

October 2009

Dear Jim,

I read through *Deep Church* once, and then went through it a second time quickly. In light of your burden for unity and mutual understanding, I'm writing this letter to you – before publishing a review. I hope by now you have received the 1986 *Searching Together*, “Desiring Unity...Finding Division: Lessons from the 19th Century Restoration Movement” that I sent you September 30th. This piece expresses the ongoing passions of my heart. I really appreciate your emphasis on listening to and caring about what others with differing viewpoints say, and being open to learn from various traditions (p.85).

As I read *DC* I noticed that we had some common “friends.” You mentioned your stint at Cal State/Northridge. I attended there 1963-1965 as an art major. I became a follower of Christ during my second year there. I was born in Barstow, and lived in Canoga Park from 1956 – 1967. I had John Frame when he started as a teacher at Westminster-Philadelphia in 1970, and deeply appreciated him. I also had C. John Miller as a professor at WTS, and he had an influence upon me that was more caught than taught.

There are many aspects of *DC* that I would be drawn to interact with, but I'm just going to focus on the handful that I see as crucial for getting to the root of the matter.

Organic vs. Institutional

Obviously, words are used in various ways by different people with shades of meaning. It seems like you want to maintain some conception of the church as organic, but it ends up in an institutional shell. To me, it looks like you are mixing apples and oranges when you state that the church is “institution” in terms of

its activities (electing officers, etc.) and “organism” when church people go out into the world as salt and light (pp.191-192). The images of the *ekklesia* are all connected to “life.” Wouldn’t one feel awkward saying, “This bride is an institution”? As Frank Viola notes, “Each image teaches us that the church is a living organism rather than an institutional organization The church we read about in the NT was ‘organic.’ By that I mean that it was born from and sustained by spiritual life instead of constructed by human institutions, controlled by human hierarchy, shaped by lifeless rituals, and held together by religious programs” (*Reimagining Church*, p.32). Based on the NT description, I would maintain any notion of “the church is an institution” is an oxymoron. The *ekklesia* is a “new being” of life in the Spirit. To connect “institution” with a beautiful woman is inappropriate.

Why Is 1 Cor.14 Not Practiced?

You assert, “Since the Bible does not give us enough information to construct a worship service, we must fill in the blanks” (p.137). Why do we feel compelled to find a “worship service”? There is no evidence that the early church had “worship services,” as we conceive of them. The largest insight we have about a Christian gathering appears in 1 Cor.14. We have these glimpses because Paul was correcting a problem. In this passage we see (1) the whole *ekklesia* gathered; (2) an open meeting where everyone was potentially involved in prophecy; (3) that what was spoken had to be understood by all; (4) multiple expressions from many, “each of you has...”; (5) no mention of a sermon by one person; (6) no pulpit; (7) no leaders. You mention “the people up front” (p.139), but in the 1 Cor.14 meeting there is no “front,” as they met in homes with simplicity as a family. Indeed, while the NT does not give a lot of information about believers’ gatherings, my question is: Why have our traditions essentially jettisoned what light we do have from 1 Cor.14 and other passages? Why don’t we practice

open meetings where we can express Christ together? John H. Yoder astutely observes:

Paul tells his readers that everyone who has something to say, something given by the Holy Spirit to him or her to say, can have the floor Within this freedom for all to speak, a relative priority should be given to the mode of speech called “prophecy,” because it speaks “to improve, to encourage, and to console.” It is noteworthy that there is no reference to a single moderator, “minister,” or “priest” governing the process, as things tend to proceed in most Christian groups in our time. Paul wishes that everyone might prophecy, perhaps echoing Moses’ words to the same effect in Numbers 11:29 (*Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before A Watching World*, p.61).

I suggest that moving toward deep ekklesia would involve enjoying a body meeting where all the priests can function. We are missing great blessings by retaining “worship services” that focus on and are led by “those up front.” Traditional services have “filled in the blanks” with practices that do not foster and enhance NT perspectives concerning the Body of Christ.

William Barclay (from the very formal Church of Scotland) made this remarkable observation based on his study of 1 Cor.14:

The really notable thing about an early Church service must have been that almost everyone came with a sense that he had both the privilege and obligation of contributing something to it (*The Letters to the Corinthians*, 1st edition, 1956, p.150).

Again I must ask, is it hermeneutically responsible to disregard the weight of 1 Cor.11-14 and fill in the blanks with practices that contradict what is revealed?

Why Isn't Our Lord's Supper A Meal?

“Weekly Communion” is a practice of your church. You call it several times a “sacrament.” To apply this word to the Lord’s Supper, given its origin and meaning, seems inappropriate and misleading (cf., Leonard Verduin, “Sacramentschwärmer,” *The Reformers & Their Stepchildren*, pp.132-159; Vernard Eller, “The Lord’s Supper Is Not A ‘Sacrament,’” *Searching Together*, 12:3, 1983, pp.3-6).

Emil Brunner in *The Misunderstanding of the Church* (1952) did a masterful job of showing how a simple meal in the early church became a “sacrament” controlled by an ecclesiastical institution (pp.60-73).

Properly speaking, New Testament Christianity knows nothing of the word ‘sacrament,’ which belongs essentially to the heathen world of the Graeco-Roman empire and which unfortunately some of the Reformers unthinkingly took over from ecclesiastical tradition. For this word, and still more the overtones which it conveys, is the starting point for those disastrous developments which began soon to transform the community of Jesus into the Church which is first and foremost a sacramental Church (pp.72-73).

New Testament scholarship is united in acknowledging that the early church remembered the Lord in a meal they ate together (Daniel Doriani, “Wasn’t the Lord’s Supper Originally a Feast?” *Christianity Today*, March 18, 1983). You note that in your celebration, “Even though people come forward as individuals, it is done as a community – a covenant-family meal” (p.140). Don’t people *sit at*, not come forward, for a meal? Why have we abandoned the blessing of eating together in anticipation of the future supper of the Lamb and his Bride?

Why Is Preaching Central?

It seems that no matter how you slice it – in the traditional, emergent, or your view – the sermon still remains intact and central. I do not see how deep ekklesia can blossom until this tradition is dealt a death-blow. There is no NT evidence of the “centrality of preaching,” as it came to be practiced in church traditions (cf., David Norrington, *To Preach or Not To Preach? The Church’s Urgent Question*, Paternoster, 1996, 130pp.). The pulpit-centered architecture of most churches has no roots in the Biblical revelation.

In order for everything to focus on the sermon, the participatory body meeting described in 1 Cor.14 must be eliminated. There are 58 “one-another’s” in the NT, and there is not a whit about the centrality of “the pastor.” Yet the pastor and his sermon is what “church” revolves around in most cases. Why? Why do we push aside that which has some sound basis (1 Cor.14), and elevate that which has no foundation in Scripture? Dr. Henry R. Sefton observes:

Worship in the house-church had been of an intimate kind in which all present had taken an active part [This] changed from being ‘a corporate action of the whole church’ into ‘a service said by the clergy to which the laity listened.’ (*A Lion Handbook – The History of Christianity*, Lion Publishing, 1988, p.151).

Your unhealthy elevation of the importance and effectiveness of sermons is revealed when you were impressed with the Biblical maturity of the adults in the house church you visited, and attributed this to pulpit oratory – “Clearly, these are folks who have been around the church many years and have heard lots of solid evangelical sermons” (p.169). Apparently you cannot conceive of people being Biblically literate unless they hear sermons. Are you aware of the many people who have testified that their understanding of Christ in the Scriptures rose

exponentially when they were part of open meetings where all participated?

“Clergy/Laity”: The Unchallenged Doctrine

Again, whether traditional, emergent, fundamentalist, liberal, your “third way,” or even heathen religions – they are all infected with what John H. Yoder called, *The Universality of the Religious Specialist*. The traditional clergy/laity distinction cannot be found in the NT, but in post-apostolic history it was the linchpin of the ecclesiastical system. Since the visible church assumed the validity of the clergy/laity divide, it goes unchallenged in almost all Christian traditions. Deep ekklesia is unable to flourish unless this mistaken notion is rooted out. John H. Yoder highlighted this problem:

But in every case he disposes of a unique quality, which he usually possesses for life, which along qualifies him for his function, and beside which the mass of men are identifiable negatively as “laymen,” i.e., non-bearers of this special quality. Normally one such person is needed per social group One person per place is enough to do what he needs to do In Catholicism he renews the miracle of the sacrament; in magisterial Protestantism he proclaims the Word as true preaching But in every case it is what only he can do right, and it is that function around which that happens which people think of as a “church.” It is, in fact, his presence which is the presence of the church; he is the definition (sociologically) of the church No one balks at what his services cost (“The Fullness of Christ,” *Searching Together*, 11:3, 1982, p.4).

You suggest in *Deep Church* that “ordination” needs to be taken seriously. I suggest that the traditional ideas surrounding “ordination” are unbiblical, and only feed the chasm between

clergy and laity (cf. Marjorie Warkentin, *Ordination: A Biblical-Historical View*, Eerdmans, 1980).

Modified Church

It would seem, Jim, that when the sun goes down at the end of the day, you end up with a view of church that is an upgraded version of the traditional elements of church – a pastor, a sermon, ushers and sacraments.

For me, *deep ekklesia* is found in a book like *Reimagining Church*. An overview of such a journey is found in Frank Viola's "Deep Ecclesiology," *From Eternity to Here* (pp.291-305). Of course, church is much more than meetings. But in terms of the issues in your book, a vital starting point is to meet around Christ in openness:

Corporate Display. The church is called to gather regularly to display God's life through the ministry of every believer. How? Not by religious services where a few people perform before a passive audience. But in open-participatory meetings where every member of the believing priesthood functions, ministers, and expresses the living God an open-participatory atmosphere (1 Cor.14:26; 1 Pet.2:5; Heb.10:24-25; etc.) *From Eternity to Here*, p.283.

Jim, thank you for considering these perspectives. So much more could be said, but these points cover some foundational issues. What are your thoughts?

Jon