

Foreword

The church at the outset of the twenty-first-century faces great challenges: How does one communicate the gospel anew and call God's people to renewal? How does one proclaim a 2000-year-old message in a way that is relevant to our diverse and postmodern cultures? How can new bodies of believers be established despite growing tensions between the Global North and the Global South?

This book suggests a fresh approach to these challenges. Del Birkey argues that renewal does not lie in the traditional church structure, but with the development of small bodies of believers meeting in homes. These units are not ancillary appendages to a large traditional church, but rather consist of independent/interdependent “house churches” following the New Testament pattern.

This return to a first-century model for the church may seem curious or puzzling to some or even radical to others. After all, some may say, times have changed and a return to the house church may seem like a gigantic step backward. Others may claim that our society differs greatly from that in which the early church was born; the contemporary world is not the same as first-century Greece, Rome, or Palestine. Suggesting a house church model for twenty-first-century Christianity seems to emphasize the trivial and to major in the minors—absolutizing the relative. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Del Birkey carefully traces the origin of the house church through Scripture and then shows precisely how this model can revitalize today's church. For the skeptics, the thesis has a solid foundation in theology and sociology and reflects sound principles of anthropology and communication theory.

One of the great challenges of the contemporary church is communication. Much of the church's communication of the gospel rests on the verbal proclamation of the “Word” of God. This focus derives from the belief that the Scriptures are the revelation of God. Church services thus center around preaching, and our notion of renewal focuses on special services where the “Word” is preached anew. The communication of the divine message did not just occur through the biblical writers, however, but through God in human form—the incarnation. God became a human to draw humans to himself; not with mere words, but with action. The “words” of God became the “Word of God”—a relational nonverbal message.

While the modern evangelical church has paid great attention to the preaching of the gospel, it has paid less attention to this living, incarnate relational message. Churches are modeled after “words” and doctrine rather than the incarnation. Its life consists of preaching rather than community, relationships, servanthood, and action. However, the church needs a greater sense of balance.

Although churches may proclaim God's message of love, community, and care in a verbal way, the church structure may convey the opposite message. Church structures strongly affect the kind of relationships among people within them. Often the setting of the traditional church fosters a spectator mentality characterized by impersonal or superficial personal relationships that show little warmth or commitment.

Therefore, while the church preaches the gospel, it is being squeezed into the mold

of the prevailing cultural values rather than biblical values. While preserving its orthodoxy, it is neglecting its practice of the gospel. There is little sense of community in the lives of believers. The verbal “words” of Scripture are out of line with the subtle messages of impersonal individualism that the massive church structures communicate.

Do our churches communicate the message of a loving personal God who wants personal relationship with humans? Or, while verbally communicating a personal God, do our churches communicate an impersonal God who does not enter into relationship with others? One need only attend church on a Sunday morning and count the number of warm friendly people to evaluate how personal the message is.

Although many are calling for an incarnational approach to ministry, many church structures do not reflect the incarnational model for ministry, evangelism, or renewal today. Birkey argues that recovering the relational nonverbal message of the gospel involves incorporating the theological integrity of the incarnation into the structure of the church. Thus, the church primarily should be relational: personal, intimate, committed, and small—like a family. What better way to communicate the personal nature of God and his love and commitment to people than by having a church in a home!

Indeed, no symbol of a personal relationship with God could be more appropriate. It is no accident that the words the Scripture uses to describe both the human-divine relationship and the relationships among believers are precisely the words used for the relationships in the family: father, mother, son, daughter, child, brother, sister.

The house church has exciting potential for renewal of the modern church. My wife and I were members of a house church for five years that met in Del's home. We personally experienced the kind of community described in this book. We will never forget the deep relationships developed there or the spiritual growth that resulted from both the intense experience of community and Del's excellent teaching. The members were diverse, with different ages, education, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Yet there was a sense of love and commitment that expressed the incarnational message of the gospel. Community does flow from structure!

Besides communicating a loving personal God in our own culture, the house church is also crucial in proclaiming this message in other cultures. First, the household is a universal phenomenon found in every culture. It is not restricted to the Western world. This means that a house church is a culturally appropriate physical location for the body of believers in any culture. It is a ready-made structure for the contextualization of the church in any culture. There is no need for a building or a denominational structure that may be foreign to the culture. The house church, then, is culturally indigenous and relatively invisible. Thus it is not as subject to criticism that churches are imperialistic organizations based upon a Western denominational mode.

Second, in addition to the household, the family is also universal in every culture. It may be defined differently, but all cultures possess the institution of the family in which children are born, nurtured, and reared. In all cultures, the family is one of the most important groups in which the values of a culture are transmitted to the young.

Third, the household symbolizes the family because it occurs almost everywhere as the location of the family. The household thus symbolizes the most personal, loving, and intimate relationships found in any culture—those relationships that most reflect biblical values.

Fourth, being universal and a symbol of the family, the household communicates an important nonverbal message of a community of caring interpersonal relationships. When the church meets in a home, the structure symbolizes the most personal intimate relationships known to people anywhere. What better way is there to communicate the care, intimacy, and personal concern of a personal God to a lost world!

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Dean is a cultural anthropologist who is internationally known for his contributions in anthropology and archaeology. He has authored three scholarly books in his field and numerous articles. He was also a visiting scholar at the University of Cambridge in Britain and now is a Research Associate at Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. In 1996, professional colleagues in the Society for American Archaeology awarded Dean the third annual “Award for Excellence in Ceramic Studies.” The Alumni Association of Wheaton College honored him as the Wheaton College Alumnus of the Year for Distinguished Service to Alma Mater in the fall of 2008.

Fascinated with the Yucatec Maya people of the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico, he has made numerous visits there studying contemporary potters who are the descendants of the ancient Maya. He discovered one of the constituents used in the unusual ancient pigment, Maya Blue, and since writing a paper in 1967, Dean and some of his colleagues have tried to understand more of the mystery of “Maya blue,” a pigment connected with Maya human sacrifices in which the entire body was painted blue before the ancient Maya priests thrust it backwards on an altar and cut out the throbbing heart.

In 1904, many objects were excavated from the sacred well at the ancient Maya site of Chichén Itzá that was a place of sacrifice to the Maya god of rain. Eventually, one of these objects, a small ancient bowl of hardened incense, was acquired by the Field Museum in Chicago. Dean’s research led him to inspect its contents, and he led a team from the Field Museum to analyze some of its contents, and was the first to provide evidence of how “Maya blue” was actually made—evidently by heating the constituents during burning incense at the sites of the Maya ceremonies.

As a longtime friend and brother, Dean remains a humble believer and gifted scholar. Thank you, Dean, for using your gifts and talents for the glory of God.