

## Docent Research Group

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Date: November 23, 2009

Re: Critique of *Pagan Christianity*

Frank Viola and George Barna's book *Pagan Christianity* is a challenge to the way Christians have "done" church since the first century. In its preface, Frank Viola asserts that "the first century church was the church in its purest form, before it was tainted or corrupted."<sup>1</sup> This begins a series of claims throughout the book that many of the practices of the church beginning soon after the death of the apostles were of pagan origin.<sup>2</sup> This is stated as "unmovable, historical fact".<sup>3</sup> The authors are making, what is in their words, an "outrageous proposal: that the church in its contemporary, institutional form has neither biblical nor a historical right to function as it does."<sup>4</sup> The reason given for this kind of angst is "to make room for the Lord Jesus Christ to be the fully functioning head of the church."<sup>5</sup> Throughout the book, the *headship of Jesus Christ* over his church along with the *priesthood of all believers* are the two doctrines that the authors use as biblical support for their claims that the church has been captivated by pagan tradition. The question, of course, is are the authors right? Have *most* Christians for the last 2000 years (minus the first 100 years of course) been duped into church practices which are not found in Scripture? The answer is a resounding "No".

Critiquing all of the radical and pervasive claims that *Pagan Christianity* has made against the institutional church would make for an extensive critique beyond the scope of this project; therefore only a few will be concentrated upon here. The concentration of this critique is upon the claims of the authors regarding the definitions of the institutional and organic church, pagan influence upon the church, church buildings, hierarchy in the church, the nature of the pastor, the role of preaching, and Jesus the Revolutionary. Some of this critique will bleed over into the other issues that they raise, but more work could be done on whether their critique of worship leaders, the order of worship, Sunday morning clothing, liturgy, tithing, the use of the sacraments, and Christian education are valid.

It is important to begin with an understanding of the authors' use of the terms *institutional church* and *organic church*. They provide the following definition for the institutional church:

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<sup>1</sup> *Pagan Christianity: Exploring the Roots of our Church Practices*, (Carol Stream, IL: BarnaBooks, 2002, 2008), xviii.

<sup>2</sup> Viola states, "Where did the practices of the contemporary church come from? The answer is disturbing: Most of them were borrowed from pagan culture" (xix). Interestingly, the authors define "pagan" as "not a synonym for bad, evil, sinful, or wrong" but "a practice or mode of thinking that has been adopted from the church's surrounding culture" (xxxix). Therefore pagan practices can be morally neutral and redeemable.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, xix.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, xx.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, xx.

“This term refers to a religious system (not a particular group of people). An institutional church is one that operates primarily as an organization that exists above, beyond, and independent of the members who populate it. It is constructed more on programs and rituals than on relationships. It is led by set-apart professionals (‘ministers’ or ‘clergy’) who are aided by volunteers (‘laity’). We also use the terms *contemporary church*, *traditional church*, *present-day church*, and *modern church* to refer to the institutional church of our day.”<sup>6</sup>

This is contrasted with what they call the organic church:

“The term *organic church* does not refer to a particular model of the church. (We believe no perfect model exists.) Instead, we believe that the New Testament vision of the church is organic. An organic church is a living, breathing, dynamic, mutually participatory, every-member functioning, Christ-centered, communal expression of the body of Christ. Note that our goal in this book is not to develop a full description of the organic church but only to touch on it when necessary.”<sup>7</sup>

The overtones of the authors’ use of words in the definitions and throughout the book as a whole drive home their view that the institutional church is a lifeless organization, which has been an invention of man and human tradition. On the other hand, the organic church is a living and vibrant community, which has originated in the heart of God and has been created by the Holy Spirit. There are certainly aspects within the definition of the organic church that institutional churches would agree with, but there does not seem to be any aspects of the institutional church that proponents of the organic church would agree with. A major weakness of the book is the implication that all institutional churches across the board are lifeless and pagan. Somehow Jesus doesn’t even make the definition of an institutional church, yet it is the organic church that is “Christ-centered”. This is misrepresentation at best and flat-out libel at worst.

Jim Belcher in his book *Deep Church* calls for a view that embraces “the church as institution and organism”.<sup>8</sup> Without embracing all of Belcher’s view, his joining of the two seems to be the most biblically accurate, as most institutional churches are not only after a structural system, but after a “living, breathing, dynamic, mutually participatory, every-member functioning, Christ-centered communal expression of the body of Christ.”<sup>9</sup> Viola and Barna’s very definitions are unfair as many churches that they would label institutional churches seek to cultivate communities with those kinds of values (though there would be obvious disagreement over the meaning of those terms).

The first major problem of the book is that the authors’ central historical assumption is false. Prolific New Testament scholar Ben Witherington points out that the “idea that Christianity had become overwhelmingly Gentile and already was adopting numerous pagan practices in the last third of the first century A.D....is historically false.”<sup>10</sup> The *Dictionary of the*

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<sup>6</sup> Viola and Barna, xxxi.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 194.

<sup>9</sup> Viola and Barna, xxxi.

<sup>10</sup> Ben Witherington, “Pagan Christianity: by George Barna and Frank Viola: Part One of the Review”, accessed online <http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2008/06/pagan-christianty-by-george-barna-and.html> (November 14, 2009).

*Later New Testament and its Developments* confirms this by stating, “Jewish Christianity had a large presence into the fifth century outside of Israel and Syria, and almost all of the New Testament was written by Jewish Christians and most of it was written for Jewish Christians.”<sup>11</sup> Many of the early church documents that came out of Jewish Christianity are ignored by the book, as well as a lack of attention to more recent scholarship which all contribute to their over-emphasis on pagan influence at the exclusion of Jewish influence.<sup>12</sup> Witherington shows that on the whole the book contains shoddy historical research, which is inexcusable when one is using historical tradition as a central argument for the widespread corruption of the church for the past 1,900 years.<sup>13</sup>

The second chapter of the book argues against the church building as the meeting place of the church. They claim that “the story of the church building is the sad saga of Christianity borrowing from heathen culture and radically transforming the face of our faith.”<sup>14</sup> Two of the primary biblical reasons given for this are that Jesus fulfilled in himself the Temple, and that the church never refers to a building in the New Testament.<sup>15</sup> They also call the building “an architectural denial of the priesthood of all believers”, which “impedes our understanding and experience that the church is Christ’s functioning body that lives and breathes under His direct headship.”<sup>16</sup> In their opinion, Constantine is the father of the church building, and began several construction projects throughout the Roman Empire in AD 327 under pagan influence.<sup>17</sup> One example of the pagan roots of Constantine’s building program was that “he named his church buildings after saints—just as some pagans named their temples after gods” and built the churches over the cemeteries of dead saints.<sup>18</sup>

In spite of the authors’ claims that church buildings are contrary to God’s intention for His Bride, there is no description in the New Testament regarding the type of architectural structure that the church should meet in. The authors’ critique begins by wrongly equating church buildings with the temple. Witherington notes that this is incorrect because temples were usually used for “literal sacrifices” and church buildings “are not”.<sup>19</sup> Church buildings are not temples, but are the meeting places of the *ekklesia*. Witherington also shows that some houses essentially became church buildings, as the remodeling of the ‘house of Peter’ in Capernaum indicates. He states, “It was no longer just a home, it was enhanced so it could be a better place of worship...”.<sup>20</sup> The *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Developments* states, “Within this complex, dating to the first century A.D., is a large hall (7.0 meters by 6.5 meters = c. 45.5 square meters) that was venerated by Christians as the house of Peter. This hall was likely used by the local community of Jewish Christians while the other rooms of the *insula* continued

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<sup>11</sup> Witherington Review Part One.

<sup>12</sup> Witherington Review Part One.

<sup>13</sup> Dr. Witherington is a professor of New Testament Interpretation at Asbury Theological Seminary and also a historian. He writes, “I am also a historian and theologian of the English Reformation, having taught 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century Methodist history and theology for some 20 years, including at Duke. So when I say, this book is poorly researched when it comes to church history, I am not kidding, and I am in a position to know. It really is.” “Pagan Christianity-Review part Three”, accessed online: <http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2008/07/pagan-christianity-review-part-three.html> (November 14, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Barna and Viola, 26.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 10, 14.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-43.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>19</sup> Witherington Review Part One

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*.

to function as part of the domestic residence.”<sup>21</sup> Recently a cave has been discovered that could be the “world’s oldest Christian church”, which dates between AD 33-70, and “was originally used by a group of 70 persecuted Christians who fled from Jerusalem.”<sup>22</sup> This was used as both a place of worship and a residence. Dr. Al-Hassan, the director of the Rihab Centre for Archaeological studies, describes the site as having a chapel distinct from the residence being 12 meters long and seven meters wide with a circular area of worship and stone seats.<sup>23</sup> Also, Christians often met in synagogues, which were places of worship. Even the apostle Paul did this until he was kicked out. Witherington writes, “It does not appear that even Paul thought there was something inherently inappropriate when it came to Christians attending a synagogue service in a building.”<sup>24</sup> Church historian E. Glenn Hinson writes, “. . . [Christians] continued to worship in the Temple and in the synagogues. . . . Until the persecution scattered them, the leaders evidently made the Temple area their base of operations, resisting warnings from the Sanhedrin to stop (Acts 4:20).”<sup>25</sup> Whether it is expanded houses, caves, synagogues, or even larger buildings, the architectural structure of the place where the church meets is not contrary to God’s purposes for His people and never has been.

The critical matter is not the place of worship, but who the object of worship is, namely, Jesus. Witherington comments, “It was the social situation which dictated what it was wise and prudent to do about housing Christian meetings in that era, not some theological principle.” Jesus himself was not against sacred spaces and sacred buildings.<sup>26</sup> After all, He worshipped in the temple (Lk. 2:41-52).<sup>27</sup> The growth of the church also facilitated the need of larger church buildings. *The Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Developments* states, “By 250, for example, the believers in Rome numbered approximately thirty thousand. Growth such as this necessitated the remodeling of existing structures.”<sup>28</sup> Another major reason for the switch to larger church buildings, as opposed to private homes, was that intense persecution became more infrequent as Christianity was legalized in the fourth century.<sup>29</sup> There is nothing more holy about Christians meeting in a home. The church meeting in a home or in a large church building is still the church and neither are pagan or unbiblical practices. What about Constantine? Was he the founder of the church building? No, as has been shown. Witherington makes clear, “it is simply false to say that there were no church buildings long before Constantine.”<sup>30</sup>

Hierarchy in the church is another fault that the authors of *Pagan Christianity* find with the institutional church. Viola and Barna write, “Alongside humanity’s fallen quest for a human spiritual mediator is the obsession with the hierarchical form of leadership.”<sup>31</sup> The authors posit that this is an adoption of several ancient hierarchical cultures by postapostolic Christianity.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>21</sup> “Architecture, Early Church”, Martin, Ralph P.; Davids, Peter H., *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2000, c1998).

<sup>22</sup> Matt McGrath, BBC News, “Jordan Cave May Be Oldest Church”, accessed online: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/7446812.stm> (November 20, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Witherington Review Part One.

<sup>25</sup> *The Early Church: Origins to the Dawn of the Middle Ages*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 42.

<sup>26</sup> Witherington Review Part One.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> “Architecture, Early Church”, Martin, Ralph P.; Davids, Peter H., *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2000, c1998).

<sup>29</sup> Witherington Review Part One.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Barna and Viola, 109

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 109

They claim that there is not one verse in the New Testament that “supports the existence of the modern-day pastor.”<sup>33</sup> Regarding the word “pastors” in Ephesians 4:11 the writers conclude that individuals that are pastors are not holders of an office or title and are always a plurality in local churches.<sup>34</sup> The father of the contemporary pastor and church hierarchy is traced back to Ignatius of Antioch (35-107) and Greco-Roman culture, not the Scriptures.<sup>35</sup> Through the years this “institutionalized the church of Jesus Christ”, and in the “fifth century, the concept of the priesthood of all believers had completely disappeared from Christian practice.”<sup>36</sup> The reader is told that Jesus “obliterated both the religious professional icon as well as the hierarchical form of leadership.”<sup>37</sup> The pastor has “stolen your right to function as a full member of Christ’s body” and become “a giant mouth” transforming the body of Christ into a “tiny ear”.<sup>38</sup> The most intense critique of the pastor by the authors is that “the pastor displaces and supplants Christ’s headship by setting himself up as the church’s human head.”<sup>39</sup> Most all of these conclusions fit within the writer’s doctrinal disagreement with the eternal subordination of the Son of God.<sup>40</sup> If the Trinity does not contain hierarchy, then the church as the community of the redeemed *imago dei* will not either.

The eternal subordination of the Son of God is a biblical doctrine. Theologian Wayne Grudem states, “...if we do not have economic subordination [within the Triune God], there is no inherent difference in the way the three persons relate to one another, and consequently we do not have the three distinct persons existing as Father, Son and Holy Spirit for all eternity. For example, if the Son is not eternally subordinate to the Father in role, then the Father is not eternally ‘Father’ and the Son is not eternally ‘Son’. This would mean that the Trinity has not eternally existed.”<sup>41</sup> The Son willingly submits to the Father throughout eternity and is equal with the Father in essence. Viola and Barna’s distaste for the subordination within the Trinity leads to their unbiblical view of zero subordination and hierarchy within the church. Absolute unity and equality does not, by necessity, lead to a lack of hierarchy and authority. Just as subordination in the Trinity does not cause the inequality of any of its members, so hierarchy in the church does not destroy the priesthood of all believers.

Is the pastoral office another unbiblical practice of the contemporary church? Absolutely not. Contrary to the authors, the shepherd/pastor metaphor is both a function and an office. They have erected a false distinction between function and office. Witherington writes, “If someone is appointed to do a task regularly and repeatedly, they have both a function and an office.”<sup>42</sup> Individuals were called of God and “appointed to regularly to do certain functions in earliest Christianity”.<sup>43</sup> The Pastoral Epistles make this abundantly clear. The priesthood of all believers does not mean that everyone is a shepherd/pastor or that all have been appointed other

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 106

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 107

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 110, 117

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 117

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 119-120

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 136

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 137

<sup>40</sup> Barna and Viola write, “...biblical orthodoxy rejects the eternal subordination of the Son of God. It instead accepts the temporal subordination of the Son in His incarnation” (264).

<sup>41</sup> *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 251

<sup>42</sup> “Pagan Christianity-Review Part Four”, accessed online: <http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2008/07/pagan-christianityreview-part-four.html> (November 14, 2009).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid..

specific giftings or offices. This is determined by the Holy Spirit.<sup>44</sup> Pastoral leadership does not detract from the reality that Jesus is the Head of the church, because, as Alexander Strauch has written, “Jesus Christ is the ‘Senior Pastor,’ and all others are His undershepherds (1 Peter 5:4).”<sup>45</sup> Jesus, as the Head of the church, gave as a gift to His church, undershepherds. This does not lead to the harm of the church. Instead it leads to the equipping and edifying of the church, and greater knowledge of Jesus Himself and unification of the church as a whole (Eph. 4:11-13).

The New Testament makes clear that the church is to be governed by a plurality of qualified male elders. Strauch states, “The New Testament records evidence of pastoral oversight by a council of elders in nearly all the first churches.”<sup>46</sup> He goes on to give the following examples:

“Elders are found in the churches of Judea and the surrounding area (Acts 11:30); James 5:14, 15). Elders governed the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15). Among the Pauline churches, leadership by the plurality of elders was established in the churches of Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Antioch (Acts 14:23); in the church at Ephesus (Acts 20:17); 1 Tim. 3:1-7; 5:17-25; in the church at Phillipi (Phil. 1:1); and in the churches on the island of Crete (Titus 1:5). According to the well-traveled letter of 1 Peter elders existed in churches throughout northwestern Asia Minor: Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Peter 1:1; 5:1). There are strong indications that elders existed in churches in Thessalonica (1 Thess. 5:12) and Rome (Heb. 13:17).”<sup>47</sup>

The authors of *Pagan Christianity* do not have a problem so much with elders, but with their authority, ordination, and the nomenclature of pastors.<sup>48</sup> However, the New Testament, not pagan culture, gives elders authority and illustrates their pastoral function. Wayne Grudem agrees that pastor (*poimen*) “only occurs once in the New Testament”, but “the related verb which means ‘to act as a shepherd’ or ‘to act as a pastor’ (Gk. *poimaino*) is applied to elders in Paul’s address to the Ephesian elders.”<sup>49</sup> These elders are to “‘shepherd the church of God’ (Acts 20:28, literally translating the verb *poimaino*)”.<sup>50</sup> Their governing authority is also stressed in the biblical text, as the apostle Peter in 1 Peter 5:2 “tells the elders to ‘shepherd (*poimaino*) the flock of God that is your charge’ (authors’ translation).”<sup>51</sup> Two verses later, Grudem shows, “Jesus is called the chief pastor or ‘chief shepherd’ (Gk. *archipoimen*, 1 Peter 5:4), implying quite clearly that Peter also viewed the elders as shepherds or ‘pastors’ in the church.”<sup>52</sup> The elder, of course, is to model their authority after the authority of Jesus who is the self-sacrificing Shepherd of the church.<sup>53</sup> Therefore these elders are to be submitted to by

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid..

<sup>45</sup> *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call To Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Rothe Publishers, 1995), 115.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>48</sup> The authors state, “Among the flock were elders (shepherds or overseers)”; however, “The vocabulary of New Testament leadership allows no pyramidal structures” (110).

<sup>49</sup> Grudem, 913.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 913.

<sup>51</sup> Grudem, 913.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 913-914.

<sup>53</sup> 1 Peter 5:2-5

believers within the particular local church community. Grudem explains the biblical foundation for this in his quoting and comments of Hebrews 13:17, “Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account.’ Since the New Testament gives no indication of any other officers in the church with this kind of authority, it is reasonable to conclude that the congregation is to submit to and obey its elders.”<sup>54</sup> Calling elders “Pastor” and the governance of elders within particular local churches is not taken from paganism or even church tradition, but from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in Holy Scripture. The authority of the pastoral elder is derived from the headship of Jesus and under the headship of Jesus Christ, not an abrogation of it.

Viola and Barna also introduce the notion that pastors should not be paid, and that the paying of clergy originated with Cyprian of Carthage in the third century.<sup>55</sup> This is not the case. Witherington states, “Paul calls it a right, not merely option. Of course the pastor or pastors may choose to forgo their salary...but that *is their choice, not one that should be made for them by the church on the basis of some pseudo-Biblical notions.*”<sup>56</sup> In 1 Corinthians 9:14, Paul states, “In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.” Paul is saying that paying those who proclaim the Gospel, which is a central job of the pastoral elder, is a given because Jesus said so. Jesus is the inventor of pastoral pay, not Cyprian. In Matthew 10 Jesus is commissioning the twelve and in telling them not to take money, “he expects them to rely on the system of standing hospitality and let others provide for them”.<sup>57</sup> Paul’s personal objection to payment in Corinth was an anomaly. He did it for social reasons, as in Corinth “there would have been orators, rhetoricians, sophists, teachers for hire.”<sup>58</sup> He didn’t ask for payment in that setting because he “did not want to appear to be a snake oil salesman [and] wanted to avoid the entangling alliances that were set up when you accepted patronage.”<sup>59</sup> If he would have accepted patronage from Corinthians at that time he probably would have been “obligated to an ongoing future service to the patron”.<sup>60</sup> This would have hindered his mission and calling to plant churches throughout the land. Witherington points out that Paul in Galatians 6:6, a different cultural setting, states, “One who is taught the word must share all good things with the one who teaches.” This outlines an “obligation of the congregation to provide for the instructor”, and the phrase “all good things” actually means “monetary support PLUS providing room, board, etc.”<sup>61</sup> Once again the outlandish claims of *Pagan Christianity* are proven inadequate in both its historical and biblical assumptions.

Another critique that the authors make against the contemporary church, primarily Protestantism, is the sermon. They assert that “the stunning reality is that today’s sermon has no root in Scripture” and “was borrowed from the pagan pool of Greek culture”, especially Greek rhetoric.<sup>62</sup> This leads to the following radical claim in a footnote, “Every time you hear a Protestant pastor sermonize, underneath you will find the Puritan sermon style which has its roots in pagan rhetoric.”<sup>63</sup> In the authors view, “the ministry of God’s Word” in New Testament

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<sup>54</sup> Grudem, 915.

<sup>55</sup> Viola and Barna, 176

<sup>56</sup> Witherington Review Part Four.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Witherington Review Part Four.

<sup>62</sup> Viola and Barna, 86, 89, 90.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., footnote 66, page 96.

Christianity “came from the entire church in their regular gatherings.”<sup>64</sup> They add, “This ‘every-member’ functioning was also conversational (1 Corinthians 14:29) and marked by interruptions (1 Corinthians 14:30).”<sup>65</sup> Pastoral sermons create passive parishioners and spectator Christianity.

Is everyone really called to preach? No. God has ordained the elders to do this: “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching” (1 Timothy 5:17). Is then every elder called to preach? No. This text makes clear that only certain elders do, as is seen by the phrase “especially those”. Therefore within a local church there is a unique group of governing elders and within the elders there is a unique group that preaches and teaches. This is contrary to the claim of Viola and Barna that everyone can engage in this.

One of the reasons why Viola and Barna make the mistake that all are called to preaching and teach is because they combine preaching and prophesying. Witherington writes, “...frankly prophecy is not the same thing as preaching or teaching.”<sup>66</sup> He adds, “...only prophecy, so far as we can tell, was normally and regularly something ‘spontaneous’, and preaching whether in the synagogue or in the church was not simply prophecy. It involved an exposition of pre-existing Words of God.”<sup>67</sup> Even if prophecy was, in 1 Corinthians 14, “Paul doesn’t think they all are, or should be prophets.”<sup>68</sup> The Holy Spirit gives differing gifts and graces to different members of the Body of Christ.<sup>69</sup> Since the Holy Spirit has done this, these gifts of preaching and teaching that are given to the elders along with the many other gifts of the whole Body of Christ should be done on a “regular basis.”<sup>70</sup> The gifts of preaching and teaching themselves imply listening and are not meant to be interrupted with dialogue. Witherington states, “A Dialogue is not Biblical preaching. It never was, and it never will be.”<sup>71</sup> The proclamation of the Word is meant to be listened to and not interrupted, which is one of the reasons why women weren’t supposed to interrupt the teaching in 1 Timothy 2:8-15.<sup>72</sup>

However, the mutual edification that the authors are craving is not all bad. Their passion for all believers to use their gifts and to function as the body of Christ is good (though many of the church practices they undermine along the way are baseless). Obviously the function of the church is not just an assembly of people who listen to an elder preach a sermon. Witherington comments, “...what Viola and Barna are describing is a vital part of fellowship, and certainly not the focus of worship. Worship in the biblical sense focuses on God and not mutual interchange and discussion.”<sup>73</sup> Public worship is grounded upon the exaltation of God and not the interaction with one another. Fellowship is not of a purely spontaneous and unscheduled nature. There needs to be a both/and approach here. After all, Paul calls the Corinthians to public worship that is featured by orderliness, not pure spontaneity (1 Cor. 14:40). This idea that spontaneity preserves the headship and rule of Christ in worship with other believers is incorrect.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>66</sup> “Pagan Christianity-Review Part Three”, accessed online: <http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2008/07/pagan-christianityreview-part-three.html> (November 14, 2009).

<sup>67</sup> Witherington Review Part Three.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Witherington Review Part Three.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

Witherington rightly states, "...Christ is not the leader of the worship service. This is not suggested anywhere in the NT. Christ is the object of worship, the one to whom our worship is directed."<sup>74</sup>

The claim that the preaching of the sermon is derived from the paganism of Greek rhetoric is "**entirely historically false**" (emphasis in the original).<sup>75</sup> Witherington writes, "The speeches in Acts are in fact summaries of speeches, and they are in fact rhetorical masterpieces, crafted according to the rhetorical outline of how an effective and persuasive ancient speech should be delivered and carefully edited by Luke..."<sup>76</sup> Most of the epistles themselves were written with and to be orally spoken in the churches "in good rhetorical form."<sup>77</sup> Witherington commends the work of Averil Cameron *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse*, who shows that "during the entire period of the first five centuries of Christian history Christians who spoke in Greek or Latin used rhetoric and rhetorical structures to form their discourses, sermons, homilies, evangelistic messages and so on. This includes the NT writers."<sup>78</sup> In fact, the preaching of the Greek Fathers was derived from the New Testament canon. Sermons were derived from Scripture not pagans, and they were not spontaneous but built on "rhetorical skill and structure".<sup>79</sup> Is the sermon then an invention of Protestantism? Witherington answers, "No one who has actually read the sermons of Chrysostom or Ambrose or Augustine or a host of other Church Fathers could ever make a silly assertion like that."<sup>80</sup>

One glaring absence in this book is a lengthy discussion of how church discipline is done. How does an organic house church practice church discipline without any form of hierarchical leadership? Pastor and author Jim Belcher, in his book *Deep Church*, discusses this issue in the context of his relationship with a house-church leader, "My greatest concern about house churches like Keith Giles's is that there is no formal structure for discipline. When I asked him how he would mediate a struggle between him and another member or leader...he really did not know. He would try, he said, to convince that person based on the strength of their relationship. But I have seen firsthand that this is not always enough. Sometimes a higher court, like an elder board or a denomination is needed."<sup>81</sup> This is indeed a major problem for house churches of the Viola and Barna mold as well. On the other hand, Belcher appeals to "The Great Tradition" and its "ordained office of elder/pastor" as being "charged with godly discipline."<sup>82</sup> This is not simply a tradition but appears to have biblical precedent as the nature of the pastoral elder's governance extends to "refut[ing] those who contradict" sound doctrine (Titus 1:9), and "reprov[ing] with all authority" (Titus 2:15).

Another critical point of disagreement is found in the author's final chapter and their view of Jesus the Revolutionary. Viola and Barna believe that Jesus is not only Savior, Messiah, Prophet, Priest, and King, but Revolutionary, and they believe that hardly any Christians know

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<sup>74</sup> "Pagan Christianity-Review Part Two", accessed online: <http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2008/07/pagan-christianityreview-part-two.html> (November 14, 2009).

<sup>75</sup> Witherington Review Part Three.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Belcher, 176.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 176

him in this way.<sup>83</sup> This adds to the book's claims that not only do most Christians not know the church well, but they don't know Jesus that well either. The authors paint a picture of Jesus as the confronter of the religious system, which is of course true and clear in the Gospels; however, their implication is that Jesus is out to confront the religious system of the institutional church and that you should follow him in it. This critique has shown that many of the author's points are simply untrue and that Jesus has not ordained this kind of revolution. Yet it is not this point that is most troubling, but what follows.

Viola and Barna believe that the "dominating aim" of Jesus' revolutionary nature "is to put you and me at the center of the beating heart of God."<sup>84</sup> This is emphatically not Jesus' aim. If it was, Jesus would be an idolater. His aim is the glorification of His Father and Himself (John 17:1, 4-5). The dominating aim of his revolutionary nature is not to put "you and me at the center of the beating heart of God", but to make a people that are passionate about God Himself being at the center of the beating heart of God.<sup>85</sup> Jesus' passion is for the glorification of Himself and His Father, and it is the church's mission, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to see that the Triune God is glorified—now *that* is revolutionary.

The single worst aspect of the book is its assumption that the institutional church is the great enemy of the church.<sup>86</sup> Institutionalism is not the foe of the church. The most significant problem of churches, whether institutional or organic, is treating anything else than Satan, sin, and death as the great enemies of the church. This results in a minimization of the Gospel. Jesus came not to free humanity from the shackles of institutions, but from Satan, sin and death. This book is built on the secondary matter of church practice and governance, instead of the central matter of the church's task, the proclamation of the Gospel. No doubt there should be a critique concerning how the church should "do church", but much of the critique that *Pagan Christianity* makes of the contemporary church is on secondary matters that are debatable (both historically and biblically) at best and utterly deficient and erroneous at worst. Make no mistake; the church is in need of revolution and reform, but not the kind the authors are calling for. The church is in desperate need of a thorough revolution of Gospel and God-centeredness.

It is important to close with some important qualifications and a few points of agreement with this book. Firstly, this critique does not mean that a structured institutional American church is the only way to "do church". The movement of home churches throughout many parts of the world is a work of God. Secondly, this is not a critique of everything that has been claimed by the authors. For instance, the problems brought up in chapter eleven with proof-texting, missing the story-line of the Bible, and rugged individualism are all big problems throughout the church.<sup>87</sup> Thirdly, the importance of the church planters is heartily affirmed, though, there would be disagreement on the type of church planted. Fourthly, each local "institutional" church must do more than a Sunday morning. It must foster and encourage other relational communities from within itself so that the Gospel and the spiritual gifts are at work in the everyday life of believers and that believers are at the kingdom work of God's mission in the world. Finally, the need for the church to be always reforming (*semper reformanda*) so that

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<sup>83</sup> Viola and Barna, 244.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> This idea was taken from and modified by Witherington's statement, "And of course the big bad guy in Pagan Christianity is not going to be sin, suffering, the Devil, or any of those things. The big bad guy is going to be what is loosely called the Institutional Church and that other famous whipping boy—'church tradition' and oh yes—Greek philosophy" Witherington Review Part One.

<sup>87</sup> Viola and Barna, 230-231

church traditions never trump Scripture is imperative. This driving concern of the authors should be more of a concern within the contemporary church, especially regarding the nature and implications of the Gospel of Jesus Christ upon the church and the world.

Even with these qualifications and points of agreement this book as a whole is not recommended, and many of its arguments are to be outright rejected. The tone of the book itself is problematic, because the authors are so sure of themselves. When one finds that their biblical and historical claims, which were carried with such confidence, are not all historically and biblically viable, their certainties become almost comical. Suddenly the authors warning at the beginning of the book (“If you are unwilling to have your Christianity seriously examined, do not read beyond this page”) doesn’t sound so ominous anymore.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 7.