

Review of the Book *Pagan Christianity?*

A few months ago I received a newsletter from an organization and noticed that a number of books were suggested as excellent reading. One of the books was titled *Pagan Christianity?* The authors of the book are Frank Viola and George Barna. The title was appealing, and the book is associated with the long-standing Barna Group. So I purchased the book and plunged in reading.

The theme of the book is presented in the “Acknowledgments” as follows:

Not long after I left the institutional church to begin gathering with Christians in New Testament fashion, I sought to understand how the Christian church ended up in its present state. For years I tried to get my hands on a documented book that traced the origin of every nonbiblical practice we Christians observe every week . . . Some may wonder why I spent so much time and energy documenting the origin of our contemporary church practices. It’s rather simple. Understanding the genesis of our church traditions can very well change the course of our church history . . . Without understanding the mistakes of the past, we are doomed to a flawed future.¹

Then over almost three hundred pages the author presents

1. Frank Viola and George Barna. *Pagan Christianity?* Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2008 p. xiii.

his conclusions in chapters such as “Have We Really Been Doing It by the Book?” “The Church Building,” “The Order of Worship,” “The Sermon,” “The Pastor,” “Sunday Morning Costumes,” “Ministers of Music,” and “Tithing and Clergy Salaries.” The author then proceeds to tell us that church buildings, the order of worship, the sermon, giving, and the pastor have been lifted from pagan practices of the past or are simply unbiblical.

The Church Building. In the chapter called the “The Church Building” the author states,

“ . . . nowhere in the New Testament do we find the terms church (*ekklesia*), temple, or house of God used to refer to a building. To the ears of a first century Christian, calling an *ekklesia* (church) a building would have been like calling your wife a condominium or your mother a skyscraper!”²

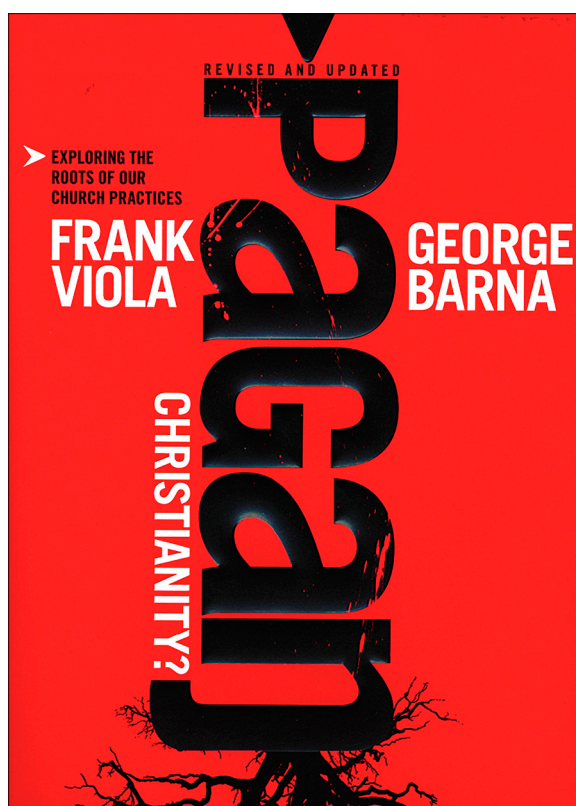
Referring to the early church father Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 190), the author writes,

Even so Clement’s reference to “going to church” is not a

reference to attending a special building for worship. It rather refers to a private home that the second-century Christians used for their meetings. Christians did not erect special buildings for worship . . . Until the year 300 we know of no buildings first built as churches.³

2. Ibid., p. 11.

3. Ibid.



At the end of the chapter the author adds,

The Christian faith was born in believers' homes, yet every Sunday morning scores of Christians sit in a building with pagan origins that is based upon pagan philosophy. There does not exist a shred of biblical support for the church building . . .

It is high time we Christians wake up to the fact that we are being neither biblical nor spiritual by supporting church buildings. And we are doing great damage to the message of the New Testament by calling man-made buildings "churches."⁴

The Order of Worship. In the next chapter, which discusses the current order of worship including singing, the sermon, and a closing prayer, the author states,

Pastors who routinely tell their congregations that "we do everything by the book" and still perform this ironclad liturgy [greeting, offering, announcements, singing, sermon, and prayer] are simply not correct . . . You can scour your Bible from beginning to end, and you will never find anything that remotely resembles our order to worship. This is because the first-century Christians knew no such thing . . . The meetings in the early church were marked by every-member functioning, spontaneity, freedom, vibrancy, and open participation . . . The first-century church meeting was a fluid gathering, not a static ritual. And it was often unpredictable, unlike the contemporary church service.⁵

The author's point is clarified at the end of the chapter,

Let's face it. The Protestant order of worship is largely unscriptural, impractical and unspiritual. It has no analog in the New Testament. Rather, it finds roots in the culture of fallen man. It rips at the heart of primitive Christianity, which was informal and free of ritual.⁶

4. Ibid., p. 42-43.

5. Ibid., p. 48-50.

6. Ibid.

The author advocates an unstructured church service.

The Pastor. The author believes that the role commonly assumed by pastors is also unbiblical. Early in the chapter titled, "The Pastor: Obstacle To Every-Member Functioning" he comments,

First-century shepherds were the local elders (presbyters) and overseers of the church. Their function was at odds with the contemporary pastoral role.⁷

Later in the chapter we are told,

The long-standing, post-biblical tradition of the one-bishop rule (now embodied in the pastor) prevails in the Protestant church today. Tremendous psychological factors make lay people feel that ministry is the responsibility of the pastor. *It's his job. He's the expert* is often their thinking.⁸

The authors then proceed to tell us that pastors are damaging themselves and the congregation when they assume the responsibilities of preaching, the sacraments, prayers for the flock, a disciplined, godly life, church rites; supporting the poor; and visiting the sick.⁹

The Church. The last chapter that we will explore from the book is "The Sermon." The opening statement from this chapter follows:

We now come to one of the most sacrosanct church practices of all: the sermon. Remove the sermon and the Protestant order of worship becomes in large part a songfest. Remove the sermon and attendance at the Sunday morning service is doomed to drop.

The sermon is the bedrock of the Protestant liturgy. For five hundred years, it has functioned like clockwork. Every Sunday morning, the pastor steps up to his pulpit and delivers an inspirational oration to a passive, pew-warming audience. So central is the sermon that it is the very reason many Christians go to church. In

7. Ibid., p. 108.

8. Ibid., p. 135.

9. Ibid., p. 141.

fact, the entire service is often judged by the quality of the sermon . . .

Remove the sermon and you have eliminated the most important source of spiritual nourishment for countless numbers of believers (so it is thought). Yet the stunning reality is that today's sermon has no root in the Scripture. Rather, it is borrowed from pagan culture, nursed and adopted into the Christian faith. That's a startling statement, is it not? But there is more.

The sermon actually detracts from the very purpose for which God designed the church gathering.¹⁰

The author then proceeds to tell us that there was no formal oration in either the Old or New Testament. Then he adds,

The earliest recorded Christian source for regular sermonizing is found during the late second century. Clement of Alexandria lamented the fact that sermons did so little to change Christians.¹¹

Frank Viola believes that the average sermon a) makes the preacher the religious specialist and the congregants second-class citizens, b) makes the "church" impersonal, c) has little power to equip and transform the lives of Christians, and d) lacks any practical value. However, Frank Viola believes that the New Testament style preaching equips and transforms lives.¹²

Perspective: The Building. The above quotes and comments are representative of how the authors address everything they speak to in the book. Unfortunately, the authors have missed several important facts.

First, the early Christians did not meet only in homes for singing, preaching, or praying. Early in the book of Acts, which chronicles the development of the early church, we are told that the early Christians spent time at the temple as well as in individual homes for teaching, sharing with each other, and prayer.

They were continually devoting themselves to the

apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer . . . Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart . . . (NASB) Acts. 2:42, 46

Then in the very next chapter of Acts we are told that the apostles went to the temple in Jerusalem to pray,

Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the ninth hour, the hour of prayer. (NASB) Acts 3:1

That is, they went to a "building" to pray. Both Acts 2 and 3 reveal that the early Christians did meet in "buildings" and not just in individual homes. This is an important point. The author is concerned that the church today is not being biblical. But these passages show that the early church met anywhere they wanted to. There was no right or wrong type of place to meet. To narrowly limit the freedom of Christians to meet only in homes is being legalistic and unbiblical.

Second, the apostles preached or taught the congregation at the Temple in Jerusalem as well as homes, according to Acts 5.

But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the gates of the prison, and taking them out he said, "Go, stand and speak to the people in the temple the whole message of this Life." Upon hearing this, they [the apostles] entered into the temple about daybreak and began to teach. Acts 5:19-21 (NASB)

But someone came and reported to them, "The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!" Acts 5:25 (NASB)

And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ. Acts 5:42 (NASB)

10. Ibid., p. 85-86

11. Ibid., p. 89.

12. Ibid. p. 98-99

Later in the historical account of Acts, we are told that the apostle Paul himself went to the temple to pray. That is, he went to a “building” other, than a home to pray.

It happened when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I fell into a trance . . . Acts 22:17 (NASB)

Perspective: The Pastor. The author is correct when he said that the biblical function of elders is “at odds with the contemporary pastoral role.” The New Testament elders were a team ministry (Acts 11:30; 14:23, 15:6 ; 20:15; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5), but not necessarily to the extent that the author envisions. The author claims that no individual ever functioned as the single teaching-elder or “pastor” in a church. But a close examination of 1 Timothy 4:6-16 suggests that Timothy did function as a pastor and Acts 20:15-30 reveals that Paul functioned as a pastor at Ephesus for a while. In truth, there is not enough evidence in the New Testament to support the author’s claims that no single individual ever functioned as a pastor. But the scriptures are very clear that a group of males called elders functioned as a team in leading the local churches. They may have shared the preaching too! A unique qualification of elders is that they must be able to teach the scriptures (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9).

Perspective: The Sermon. The New Testament reveals that Jesus and the apostles gave sermons and interacted with people. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, a classic example of a sermon (Matt. 5-7), Jesus preached for two long chapters. In Matthew 24-25 Jesus responded to a question from the disciples. His response was a long one.

Acts 7 records a sermon of the first church martyr, Stephen. On one occasion Paul preached a long sermon. He preached so long that one believer went to sleep and fell over backwards to the ground. If it was “every-member functioning, spontaneity, freedom, vibrancy, and open participation” as the author contends, why did the believer go to sleep?

On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them, intending to leave the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight. There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered together. And there was a young man named Eutychus sitting on the window sill, sinking into a deep sleep; and as Paul kept on talking, he was overcome by sleep and fell down from the third floor and was picked up dead. Acts 20:7-9 (NASB)

Surely the confusion of “spontaneity, freedom, vibrancy, and open participation” that existed in the worship services in the city of Corinth (1 Corinthians 12-14) should not be an example for us to follow.

Wrong View of the Sermon. The author has incorrectly concluded that the sermon hinders a person’s spiritual growth. He has missed the point that even the apostle Paul said,

But even if I am unskilled in speech, yet I am not so in knowledge; in fact, in every way we have made this evident to you in all things. 2 Corinthians 11:6 (NASB)

He has missed the point that God gave the church spiritual gifts for the edification of the church.

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ . . . Ephesians 4:11-12 (NASB)

That is, God uses specific individuals and not just anyone to minister in a teaching role to the body of Christ. Since when should biblically uneducated and spiritually immature individuals be encouraged to teach the believers? Are we to ignore 2 Timothy 2:15 and James 3:1?

God tells us that He uses the foolishness of preaching to transform the lives of believers (1 Thessalonians 2:13). It is the Holy Spirit who uses the Word of Truth to change lives

and not the preacher in his frailty, or his sermon (1 John 2:27). If in fact the person is a believer, he/she will grow. If one does not grow when hearing the Word of God and produce fruit, there is reason to suspect that the person may not be a Christian (1 Corinthians 2:11-14; 2 Corinthians 13:5-6; 1 John 2:12-14). That is the message of the sower and the seed in Matthew 13:18-23 and the entire book of Hebrews. All believers are given spiritual gifts for the edification of the body of Christ. They do not have to speak every time believers gather together.

Conclusion. It is interesting that the publisher in an unusual step prefaces the book with the comments, “Tyndale does not necessarily agree with all of the author’s positions and realizes that some readers may not either.”¹³ Does the publisher disagree with the author?

It appears that the major theme and conclusion of the book is that current churches are unbiblical and need to meet in homes and the meetings should be unstructured. The author has concluded that the church cannot adopt any form of worship that is not specifically stated in scripture. His message is that the church is currently shallow and hollow. It is dead, and he reasons that this has occurred because we are following pagan customs in our churches. He believes that the hope for the future depends upon a return to “New Testament” forms. But it is clear that the author did not check the teachings of the New Testament. His conclusions about the habits of the early Christians are in error.

Jesus’ message in the gospels is that the heart of the worshipper and his/her relationship with God is what is important.

Jesus said to her, “. . . But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” John 4:21-24 (NASB)

For the most part, the form of the worship service is

irrelevant and unimportant. The building is irrelevant, the order of the service is irrelevant, and so are many other things. The Holy Spirit has not mandated specific forms for us to follow in the New Testament. He has given us great freedom of choice. The authors cannot point to specific forms mandated in the New Testament, except for the requirement to have a plurality of godly elders. But we can find the Holy Spirit mandating spiritual patterns and characteristics of the men who are to lead our churches. This has been largely ignored by the church today and is the source of many of our churches’ problems.

In recent times the church has been looking to methodologies and forms to transform the believers. Unfortunately, the book’s recommendations are more of the same. Not forms but the ministry of the Word of God is the central tool that God the Holy Spirit uses to transform lives. That is the resounding message of scripture (Rom. 12:2; Ephesians 4:11-14; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; Heb. 4:12; 1 John 2:12-14). God has selected and does select specific individuals to be pastors, teachers, and evangelists and not just anyone to accomplish this task. God uses the sixty-six books of the Bible and the Holy Spirit to teach us His truths. God has warned those who teach scripture to study it diligently and to labor hard in Word and doctrine (1 Timothy 5:17; 2 Timothy 2:15).

If a church is dull, dry, and not effective, then one only needs to look at the love relationship and spiritual diet of the believers in the church. Hosea summarizes the issue well,

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge . . . Hosea 4:6 (NASB)

And it will be, like people, like priest . . . Hosea 4:9 (NASB)

If the leaders and other believers in the church do not love Jesus with all their hearts and do not love studying the scriptures, then the church becomes lukewarm or dead. The problem of a lukewarm or dead church cannot be traced to its form. The form is irrelevant and church attendance is not the barometer of a healthy church. The problem is traceable

13. Ibid., p. ix.

to the existence or absence of a love relationship with God (Revelation 2:4, 8; 3:16) and His Word (Psalm 42:1-2).

The message of 1 John 2:12-14 is that we grow from “spiritual babies in Jesus” to spiritual “fathers in the faith” by having victory over sin, being strong in the faith, loving God, and knowing the scriptures.

I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name's sake. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one . . . I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one. 1 John 2:12-14 (NASB)

A spiritual “father in the faith” has a vital, vibrant relationship with God. The key to such a relationship is centered in a solid knowledge of the scriptures.

Thus says the LORD, “Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me . . . Jeremiah 9:23-24a (NASB)

You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you . . . Jeremiah 29:13-14a (NASB)

The path to knowing the Living Word is through the written Word. The path to a dynamic relationship is seeking to become a father in the faith.