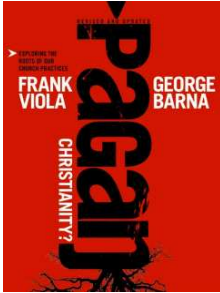


[Book Review: Pagan Christianity](#)



[Pagan Christianity](#) by Frank Viola and George Barna (Barna Books, 2008) is sure to ruffle some feathers. In the authors' attempt to "explore the roots of our church practices," they aim their guns at nearly *every aspect* of the institutional church.

Books that critique the current worship practices of the Church come and go. But rarely does one come across a book that so vehemently opposes *everything* about the institutional Church. Viola and Barna are convinced that the housechurch/organic church movement is the way of the future because it is the only authentic reproduction of the past.

Viola and Barna believe that for almost 2000 years, the Church has been seriously misguided. Layers of tradition have stifled the true Christian experience. In order to recover the early church of the apostles, we must see the church as an "organic entity."

An organic church is simply a church that is born out of spiritual life instead of constructed by human institutions and held together by religious programs. Organic churches are characterized by Spirit-led, open-participatory meetings and nonhierarchical leadership. This is in stark contrast to a clergy-led institution-driven church.

Pagan Christianity takes the readers through the history of many of our church practices. The authors argue the following:

1. The church should not contain any hierarchy at all.
2. The senior pastor is actually an obstacle to the fully-functioning body of Christ.
3. The idea of a sermon in a church gathering is pagan (after all, that brings about a clergy/laity distinction).
4. Church buildings take away from the biblical teaching that the Church is a people.
5. Any routine in worship is wrong. *All* liturgy, whether Protestant, Catholic or free church is misguided and stifling to the Holy Spirit.
6. Dressing up for church is a leftover from paganism and hypocritical for Christians.
7. No one should lead in singing. To have a worship leader picking songs is an affront to freedom in Christ.
8. Tithing is completely unbiblical and now serves to prop up the unbiblical institutionalized church and the salaries of unbiblical clergy.
9. Baptism and the Lord's Supper have been co-opted by pagan mysticism.
10. Christian education doesn't work because everything is mind-focused. Discipleship should be an apprentice-ship, not just filling the head with information.

11. The Bible needs to be read in context, not as a jigsaw puzzle.
12. We need to be like Jesus - revolutionaries who are ready to turn aside all tradition.

A few areas of agreement (and I do mean *a few*):

- It's good to question *why* we do things a certain way in worship. I do not find fault with the authors for posing good questions.
- We do need to recover the celebratory aspect of the Lord's Supper, and I think that placing the Supper within the context of a community meal might help.
- The Bible does, indeed, need to be read as a narrative, and not merely as a list of selective verses.
- We need to be willing to throw out traditions that are unbiblical.

Some areas of disagreement:

1. First off, I disagree with the underlying premise of the entire book - a premise that says the early church was untainted and uncorrupted by human tradition. I often ask this question to those who want to get back to the early church: *Which early church do you want to be like?*

Corinth? (Do you really want incestuous church members and no-rules-at-all worship gatherings?)

Galatia? (Is it good to model a church that has so quickly abandoned the gospel?)

Thessalonica? (Do you want to be the church that has lost the eschatological hope of the new heavens and new earth? A church drowning in grief?)

Sure, we can learn from the earliest churches. But I disagree that there is some pristine, uncorrupted, untainted early church that we must aspire to be.

2. I dislike the way Viola and Barna put forward their argument. They leave no room for discussion on the issue. If you disagree with them, you must love the traditions of man more than God. It becomes impossible to enter into honest dialogue because of the way they have set up the predicament.

3. *Pagan Christianity* is a historical book that hates history. That might sound like an oxymoron; after all, the book is filled with historical dates and references. But the authors are convinced that *all* Christianity from the second-century on has been wrong, unbiblical, and harmful to the gospel. In other words, church history is the story of a church that does not at all resemble what Jesus intended.

Let me give a quick example. When discussing the liturgy, the authors seek to show how the order of worship of medieval Catholicism is still visible in Protestant churches. There should be no order of worship, no routine, no liturgy whatsoever. The authors compare and contrast the liturgies of varying denominations to show how they are all unbiblical.

But nowhere do the authors entertain the notion that perhaps the similarities in liturgy point to the value in structuring our worship a certain way. Have the greatest thinkers of the past 2000 years been blinded by tradition? Or have the great Christian thinkers seen value in the way Christian worship has developed?

4. *Pagan Christianity* will drive more evangelicals to the Roman Catholic Church. Just watching an author like George Barna go from one fad to another in the past twenty years is enough to exhaust anyone who tires of the evangelical merry-go-round. Even though *Pagan Christianity* condemns Roman Catholic tradition, its equating of Roman Catholicism with Protestantism in areas of church practice will undermine this book's argument. Many disenchanted evangelicals will try out the "organic" churches that Barna recommends, only to discover the same fallenness in this expression of the "church" that they saw in the institutional church they left. Burned, confused, and disappointed, many will turn to Rome for the stability they long for.

5. *Pagan Christianity* will give ammunition to those who already dislike the churches they have encountered. I do not believe the book will launch a new organic-church movement. I believe the book will give justification to those who have already removed themselves from their local bodies of Christ. *Pagan Christianity*, if taken seriously by many Christians, will not lead to a renewal of the church, but to ecclesial amputation - as more and more disenchanted church members abandon their church families in order to seek after the "pure church" of the first century. They will keep chasing the pot at the end of the rainbow, only to find it eludes them because it doesn't exist.

written by Trevin Wax. © 2008 Kingdom People Blog