

leadership enough to be aware of any issues they may have that would impact the stability and YHWH honoring nature of the group. Whether they are able to deal well with conflict is a pivotal point but often very hard to assess until one is in the middle of it! This is hardly enough of a description of the cautions but it will have to suffice for the purpose of this topic here.

Outcomes:

With this growth in a higher level of commitment and structure and calling and so forth, is it then safe to say that such a group is less susceptible to fragmentation? Oh, how we wish that were true! Unfortunately, there are still proverbial “chinks” in the armor.

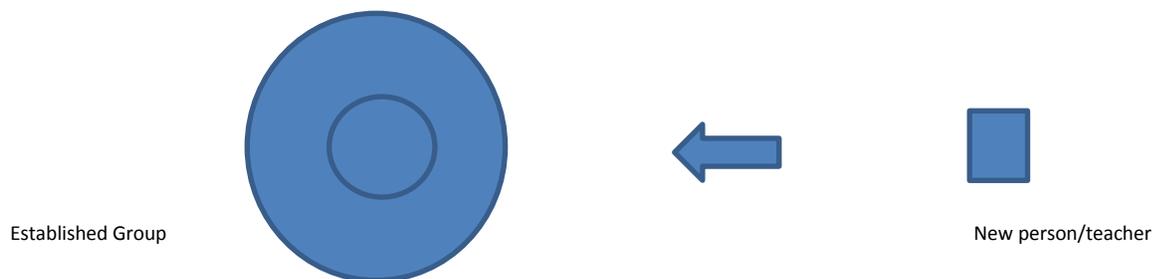
The improvement is that there is now a way to identify, address and resolve such issues, praise Yeshua!

We see issues of division coming in several ways; it may be by exposure to those outside the group or it may be by exposure to those that come in among the group members.

Despite however longstanding the positive experience in the group may be, even when group members know that the leadership and halachah are developing in a YHWH honoring way and have experienced it themselves because they are a part of making it happen, it is still possible for them to be influenced by doubts and accusations. This seems to be true based on the differing levels of maturity of members that must of necessity be a part of any group.

There is often still a question in people’s minds as to who is “authorized to speak” on behalf of a group. It seems like a “throwback” to the idea that the pastor “owns” the church perhaps, but sometimes people in a fellowship question whether they can speak up even as it relates to their own experience in the group. At least, I have seen this idea in Wisconsin congregations of Germanic origin. Does it happen in other areas in a similar way?

Here is an effort to diagram what happens in an established group when someone from outside the group has some kind of influence on the members.



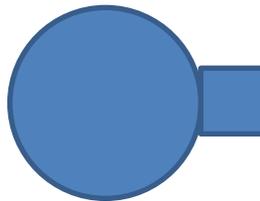
They may come alongside speaking of their desire to develop relationship with this group or people in the group. If they do not understand what they see or hear in the context of the community, the tendency for most people is to reject rather than seek to learn and understand. Even when they see a community that functions as a cohesive unit with appropriate leadership and shepherding, as this seems to be so rare today, they may well interpret it as the group is under too much control of the leadership. This is our most frequent experience.

If the members of the group hold fast to what they know, this experience will have little effect, other than perhaps sadness that the relationship with the new person didn't develop any further.

If the questions of the person raise doubt of something about the character or function of the group, or its leaders, it will require the members and leaders to quietly stand firm in what they know and not be shaken by the opinions of someone who really isn't familiar with them; no matter how loud or aggressively they may make their opinions known. Here is where it is essential that members understand that they ARE well able to speak up and identify their own experience to refute or correct what has been misinterpreted.

If they do not speak up, but hold secret doubts the division process has begun.

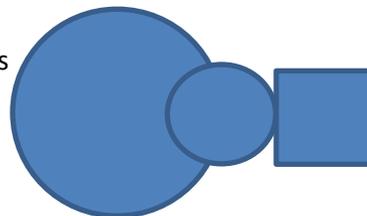
The new influence has in some way
"joined" with the community



even if in a very small or short term way. Usually, they will develop a relationship with one or more people just as they would in the earlier examples of the more casual group experiences.

If they then depart without have adequate understanding of what they experienced, but instead interpreting the experience negatively, they can leave doubts in the minds of the members about what happened, as well as spreading a negative report to others.

This chart is trying to express the connection that happens
With new people and existing members who are then
experiencing doubt about the community.



They retain their identity as part of the community but are drawn slightly apart from it as they now have an innuendo or outright accusation that all is not as it should be.

Do we recognize the scheme of the evil one and how well this same plan worked for satan in the garden?

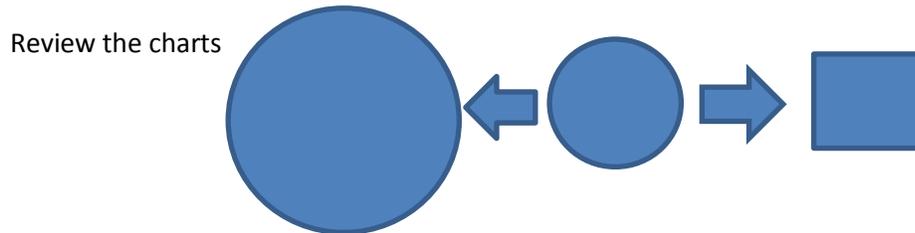
If we don't, we surely need to do so!

If the difficulty is not recognized, brought out into the light and resolved, the influence of the new person may continue to be felt or it may be magnified by other people expressing similar concerns.

Usually a member who has had a good experience in a community will feel a deep tug of conflict here! They want to be kind to the "new" person but they also know they have done well in the community. It

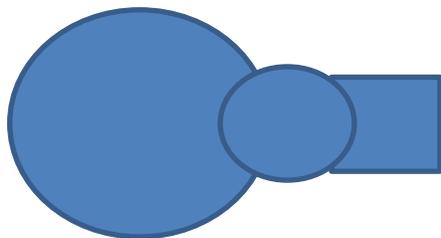
is not difficult then for that person or couple to be drawn just a bit further out of the community with these doubts magnified.

In desperation, they may say, 'I don't want to be "put in the middle!" In fact, at this point, that is EXACTLY where they are!



There were two "entities" represented: the community and the new person or influence.

If they identify themselves as not wanting to be put in the middle, they are already seeing themselves as no longer a fully committed part of the community, but on the outside, looking both back to what they have known and over to what they are now hearing. There are in effect, three entities now. How else could someone be "in the middle?" It could also be shown as a Venn diagram, with the circles and the square overlapping, which would show the dual commitment to different relationships:



At such a juncture, we have experienced the struggle of the people involved who want to be respectful of the new person and not offend them in any way. Unfortunately, this desire not to offend can also mean that they do not speak up for what they know to be true, since it isn't their place to speak for the community, as they see it.

It should be no problem for people to have such friendships and relationships OUTSIDE their community. A healthy boundary for each community should be porous, not requiring a total loss of personal identity in order to be a part of the community! Unfortunately, we see all too often that if the relationship was a part of the community relationships to begin with, retaining any kind of close ties with someone who casts doubt on the validity of the community is a very difficult stretch for the members! Whether they speak openly about their misinterpretations or not, the friendship will be strained and we have seen, often results in pulling the people away from their previous understanding of what was good for them in the community, unless they are mentally and emotionally strong enough and mature enough to stand firm.

Many have spoken of the danger of associating with people who have less than good behaviors, especially for adolescents. Our comment is similar to many others: if you can remain a light shining among the darkness of a peer group that is less than exemplary, all is well. If you find that your light diminishes in their company, you are not yet strong enough to function in the capacity to lead others in the good paths.

In a similar way, the maturity and strength of people in community who are pulled out in this way will be a large part of determining the outcome.

We see it as very similar to the situation with the Amalekites as the Israelites were departing from Egypt. As the young, old or weak people straggled out behind, they were picked off by the enemy. If community members who are weak in personal or group identity are so challenged, they can be easily picked off.

An additional danger is when such disruption comes from someone who has integrated himself or herself in the community more intimately or over a longer period of time. This is more like the picture of a saboteur, or a wolf in sheep's clothing. We do understand that some people really have no conscious idea that they are functioning in this way! They just see that they have difficulty wherever they go...and seem well able to play on other's sympathies in the process.

Unfortunately in these days we are seeing an increase in the numbers of people who are unstable, deceitful and duplicitous, as well as an increase in the severity of their issues. As one reviewer of a first draft of this article commented:

When I was baby Christian, I encountered many people that had criminal behaviors. Many Christians didn't want to discuss this issue. The usual answer was "it's judging people" etc. Then some scandal would break out. Time and time again I would discern these behaviors. Now the church & messianic groups are full of them. I think this is just the same thing that John, Jude, and Titus were trying to warn early believers about in their midrashes. When I took some social- psych classes it appeared to make sense, but the church at that time was reluctant to align itself [using] psychology as diagnostic tool.

When I did more studies into Hebrew and re- reading the books of wisdom from Shlomo, I noticed the word "fool" and other descriptions of odd behavior he warned us about. I wrote two short articles on the subject by the inspiration of the RUACH. What you have in the world, you have in the Christianity/Hebrew Roots [movement]. I learned there are some super smart crooks, to which there are theories behind intelligence level and behavior. They can be bi-polar, borderline, socio-psycho path [personality disorders] or schizophrenic etc...pick the label and event for it but triggered around lambs, it still spells "predator".

We see this as a major strategy of the evil one to destroy the unity of a community, whether it is a long term subtle disruption or a fairly short term sudden occurrence. In the case of one who is more integrated in a community group before making any divisive efforts, it is more like a culling out of the weak from the flock; looking for those who are vulnerable to such innuendoes or accusations from their position within the group. In both cases, we see the results to be similar. Again, we emphasize that the individual may not be consciously aware at all that they are being used in this way and would even protest such a recognition of the process they are involved with.

In all things we must remain prayerfully aware of these dangers if we are to recognize and address them to maintain the stability of our fellowships. We see that the ability to handle such dangers successfully is highly related to the degree of stability, commitment, identity and structure of a group, believing that those in stages 3 & 4 have a much better opportunity to do so than do the more casual groups.

If you are interested in further discussion on these issues, please contact us at:

Info@set-apart-ministries.org or (920) 336-7005

We are ready and able to set up Leadership Development teleconferences for such discussions or to meet with your leadership teams by invitation.

In the meantime, may our Abba increase our wisdom and understanding as we both shepherd and are shepherded so that we may give and receive wise counsel!