PART III

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this section was to examine the “favourable” characterization of the crowds in the gospel. As was mentioned in Chapter One, this portrayal includes most of the crowds’ words and actions during Jesus’ public ministry. Accordingly, the section began with an assessment of Jesus’ ministry to the crowds to see how Jesus’ own actions were represented in the gospel. The role of the crowds is partly modelled on the picture inherited from Mark’s gospel. They are the receptive masses who respond to Jesus’ ministry. They react to his teaching, his healings, and they follow him about. In Matthew, however, there is a distinctive globalizing of these features. The crowds react at key intervals, such as the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, the close of the Messiah of Deeds sequence, and at the Triumphal Entry.

The Role of the Crowds: Their Situation

The above chapters indicate that the crowds are to be situated in their approach to Jesus midway between the disciples and their leaders. On the one hand, the crowds are to be distinguished from the disciples. The crowds respond with amazement and wonder at Jesus’ thaumaturgy, while the disciples are usually portrayed as being unmoved, simply because they understand. When the disciples do react, they worship Jesus. The crowds do not worship Jesus, but they praise God because of him, and evince an increasing penetration of Jesus’ identity, even if it stops well short of the understanding displayed by the disciples.

As “lost sheep,” the crowds are the object of Jesus’ and the disciples’ ministry. The disciples are specifically enlisted to aid Jesus in the feedings of the crowds; they figure as Jesus’ coworkers precisely because he has commanded them to renounce themselves and follow him as disciples. Here the disciples perform the will of the Father. This cannot be said of the crowds’ following, as it is not initiated by Jesus. They follow Jesus as needy subjects, who look to Jesus and his disciples to requite their needs. The situations of the disciples and crowds are, therefore, categorically different.

Yet, the crowds are also categorically different from their leaders. Where the crowds demonstrate an instinctive openess to Jesus’ words and deeds, the reactions of the Pharisees and other leaders is entirely negative. Throughout Jesus’ public ministry, the leaders of
their people do their utmost to subvert Jesus’ influence, and to prevent the crowds from gaining an accurate perception of Jesus’ identity. As characteristic examples of “bad shepherds,” they show no concern for the needs of the people of Israel, but merely for their own influence.

The crowds, therefore, as was suggested in an earlier chapter, do in fact occupy a position midway between that of the disciples and their leaders. That this is not a static position is also an important consideration for the evangelist: the crowds are, in despite of their leaders, instinctively gravitating toward a position of increased understanding.

*The Role of the Crowds: Their Favourable Portrayal* Two features contribute to a positive portrayal of the crowds. The first is their instinctive appreciation of Jesus. That they appear to be gaining inklings of Jesus’ identity means that they are characterized in a positive light. Their openness to Jesus cannot but contrast favourably with the willful blindness of their leaders. The second feature is their absolute helplessness. Their want of good leadership, their need of healing, of feeding, of direction—all these traits place the crowds in a sympathetic light. Jesus’ compassion for the crowds awakens the reader’s compassion.

*The Function of the Crowds: Christology* Matthew clearly uses Jesus’ involvement with the crowds to develop his Christology, and his Christology to develop his representation of the crowds. As was demonstrated in Section One, the crowds are Israelites without a leader. As leaderless sheep, they instinctively search out their shepherd, and begin consciously to appreciate him for what and who he is. Their dawning recognition, in turn, informs the reader. Through his use of the crowds, therefore, Matthew is able to reveal Jesus as the Davidid whom God would raise up. Their gathering together from all Israel has a significant correspondence with the behaviour of Israel at the inception of David’s rule and signals the appearance of the Son of David.

As the Scriptures suggest, shepherding is a feature of the Davidic rule. The same holds true for Jesus’ role as servant. In Matthew, shepherd, servant, and Son of David complement each other and disclose a figure who is the virtual antithesis of the warlike, conquering Messiah. Matthew uses the crowds to limn the features of this figure. Obviously, the suppliants also contribute to this portrayal, but the crowds give official expression to it. In the Triumphal Entry, the crowds, as representatives of Israel, formally announce to Jerusalem