



PAGAN CHRISTIANITY

Authored by Frank Viola & George Barna

Reviewed by Albert James Dager

When Jesus said, “You are Peter (*Petros*) and upon this rock (*petra*) I will build My *ekklesia* (called-out assembly),” it is certain that He did not have in mind an institution that would be governed by a hierarchy of professional clergymen. But men being what they are, their flesh leads them to seek other men to be their spiritual heads. Just as Israel desired of God that He give them a king, Christians desire priests, pastors, and other ministers to tell them what they must do in order to please God. And they are more than willing to pay for the privilege of sitting under the tutelage of those clergymen.

For almost 2,000 years there have existed institutions called “churches,” most if not all of which can trace their roots to Roman Catholicism. Regardless what some may claim about their institution not tracing its roots to Roman Catholicism, virtually every modern institutional church follows the same patterns for their services and ministry that have been gleaned from Protestantism, which came out of Roman Catholicism.

Yes, there have always been believers who have met without the benefit of institutional trappings, but they have been few and far between, and more often than not they have been persecuted by institutional Christianity. At best they have been ignored or ridiculed for not having a “spiritual covering” called a pastor, priest, pope, or what have you.

That’s not to say that God has not worked within the religious institutions, or that many of the men and women who have ministered in them were not and are not true believers in Jesus. The question is, are those institutions the best way to live the Body life of Christ? Is there not a better way than the clergy-laity model that permeates virtually all institutions called “churches”?

For fifteen years I have been part of a house assembly that has no clergy, no dedicated building, no formal order of “service,” no collection plate, or any of the other trappings associated with the institutional churches. That is what prompted me to write

the book, *The House Assembly: Recapturing the First-Century Model for the Gathering of the Saints*. It was written as a guide (not a manual) for those wishing to find fellowship outside the institutional churches with like-minded believers. So I was greatly interested when I came across Frank Viola’s and George Barna’s book, *Pagan Christianity*. Although published by Present Testimony Ministry in 2002, it gained greater popularity after publishing rights were sold in 2008 to Tyndale House Publishers, a major Christian publishing company.

Pagan Christianity contains valuable, documented information on the pagan roots of most church practices and trappings. These are things I’ve known of, but Viola and Barna have put them together in a way that is easily perceived and understood.

The publisher states, “the authors are not questioning the validity or importance of the church. Instead, they are asking us to thoughtfully consider the source of our churches’ traditions and then ask how these practices square with Scripture and the practices of the first-century church.” (p. ix.)

Viola and Barna distinguish institutionalism from what they call an “organic” assembly of believers, but they retain the word “church” when referring to that organic assembly.

Most of our readers know the problem I have with the word, “church.” It is not a legitimate translation of the Greek *ekklesia* (called-out assembly), but a translation from the Greek, *kyriake oikia* (the lord’s house). It implies a building or an institution, not an assembly of people with a common purpose. This may be one of my idiosyncrasies, but it never fails to nettle me. Yet that is insufficient reason to not recommend this book.

In it there is much valuable information that, once understood, might give believers the impetus to begin searching out a more perfect way to gather together in the Lord’s name.

To begin contrasting what the Lord intended with what man has developed over the centuries, Viola states:

The church in the first century was an organic entity. It was a living, breathing organism that expressed itself far differently from the institutional church today. And that expression revealed Jesus Christ on this planet through His every-member functioning body.

...Where did the practices of the contemporary church come from? The answer is disturbing: Most of them were borrowed from pagan culture.(p. xix)

Adds George Barna, famous for his Barna Group, a research firm whose polls are regarded as reliable indicators of popular trends:

Also, just because a practice is picked up from culture does not make it wrong in and of itself, though we must be discerning. As author Frank Senn notes, “We cannot avoid bringing our culture to church with us; it is a part of our very being. But in the light of tradition we need to sort out those cultural influences that contribute to the integrity of Christian worship from those that detract from it.” (p. xxix)

After some challenges for Christians to rethink what they believe and practice based upon their institutions’ traditions, Viola and Barna get to the nitty-gritty by first addressing the pagan influences of what they call “the edifice complex”: the church

building. They somewhat correctly state that “nowhere in the New Testament do we find the terms *church (ekklesia), temple, or house of God* used to refer to a building.”

I say, “somewhat,” because “house of God” is used by Jesus to refer to the Jewish temple (Matt. 12:4; Mark 2:26; Luke 6:4). And, of course, there are many references to the Jewish temple in the “New Testament.” Also, as I stated above, “church” is not a correct translation of *ekklesia* in referring to the Body of Christ. But again, we don’t wish to nitpick; it’s just my pet peeve.

The authors attribute construction of the first church buildings to Constantine who wished to give Christianity the same legitimacy as the other accepted religions within the Roman Empire. Up to that time Christians met in homes or, occasionally, in common meeting places that were not dedicated to the purpose of Christian worship. The authors cite historian Michael Grant when they state that:

The church edifices built under Constantine were patterned exactly after the model of the basilica. These were the common government buildings, designed after Greek pagan temples. (p. 22)

From the basilica model came elevated platforms, pulpits, special chairs for the clergy, and other accoutrements familiar to most Christian institutions today.

Constantine also introduced the burning of candles and incense as a means to incorporate pomp and ritual similar to that used to honor Roman magistrates. He laid the groundwork for a clergy class that would become a priesthood, and introduced special clothing to separate those officiating, from the common people called “the laity.”

For almost the first thousand years hence, the laity stood facing the clergy on the podium. Eventually pews were introduced; the wealthy could purchase their own pews on which no others could sit. Ushers were employed to guide the people away from those designated pews. The authors state:

The pew is perhaps the greatest inhibitor of face-to-face fellowship. It is a symbol of lethargy and passivity in the contemporary church and has made corporate worship a spectator sport. (p. 34)

Tracing the evolution of church edifices from pagan temples to Roman Catholic churches and cathedrals to Protestant and even Evangelical and Pentecostal church buildings, the authors pull no punches in outlining the pagan origins of many things most Christians take for granted today.

But they are not content to leave it at the physical trappings of everyday (or Sunday) Christianity. They address the pagan influences upon “The Order of Worship,” “The Sermon” (taken from Greek oratory), “The Role of the Pastor” (as a form of priest), “Sunday Morning Costumes” (special robes for clergy and choir, etc.), “Ministers of Music” (spectator as opposed to participatory), even (horrors!) “Tithing and Clergy Salaries.”

These are all chapter titles that offer fascinating reading.

The authors also offer good insight into what constitutes, in their words, an “organic church”:

The DNA of the church produces certain identifiable features. Some of them are: the experience of authentic community, a familial love and devotion of its members one to

another, the centrality of Jesus Christ, the native instinct to gather together without ritual, every-member functioning, the innate desire to form deep-seated relationships that are centered on Christ, and the internal drive for open-participatory gatherings. We believe that any church practice that obstructs these innate characteristics is unsound, and therefore, unbiblical. (p. 263)

Had the authors left off after their excellent exposé of the pagan origins of institutionalism, we might have offered this book through Sword Publishers. Alas, there are a few things that cause us to offer a caveat to any who might read it.

To begin, the elders in the authors’ organic church are considered merely guides, but have no real authority or control in what is done or said:

...Every Christian possessed different gifts and different functions, but only Jesus Christ had the exclusive right to exercise authority over His people. No man had that right. Eldering and shepherding were just two of those gifts. Elders and shepherds were ordinary Christians with certain gifts. They were not special offices. And they did not monopolize the ministry of the church meetings. They were simply seasoned Christians who naturally cared for the members of the church during times of crisis and provided oversight for the whole assembly. (p. 248)

“Oversight” is not defined, which leaves us wondering exactly what the purpose of elders is. To say they had no right to exercise authority is contrary to Scripture:

And we beseech you, brethren, to know those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake. And be at peace among yourselves. (1 Thess. 5:12-13)

Remember those who have authority over you, who have spoken to you the Word of God, whose faith follow, considering the result of their conduct (Hebrews 13:7)

Obeys those who have authority over you, and submit yourselves, for they watch out for your souls, as they who must give account, so that they may do it with joy and not with grief, for that is unprofitable for you. (Hebrews 13:17)

Greet all those who have authority over you, and all the saints. (Hebrews 13:24)

The Greek word we translate as “have authority” is *hegeomai* (from which we get the English word “hegemony”). It is even stronger than “authority,” meaning “lead” in the sense of “command.” Obviously, the context of this authority places it in the hands of certain men which Hebrews 13:24 distinguishes from “all the saints.” Of course, elders are to be authoritative, not authoritarian. All ministry is to be conducted in the spirit of love and for the benefit of the brethren.

Another serious problem is with the authors’ conclusion, to wit, unless a “church” is planted by an itinerant “church planter” from an already established “organic church,” it is nothing more than a trite Bible study, even if it incorporates all the elements familiar to the first-century gathering of believers in Jesus.

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This is where we offer the caution. The reader of *Pagan Christianity* is directed to Viola's Web site which "provides resources for those interested in organic church life and puts people in contact with churches that are exploring fresh ways to be faithful to the New Testament vision of church." Here we may contact his organization for help in finding a house church, to request that they send an "apostle" to start a house church, and to order books and other materials to aid in the starting of a house church.

Now, I'm not at all opposed to brethren who have experience in house assemblies helping others get started. The authors correctly point out that all the first-century assemblies mentioned in Scripture were planted by the apostles who, after appointing elders, left the assemblies to themselves and later kept in touch by letter and/or return visits. But according to *Pagan Christianity*, this is the only legitimate manner in which a biblical assembly can come into being. If it arises among good brethren who see the need and perceive the proper functioning of the assembly, but without outside help, then it is not a legitimate assembly. At best it is a Bible study, or a prayer meeting, or a songfest.

There are a few problems with their reasoning: 1) faith in Jesus Christ was new to our first-century brethren. The only way their assemblies could be established was by apostles; 2) they already lived in close communities of familial relations; 3) we live in a different world where people are coming out of already established assemblies called "churches." Those who are seeking a deeper walk with the Lord and with their brethren are already saved and are also mature in their understanding. They may not all have perfect understanding of how the house assemblies in the first century functioned, but that doesn't mean the Holy Spirit cannot lead them to learn and to grow without an outside mentor; 4) we find that many of our like-minded brethren live miles apart and cannot realistically live in a community setting—at least not right away or consistently at this time. The first-century saints seldom traveled beyond a few miles from home throughout their lifetimes. Today jobs and dispersed families require up to hundreds of miles in travel. Time and distance are factors we must contend with that they didn't. (Amazingly, after strongly imposing their view of how "church" should be done and dismissing those who do not do it his way, Viola says in his followup book, *Reimagining Church*, "I would never claim that there is one "right" way of doing church.")

The authors relate horror stories of how independent house assemblies have failed, but they do not tell us how any planted by their organization's apostles have failed. Certainly there are going to be problems and even failures among house assemblies as there are in institutional churches. Scripture tells us to expect such problems:

Therefore, take heed to yourselves, and to all the flock over which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to feed the called out of God that He has purchased with His own blood. For I know this: that after my leaving, grievous wolves will enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after themselves. (Acts 20:28-30)

This doesn't negate the need to meet in a biblical manner.

Viola and Barna don't believe in regularly functioning teachers or shepherds in the assembly apart from all the members, including women. They make no distinction between the roles that men and women are to take within the assembly. In a number of places they speak of the "sisters and brothers" mutually submitting to one another.

Although they enumerate the ministries of elders according to God's Word (apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, teachers) they offer nothing to empower these elders with any duties apart from what the entire assembly is to exhibit. According to their thinking the only person who truly oversees the assembly is the "apostle" who comes from the outside to set things in initial order. And, except for a "crisis," the only persons who have any distinct ministry from within the assembly are the evangelists who work outside the assembly to bring souls to Christ.

Yet without strong, knowledgeable leadership dedicated to the spiritual welfare of the assembly's members, it would be difficult to guard against false teachings and spiritual error. There must be functioning shepherds who will guard the flock, teachers who will guide the flock (whose teachings are mutually tested by Scripture), and prophets who can speak correction to the assembly and/or individuals according to God's Word. If God has established them for the perfecting of the saints, the work of the ministry, and for the edifying of the body (Ephesians 4:11-16), their roles cannot be so lightly dismissed.

The discernment so necessary for guiding God's people is lacking even within the confines of Viola's organization. In its "2008 National House Church Conference," a featured speaker was William Paul Young, author of the best-selling book, *The Shack*.

If these "apostles" are so woefully undiscerning as to accept and promote the author of a book that misrepresents the Godhead, even as "fiction," I must question their ability to plant a properly functioning house assembly. By convoluting the very nature and character of God, *The Shack* proves itself nothing short of blasphemy. Why cannot Viola and his institution recognize this? (See our review of *The Shack* in Vol. 31 - No. 1.)

Additionally, Viola promotes the Emergent Church concepts of contemplative prayer and other forms of mysticism, claiming they are first-century Christian elements to church life. How did he miss the truth that these were adopted by Roman Catholicism out of ancient paganism? Here's another caveat: the Emergent model is targeting house assemblies, so beware.

The authors are correct when they say that there is a great movement away from institutional churches. This is good. Yet to say that the assembly must in every way reflect the examples in Scripture without exception is to limit the Holy Spirit. Certainly Scripture is our guide, and the elements revealed are important. But not every autonomous assembly is going to incorporate every element at all times. Nor is it always practical to be in daily community relationship with one another, which the authors insist is essential to a true "organic" assembly.

Organizations such as Viola's are turning the movement into a Movement. They insist that only the things they think are germane to first-century assemblies may be practiced today. They are seeking to turn what God is doing into another institution guided by a class of hierarchy called "apostles" whom they claim are the only true planters of legitimate assemblies of believers in Jesus. ❖