

The following is Frank Viola's 3-part response to Ben Witherington's critique of [Reimagining Church](#). Ben posted each of Frank's responses on his blog.

A FRANK RESPONSE

Okay, so in a moment of insanity, I accepted BW3's challenge to appear on his blog and respond to his review of my latest book, "Reimagining Church."

Just to prevent any confusion, I'm the Frank Viola who was the high school baseball pitcher, not the major league Cy-Young Award winner <painful sigh>.

Truthfully, I'm both humbled and honored that BW3 would think enough of my books to (a) actually read them, (b) take time out of his grueling schedule to review them on his blog. And not just review them, but post a lengthy 4-part response to them. "Loquacious" has taken on brand new meaning for me <smile> (c) To receive Ben's gracious invitation to let me respond, and (d) to give me "the last word" in Bill O'Reilly style. <What a guy!>

I'm impressed.

Most people who differ with each other on issues like this embed themselves in their own circle. What Ben has done, therefore, is not only needed, but it's highly commendable. And I hope that those who are on both sides of the fence on this subject will learn from this exchange. Although I may disagree with what I call the "institutional church model/structure," I have great respect and appreciation for the people who are in it, including its leaders. (I owe my conversion and baptism to them.) God has used many people who belong to the institutional church in my life, and that continues till this day. Some of the most godly, mature Christians I've ever met are members of it in fact.

By the same token, Ben is not attacking those of us who meet outside the institutional church structure/system. He's addressing the ideas behind why I and others feel that we have a solid biblical basis for gathering the way we do. Too many times God's people on either end of this discussion resort to personal attacks and the judgment of heart-motives of their own brethren in Christ. But we have not so learned Jesus Christ. I'm glad that Ben and I can have a substantive conversation on the issues and hope that similar conversations will continue in the Body of Christ.

Consequently, I'd like to begin by thanking Ben for this opportunity. (I reserve the right to retract that last sentence after I read Ben's reply to my response. <smile>)

Let me begin by listing my credentials.

I've never been to seminary (visiting seminary libraries doesn't count). I've never been to Bible college. I don't speak Greek or Hebrew or Latin. (I don't even remember Spanish, even though I took two classes in high school.) I don't part my hair down the middle or the side (it's difficult to when you don't have any). I still have a mustard-like fast ball, but I lost my wicked curve at age 27. And contrary to popular opinion, I wasn't born during the first century.

Oh, and Philippians 2:4-8 happens to be one of my favorite passages in the entire Bible.

I'm quite content with the above. There are the Pauls of this world (professionally schooled in Tarsus and Jerusalem). And then there are us Peters, who have no such credentials. (I love A.W. Tozer and G. Campbell Morgan for that reason, by the way. They were autodidacts.)

All told: another eminent scholar like Jon Zens or Robert Banks or Howard Snyder or Leonard Sweet or Miroslav Volf or Stanley Hauerwas should be engaging Ben on some of these subjects. Not an erstwhile baseball pitcher.

But then again ... what fun would that be? 'Tis a lot more thrilling to see an erudite scholar unsheathe his

sword on a poor, ignorant “layman” who can barely wield a plastic knife, right?

Three more points of introduction.

First, I’m keenly aware that I could be mistaken in many of my views. I’ve made many mistakes in my life, but God has graciously taught me through them all. I have also changed my views over the years upon receiving further light, and I’m constantly open to new light. As I say in the book, I’m still learning, I’m still in school, and I’m still open to hear the Lord through all of His little ones – both scholars and new converts. I trust that this will always be the case. I’m so thankful for the many close friends that God has put in my life and taught me through. And I’m thankful for my relationship with Ben. Every day I thank the Lord for His mercy and grace in my life. I am nothing; Christ is everything. This will always remain true. What you will read in my response, therefore, is how the terrain looks from my hill right now. Albeit, I’m looking at the back of the rocks, while Ben may be seeing their front.

Second, I’m not a promoter of “house church.” Those who are familiar with my work know that I’m quite critical of much that goes on in the modern house church movement, and as I say in my book, I do not believe that “house church” is the only model of church. In fact, it’s a myth to believe that there is one “house church” model, as is commonly assumed. The house church movement is very, very diverse. There are elements of it that I agree with, some elements that I love, and other elements that horrify me. As I like to say, meeting in a home doesn’t make you a church anymore than eating a donut makes you a police officer. <smile> If interested, readers can listen to a recent message I delivered at a house church conference at <http://www.ptmin.org/Dallas2007.mp3> for more details. If nothing else, it will give you my heart on the matter. More on this subject later.

Third, I wish you all could see the comical banter that Ben and I pass along in our private emails. It’s huge fun. I love the guy, and I’m deeply thankful for this opportunity to interact with him on this venue. (So if you happen to see me poke fun at Ben and vice-versa, don’t be alarmed. We do this often in our private emails.) The truth is, there’s a healthy respect there.

On that high note, I shall respond to Ben’s 4-part eBook (ahem [cough] ... “review,” sorry).

Actually, I’m not joking about the eBook. Ben’s complete review exceeds 26,000 words. Compare that to the average-sized review of the same book:

<http://www.internetmonk.com/archive/the-frank-viola-project-and-why-you-should-take-it-seriously>

It took me awhile to wade through Ben’s 4-part review. Unlike his books, I found the writing style a bit tedious. I’d describe his style of writing on his blog as “an intellectual stream of consciousness.”

Consequently, I’m responding to Ben’s review in the order in which he wrote it. Therefore, it won’t be as organized as a chapter in a book might be. After all, this is just a blog post anyway. <grin>

This first post will be under 8,000 words.

[Deep breath]

MY RESPONSE TO PART ONE

General comment: I’m of the opinion that the bulk of Ben’s review is based on taking for granted a number of theological points of view, all of which are contested. Yet he believes these points to be self-evident. His theological construct is popular among conservative American evangelicals, but I believe it’s very hard to justify biblically. More on that later.

- 1) Ben opens his review asserting that he believes the vision of church that’s presented in my book denies, ignores, and reinterprets much of the NT ecclesiology. I would suggest the opposite. Namely, that the modern institutional paradigm for church that Ben embraces as biblical denies,

ignores, and reinterprets much of the NT ecclesiology. I argue in my book very specifically how the churches in the NT fit the organic expression of body life that I describe. Many examples are cited from Scripture. Given Ben's claim, I'd like to see one or two examples of a United Methodist church in the NT, for example. For instance: Show me in the NT the church building, show me the modern Methodist pastor, show me the order of worship, show me the weekly sermon delivered by the pastor to a passive audience every week/month/year, etc. In fact, I'd like to see just one example of a *modern* pastor in the NT.

- 2) Ben goes on to correct me, saying that the body metaphor is not the only metaphor of the church in the NT. I'm well aware of this and am in agreement. In fact, I dedicate an entire chapter to the family image – an image that dominates the NT.
- 3) I found Ben's comment about my use of Dr. King's speech to be curious at best. It's hardly a paraphrase. I think I lifted 5 words from the speech in total and credited Dr. King with it. No doubt, Dr. King's work is an area where African-American sensibilities vary widely. However, I have many African-American friends who are involved in ministry, and I've consulted with some of them about this. Their response to me was, "We don't see how any African-American would be offended with the way you used the speech. We feel it actually honors Dr. King's speech." For that reason, I had no trouble using it. But Ben is very right in saying that I have no intention of offending anyone. That would include an institutionally-minded clergyman like Ben Witherington (smile Ben ;-)
- 4) Regarding the T. Austin-Sparks quote, Ben didn't quote him entirely. The quote begins with, "*The ministry of the Holy Spirit has ever been to reveal Jesus Christ, and revealing Him, to conform everything to Him.*" He also left these parts out of the quote: "*No human genius can do this. It is all the Holy Spirit's revelation of Jesus Christ. Ours is to seek continually to see Him by the Spirit, and we shall know that He—not a paper-pattern—is the Pattern, the Order, the Form. It is all a Person who is the sum of all purpose and ways.*" This quote opens up the "Reimagining the Church as an Organism" chapter. Sparks is speaking in the context of church formation. He's reacting against what I call the "biblical blueprint" approach to church planting, which says, "study the bible, research, activate your frontal lobe, imitate, and presto, an instant church is born." Sparks' point is that the pattern for the church is a Person. And a revelation of Christ by the Spirit is necessary. T. Austin-Sparks was not an anti-intellectual. No more than I am. His books "The School of Christ" and the "The Stewardship of the Mystery" are without peer in their unveiling of Jesus Christ and the church in God's eternal purpose. They show a depth of spiritual insight and scholarship that's found in few writers today.
- 5) Ben opines that my assertion that the major images of the ekklesia as being living entities is "false." (Note: Ben really likes using words like "false," "error," "wrong," etc.) He offers Paul's image of the church being a "field" as proof (see 1 Cor. 3). A field, to Ben's mind, isn't a living image. He believes that Paul has dirt in view here. My response: I seriously doubt that Paul was talking about an acre of dirt when he said to the Corinthians "you are God's field." I believe Paul had a wheat field in mind, or something similar. (Compare with other texts in the NT and in Paul himself; wheat is often an image of believers.) Ergo, a "field" is a living image. To confirm this, Paul uses the language of "planting" and "watering" in that same text. Images of life and growth. The point I was making is that the ekklesia is depicted as an organism in the NT over and over again. I don't understand how this can be denied.
- 6) To my mind, Ben argues that "buildings" are a hierarchical image of the church because "buildings have structures." Maybe I'm not very smart, folks, but where do I locate the hierarchical structure of a building? I understand that buildings have a ceiling and a roof (along with walls, etc.), but they're built from the bottom up. Even so, is that what Paul and Peter are trying to convey when speaking of God's house/ building? Or are they trying to convey that the church – which is comprised of God's people – is the dwelling of God? And does not the NT teach that Jesus Christ Himself is the foundation, the cornerstone, the capstone, and the temple itself (as embodied in His people)? So where are we supposed to connect the dots of human hierarchical/ top-down/chain-of-command social structures within the image of the church as building/temple?
- 7) I've never denied that the church is without a particular expression or anatomy. I'm not a "post-church" Christian as I state in the book. The physical body – which is a living entity – has a distinct expression. An anatomy, if you will. So too does the ekklesia of God. (This is one of the main points that I make in "Reimagining"). However, to leap from "expression" to "hierarchy" is

nonsensical in my opinion. A plant has an expression and an anatomy too. But there's no hierarchy between the leaves of a plant or between the roots, stem, and branches. Each provides for and supports the other. So it is with the ekklesia of God.

- 8) Again, the house of God is made up of "living stones." This is a living, breathing image.
- 9) The main point of all of this, of course, is my contention that the church is a spiritual organism and not a human organization. Ben appears to deny this – despite the fact that countless evangelical churches and organizations have in their mission's statements, "The church is an organism." And many of them add "and not an organization." "Reimagining" affirms this but it seeks to draw out the practical implications. If the church is an organism, then what does that mean *practically*? That's the question that the book seeks to answer.
- 10) One comment on the word "organization." While the church has an expression, an anatomical structure, if you will, I wouldn't call it an "organization." No more than I'd call my physical body an organization, or a family an organization, or a bride an organization, or a wheat field an organization. Being a living organism doesn't exclude the idea that organisms do have a certain anatomy or expression. Nor does it mean that it's a chaotic, disorganized blob of life. (Although sometimes it can look that way!) Nor does it mean that it won't have "habits." One of the definitions of "nature" is that it includes innate tendencies, instincts, and habits. I talk about this in terms of the DNA of the church. Perhaps there may be better language for communicating all of this, but I haven't found it yet.
- 11) If I believe that the church is a spiritual organism and Ben believes that it's a human institution, then obviously our paradigms are hugely different and this will account for our differing interpretations of many NT texts. This emerges in the area of Christology and the believers' unification with Christ also.
- 12) In the book, I quote one scholar who incisively observes, "When the Greeks got the gospel, they turned it into a philosophy; when the Romans got it, they turned it into a government; when the Europeans got it, they turned it into a culture; and when the Americans got it, they turned it into a business." Ben denies that the church follows a business model. However, I believe he completely misunderstands my point about this. I am not claiming that the leaders of institutional churches think and act like business men, which is what he understands me to say. His justification was "in my church we pray before every decision, etc." But that wasn't my point. I'm not suggesting that the leaders of these churches are unspiritual or materialistic. I am speaking of the *structure* of such churches. My point is that the structure of the institutional church (which I define in the book) is one that imitates modern business patterns and methods. The typical American church, for example, has a structure that's basically similar to that of a company that has stock-holders (the members of the church), a board of directors (the leadership staff or clergy), a hierarchical structure, a CFO (church treasurer), and a CEO (the pastor). So it's organized very much like a business.
- 13) The constitutional scholar and historian Andrew C. McLaughlin in a book called "Foundations of American Constitutionalism" argued that the sort of covenantal thinking that we find in Puritanism – which is rife throughout American evangelicalism – is identical to the sort of thinking that led to the formation of the earlier business corporations of that day.
- 14) Now let's get to Genesis 1. (Ben alludes to my references to Genesis 1 and 2 in Parts Two and Three also, so this will cover his critiques there as well.) The problem here is one of hermeneutics. Ben is assuming that the hermeneutical debate is over. And that a conservative version of the modern approach has totally won. But this isn't true. The debate is not over. The question is not closed. There have been developments in theology that challenge the modern hermeneutical model. One of them is canonical criticism. Probably most associated with the late Brevard Childs of Yale. Canonical criticism basically says that every part of the Bible must be interpreted in its relationship to the entire Canon. Therefore, when the NT was created and the canon expanded, the meaning of the OT actually changed from our perspective. It became fuller. Why? Because now it could be completely interpreted from the standpoint of Christ. Recall how the resurrected Christ interpreted the Scriptures beginning from Moses through the Prophets to Cleopas and his companion on their walk to Emmaus. Post-resurrection interpretation goes beyond authorial intent. The modern hermeneutic rejects this. According to the modern hermeneutic, authorial intention *is* the meaning of a particular text, period. Christological interpretations of the OT that would be figurative or typological are rejected out of hand.

- 15) Now the subject of hermeneutics is a huge one. But it's where many of our differences in interpretation lie. I'll reference C.H. Dodd's classic book, "According to the Scriptures," as well as the work of Hans Frei, Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Edmund Clowney, and James A. Sanders – all of whom held to this canonical approach to Scripture and believed that all Scripture must be interpreted in the light of Christ. I've discussed this issue in depth elsewhere, so if you want a more comprehensive understanding, take a look at <http://www.ptmin.org/beyond.pdf> In it, I give many examples of how the meaning of OT Scripture went beyond authorial intent and understanding. Therefore, I would pitch my tent with Hans Frei in his claim that we should understand the literal meaning of Scripture to be the story of Jesus Christ. The literal meaning shouldn't be isolated in the authorial intention of the writer (if that can be discovered). Instead, the literal meaning of Scripture is about Jesus Christ.
- 16) Consequently, I am not asserting that the author of Genesis 1 had an understanding of the Trinitarian nature of God. However, to my mind, this is a moot point. And it touches on the limitations of Ben's modern hermeneutics. Those who hold to canonical criticism would say that Genesis 1:26 can indeed be viewed as a Trinitarian reference. Dr. Michael L. Brown, who is a first-rate OT scholar, agrees with me here. See also D.J.A. Clines, et al. On another note, I find it hard to believe that the "our" in Gen. 1:26 is referring to God and his court of angels, as Ben suggests. For this would mean that humans were created in the image of God *and* in the image of angels. Perhaps Ben believes this, but I'm unconvinced. No, Gen. 1:26 is in keeping with the complex nature of the Godhead.
- 17) A related note: I agree with both Barth and Bonhoeffer who stated that the interpretation of Scripture should not be limited to an academic context. When we talk about interpreting the Scriptures, we're talking about unfolding their meaning in the life of the church. Not unfolding their meaning in an academic history course. The scholar, therefore, should submit himself to the life of the church as being the context in which biblical interpretation acquires its full meaning. This gets into John Howard Yoder's "hermeneutics of peoplehood." Stanley Hauerwas has written powerfully on this subject as well. Ben seems to assume that interpretations acquire their meaning by meeting certain academic and intellectual canons of interpretation.
- 18) To put a finer point on it, the problem I'm underscoring here is the assumption that the meaning of Scripture, and therefore, the ground for any legitimate theology, is simply one where any unregenerate exegete can figure out the meaning of the inspired text. It assumes that the meaning of Scripture is accessible to the unregenerate scholar simply because he can follow the secular canons of interpretation of historical documents. I believe, along with Barth, Bonhoeffer, Yoder, Hauerwas, et al. that proper Scriptural interpretation requires the Holy Spirit working in the believing community. Academic tools can help, but they can't take us there in and of themselves. We interpret Scripture together in the context of the church.
- 19) Now on to a fundamental point in BW's theology. I disagree with Ben's opinion on what the NT teaches regarding our union with Christ. In effect, he denies our participation in the divine life. I certainly do not agree with Mormon theology and flat-footedly deny that we become "gods" or divine beings. I've never taught or believed this. I believe that our union with Christ Jesus is actual, real, and even experiential. Ben's whole perspective is quite "Zwinglian" on this issue. The absolute distinction between God and human beings requires that the church be in and of itself nothing but a human organization. A human organization in which Christians come together to build one another up and obey God together. It's based on the classic American evangelical theology in which a relationship to Christ is seen as substitution. And we're excluded from it. According to this view, so many texts that speak of our union with Christ (Christ IN us and we IN Christ) are taken as metaphorical instead of actual. I believe, along with many other theologians, that this idea is flawed. Christ is the Vine and we are the branches. This is one of scores of images that speak of the kind of union that we have with Jesus Christ.
- 20) Ben seems to think that God gives us a sort of separate kind of eternal life, rather than His own life. Peter says that we are partakers (sharers) of the divine nature. That's not simply an abstract "positional" statement. It's real. The same life that God lives by dwells in us. And we can live by that life. In the words of Jesus Himself, "As the Father has sent me and I live by the Father, so He who partakes of me shall live by me." Christ is life. And He is *our* Life. Paul says "Christ lives in me." Not in some positional, metaphorical, abstract way. But in an actual way. "Partakers" doesn't convey the idea of two boards that are glued together as two completely separate things.

Partaking involves an actual participation in something. We aren't united to God in that we become God by nature. But the divine energy, the divine action, and the divine life is shared with us.

- 21) This moves us into the question of Christology. Ben's language almost sounds Nestorian to me. While the divine nature doesn't cease to be divine in Christ, the human nature does not cease to be human. (See the work of Jaroslav Pelikan and David Bentley Hart for a good discussion on this.) The divine and human do not, therefore, exclude one another. Christ is not on one side of the wall and the church on the other. Such an idea fundamentally misconceives the entire nature of the ekklesia. The church isn't something that we create. It's something that God has created.
- 22) Again, Ben seems to see the church as simply individual Christians coming together to build one another up and help one another in obeying Christ even while they continue to be essentially individual Christians with individual relations with God (the Puritan view). He conceives the church as simply an earthly, historical, non-divine institution. This is not the historic teaching of the church, however. The classic example is that of a fire poker plunged into a fire. The fire indwells the fire poker, yet the fire poker never ceases to be in and of itself iron. On the other hand, the fire never becomes a fire poker. But the poker glows like the fire does and it's hot like the fire is. The attributes of the fire become communicated to the poker. The poker *partakes* of the fire. Go ahead and touch the poker and you'll know right away if this union is metaphorical or not. The divine life is given to us at every moment as a gift. We do not possess it as if it's ours separately. The gift of the divine life is a perennial gift. But it never becomes our possession (this is one of the great fallacies of Mormonism). Dietrich Bonhoeffer did a good job distinguishing between the image of God (*the imago dei*) and being like God—possessing divinity as a possession of our own (*the sicut deus*). Bearing the image of God means being caught up in the life of the Trinity and expressing it. We humans were created to have God live His life in and through us. We aren't fully realized human beings when we don't experience this. In the words of one writer, "It takes God to be a human being." Ben and I disagree on this.
- 23) For some great classic reads on the church's union with Christ, I refer you to Watchman Nee's classic, "The Normal Christian Life," and his "The Secret of Christian Living" (a newer publication). His book "The Body of Christ: A Reality" is also worth reading. W. Ian Thomas' "The Indwelling Life of Christ" is also recommended. (Warning: "The Normal Christian Life" can change your life. It completely wrecked me as a young man. I still haven't recovered from it.")
- 24) My basic response to Ben's opinions on the Trinity is that I believe he misconceives it. And again, he does so in a very typical modern Western way. He honors the divine nature over the divine persons. In this framework, God becomes a box of attributes. The more biblical point of view, I would claim, is that which was taken by the Eastern Fathers who said that we must understand God in the first place in terms of the three divine persons, not in terms of the one divine nature. They certainly didn't deny the one divine nature, but they started in a different place.
- 25) The Eastern Fathers, along with the Western Fathers before the middle ages, rightly understood that all the members of the Trinity were involved in an eternal relationship depicted by a great dance. A relationship in which the Father totally gives all and everything that He is to the Son as sheer gift. The Son, then, is the retainer of the fullness of the Godhead. The Son, in turn, gives Himself totally to the Father by glorifying Him. In that sense, the Son could be said to be subordinating Himself, but the problem is, if we stop there, we miss the fact that the Father's act of filling the Son with His fullness and glorifying Him is also a kind of subordination. So in that sense, the Father and the Son each take turns subordinating themselves to one another.
- 26) Consequently, to take the moment of the Son's subordination and treat it as something distinctively belonging to the Son is to fail to deal with the very dynamics of the Trinitarian life. It fails to deal with the Father's eternal dispossession of Himself in giving Himself to His Son eternally, and holding on to nothing of Himself. The Father is a Father because He has a Son; the Son is a Son because He has a Father. Each divine person doesn't exist apart from the others. That's one of the distinctions between the divine persons and the divine nature.
- 27) When Ben turns subordination into a distinctive trait of the Son, subordinationism actually becomes part of the Son's *unique* nature. We then start to move toward the very confused point of view that makes each person of the Trinity a being that has an individual nature. For this reason, Ben's opinion that there is a functional hierarchy in the Trinity is one that, according to Kevin Giles and Gilbert Bilezikian, does not reflect the teaching of the historic church. Jurgen

Moltmann, Miroslav Volf, Kevin Giles, Gilbert Bilezikian, and Stanley Grenz are just some of the theologians who have written extensively on the non-hierarchical nature of the Trinity. (That's no shabby bunch of theologians, by the way.) I cite them in "Reimagining," and their specific works (which are referenced in the book also) take dead aim at Ben's opinion of the functional subordination of the Son. They address every objection he makes, and then some.

- 28) So what's going on in 1 Cor. 15:28ff? As Pannenberg observes in his Systematic Theology, the Father hands over the Lordship to the Son (see also Philippians 2:9-11). The Son in turn hands back the Lordship to the Father. Thus there is mutuality in their relationship. Even in the end, the Son does what He always does. He dispossesses Himself of what is His and gives it to the Father. But the Father does what He always does. He pours out everything that He is and has on the Son, including the glory of being Lord. To exegete hierarchy from that text, therefore, is quite a reach. A careful reading of the NT shows both the Father and Son engaging in a mutual exchange love, life, honor, glory, etc. I give examples of this in the book. The question I would like Ben to consider is this: Is it possible that you are wrong and Moltmann, Volf, Giles, Bilezikian, Grenz, et al. are all right? Is that a possibility in your mind?
- 29) Ben closes Part One with these words: "I am afraid that what has affected and infected this discussion is secular notions of equality that assume that equal must mean 'the same' in all respects, or 'the same' in all functions. But this is not what the Bible either says or suggests." I deny that equality makes Christians the same in gift, role, and spiritual maturity. My book underscores that point repeatedly. So this is a straw-man statement. I would instead say that what has affected and infected the discussion are secular leadership patterns that project hierarchy back into the NT and contradict the historic teaching of the church. As Kevin Giles put it, "Historic orthodoxy has never accepted hierarchical ordering in the Trinity." We don't deny subordination/subjection in the Christian life. We're denying the need for a chain-of-command. We're not calling for a gathering of equal figures who have the same rights. We're calling for a gathering of people who willingly give up their rights out of love for one another that springs from encountering Jesus Christ. Another element that has affected and infected the conversation is the proclivity to embrace one kind of hermeneutic as being the only legitimate hermeneutic, when the fact is that this debate is far from over.
- 30) Footnote to interested readers: I recommend three books on this subject. Stanley Grenz's "Theology of the Community of God." Much of what's in "Reimagining Church" can be supported theologically in Grenz's work. While I'm not really a fan of systematic theology, Grenz's book is exceptional. He really got it. He understood how the Trinitarian Community works out God's purpose of bringing forth a community on earth that reflects His nature. I'm so glad he wrote this work before he left us. The other books are Kevin Giles' "The Trinity & Subordinationism" and "Jesus and the Father." Two essential texts on the topic.
- 31) I could go on with this, but my response is getting too lengthy for my tastes (and undoubtedly, for your eye-sight). So I'll rush through Part Two.

MY RESPONSE TO PART TWO

- 1) Ben begins by bemoaning the fact that I don't mention "the traditional church" in my four "ways of doing church" (as he puts it). He says he finds this amazing. The reason is simple. I'm not listing "four ways of doing church." I'm listing four way of "restoring" the church, which is stated in the subtitle. So obviously I wouldn't mention the traditional/institutional church, because it's the very subject of the attempted reforms I mention. (I got the clear impression that because of his tight schedule, Ben was forced to skim-read my book.) Therefore, I'm amazed that Ben would be amazed that I didn't add the traditional church as a reforming/restoring paradigm. <smile>
- 2) Ben seems to feel that gathering in an organic way is a recent occurrence dictated by cultural breakdowns. I don't. If one reads books like the "Reformers and their Stepchildren," "The Torch of the Testimony," "The Pilgrim Church" (the latter two books were originally endorsed and forwarded by F.F. Bruce.), they'll discover that there have always been Christians who left the institutional church to gather in simplicity under Christ. I believe the reason is because there are spiritual instincts at work that go beyond environmental factors. It almost sounds like Ben is saying that organic church life is only for those poor, befuddled souls who have broken families and no friends. (I hope that's not what he's saying or thinking, but it can easily be taken that way.)

The fact is, I know scores of people who haven't come from broken families whose spiritual instincts and desire for more of Christ has led them to organic churches. I'd also recommend George Barna's "Revolution" that goes into the spiritual reasons why so many Christians are leaving the institutional church – 1 million adults a year in the U.S. and growing.

- 3) Straw man alert: I don't believe nor do I teach that "the body of Christ is made up of interchangeable parts where everyone is equally gifted." I actually discount this idea in the book. I affirm the diversity of gifts numerous times—even the shepherding gift. Though I believe it's profoundly different from the conventional pastoral role.
- 4) Ben says I deny leadership in the church. On the contrary: I very much believe in leadership and dedicate numerous chapters to unfolding my understanding of leadership in the church. In fact, here's a direct quote from the book: "Every church has leadership. Whether it's explicit or implicit, leadership is always present. In the words of Hal Miller, 'Leadership is. It may be good or bad. It may be recognized and assented to or not. But it always is.' Depending on who is doing the leading, leadership can be the church's worst nightmare or its greatest asset." But to say that the church needs "human headship" is, I believe, completely false. (Yikes, I'm starting to sound like Ben now – "You're wrong, that's false, I'm right, etc. etc. etc.") <smile> Okay, so let me restate it as a question: Where, pray tell, is anyone other than Jesus Christ called "the head" of a church?
- 5) Ben seems to think that OT officers are precedents for NT ministries. I give an entire section to this objection and answer it. NT scholar Robert Banks in his seminal book, "Paul's Idea of Community," excoriates the idea that the NT had "officers" as we understand them today.
- 6) One of the major points in my book is to distinguish between those leadership forms that subvert the headship of Jesus from those which don't. Ben doesn't mention this at all, but instead gives his readers the inaccurate impression that I ignore the fact that the church has leadership.
- 7) Ben makes it sound as if I deplore large gatherings of Christians. I have no problem with large gatherings of Christians who come together for teaching and worshipping in song. I'm sure many people find such meetings at Asbury Seminary enjoyable. Btw/ Ben, if you pay for my air-fare, I'll accept your invitation to worship with you at Estes Chapel, and I'll even buy you a happy meal afterwards! ;-) But I would not call such gatherings a "church meeting" unless each member of the body is free to share, minister, and display Jesus Christ. A church meeting, as I've defined it in the book, is a distinct type of gathering. Incidentally, I was part of the Vineyard once, and I don't think anyone can trump their large worship services. Not back in the 90s anyway. They were majestic.
- 8) Jon Zens has adequately answered Ben's opinion that the purpose of a church meeting is mainly for worship. See <http://www.paganchristianity.org/zensresponds1.htm>
- 9) I believe the "church meeting" should be Christocentric. I don't see them as anthropocentric and am not sure why Ben would think that after reading my book. Neither do I see the meetings as detached from worship. Note that my definition of worship is much broader than Ben's. I define it in the book. My views on the man-centered nature of the modern gospel as well as the church are addressed clearly in the chapter entitled, "Reimagining the Eternal Purpose." Not sure how anyone can think I'm anthropocentric after reading that.
- 10) Ben denies that Paul was itinerant. He cites his long stay in Ephesus and Corinth as proof. But being itinerant doesn't excluded lengthy, but temporary stays in various places. Trace Paul's *entire ministry* and you will see that he's consistently on the move. (I do this in "The Untold Story of the New Testament Church," which is a narrative ecclesiology.)
- 11) Ben claims that James was the decision-maker in the Jerusalem council on Acts 15. I address this in the book, but I'll summarize here. This interpretation reveals ignorance in how consensus decision-making is done. Consensus decision-making declares the sense of the meeting. In such meetings, votes aren't taken. It's not a democratic event, as Ben seems to think I'm suggesting. In consensual decision-making, there's always some (usually those who are respected) who stand up and give the sense of the meeting. In Acts 15, James did this. In other such meetings it may have been one of the other overseers or apostles who were present. A close examination of the text makes clear that everyone was involved in the decision and there was "much discussion." Luke doesn't give us the details. If we assume all that happened is what's in the text, than that was about a 5-minute meeting. Anyways, I lay this all out in the book step by step.
- 12) I'm surprised that Ben thinks that Paul enjoyed going to synagogues just to worship with his fellow unconverted Jews. I don't believe this. It seems evident to me that Paul frequented the

synagogue because had an open door to preach the gospel to the Jews there (“to the Jew first,” was his pattern. And he found them in the synagogue). Thus his purpose was “evangelistic.” Read carefully those accounts and notice that Paul would most often say at some point, “Okay, that’s it, I’m leaving. I’m turning to the Gentiles now.” If Paul went to a synagogue as an obligation to worship, he wouldn’t have made staying in it contingent upon their acceptance of the gospel. So as I say in the book, an evangelistic meeting can occur anywhere and in any context. Go to a bar and if you find yourself preaching to the crowd, that gathering just become an “evangelistic meeting.”

- 13) Ben utterly lost me on his reinterpretation of Hebrews 10:24-25. A rather bizarre way of making the text say the opposite of what it plainly says. The exhortation of the writer is an ongoing thing. Exhort one another when you assemble together – not once, but continually. This text carries the same spirit as 1 Cor. 14:26. The assembly or church meeting is marked by *mutual* exhortation and edification. I think it’s a few-mile stretch to say that this text is dealing with church discipline. Verse 24 is an appeal to exhort one another to good works. Church discipline is dealing with bad works. I see no indication of this in the text at all. Donald Guthrie and F.F. Bruce both exegete this text to envision a regular gathering where mutual encouragement takes place, as do other scholars.
- 14) Ben also suggests that “one another” is not an indicator of mutuality, but it involves a private setting. (?) I disagree with this completely and see no evidence for it. See Jon Zens’ superb article “Building Up the Body: One Man or One Another” - www.searchingtogether.org (articles).
- 15) Here again Ben’s “Zwinglian” approach emerges. He denies that Jesus Christ can speak through His people. I find this “seriously problematic” (to use Ben’s phrase). This, I believe, is a reflection of Ben’s misconception of the Trinity and the indwelling Spirit. Is not the Holy Spirit the Spirit of Christ? Doesn’t God’s Spirit inspire Christians? Romans 8 makes clear that Christ dwells in us by the Spirit, not metaphorically, but in actuality. In 1 Cor. 12, Paul argues that the Corinthians no longer serve dumb (mute) idols (v.2). Instead, they serve a speaking God. Jesus Christ has the power of speech through His Spirit (v.3). And where does He speak? Through His Body (v.4ff.). By the way, while Ben denies that Christ speaks through the body, I get the impression from his review that he believes God speaks through the “preacher.” Why is it that God can speak through the “clergy” but not through the “laity”? Especially when the NT cannot sustain such a division.
- 16) Like Zwingli, Ben believes that Christ isn’t present on earth; He’s only present in heaven. Luther’s response to this was, “Does that mean that Christ is in heaven the way a stork is in a tree?” Christ is in heaven, but He’s also present on earth by the Spirit through the church. Acts 1:1 opens by saying that Luke’s Gospel was a record of all that Jesus *began* to do and teach. The implication is that the Book of Acts was a record of what Jesus *continued* to do and teach through His body, the church. (See also John 14-17.)
- 17) Ben’s view reduces the term “body of Christ” to a very poor and weak metaphor. Paul’s use of the phrase doesn’t map at all to this. The statements about the body being totally separate from the head are addressed above in my discussion on our union with Christ. The body and the head are distinct, but they are not separate. John A.T. Robinson, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (scholars) as well as Watchman Nee and T. Austin-Sparks (more popular writers) have written extensively about the intimate union between the head and the body. This union is an actual, real, and living thing. It’s not metaphorical. Paul says so much in 1 Cor. 12:12. I recommend Bill Freeman’s excellent book, “The Church is Christ” and T. Austin-Sparks’ “God’s Spiritual House.” In effect, Ben sees our relationship to Christ as purely external. This is a monumental subject; but the fact that Ben and I differ so much on it reveals why our views of ecclesiology are so profoundly different.
- 18) We’ve dialogued about this in private emails, but when Ben reads my description of organic church meetings, he thinks of the small-group charismatic meetings that he’s witnessed. (Others conceive it as a Quaker meeting or a Plymouth Brethren meeting.) None of this is what I’m speaking about and this lends to some of the differences in our communication and understanding.
- 19) I don’t buy the idea that the Lord’s Supper is a static liturgical ritual. Rather, it can be celebrated in scores of different ways, still holding to the shape of a banquet that celebrates the Lord’s death and resurrection in a corporate context. There’s no evidence that the church had one fixed liturgy for the Supper throughout its life. And very early on it morphed into something very different from what Jesus gave us and the apostles practiced. (George Barna and I give an entire chapter to

this in “Pagan Christianity.” I have a friend who is an Episcopalian scholar and he agrees.) There was also no set form of the Eucharistic words until very late.

- 20) I’ve never denied that the “church meeting” may include “preaching” as Ben suggests. What I’m saying is that it was never marked by one-man preaching a sermon to a passive audience. 1 Cor. 14:26 and 31 includes prophecy and instruction, for instance. I can see any gift inserted there. The hallmark, however, is mutuality. Note: apostolic and evangelistic meetings are different altogether. I expound this early in the book.
- 21) I agree that when someone shares in a meeting, at that moment they are leading. Again, I affirm leadership. The question is, what is leadership according to Jesus and how does it flesh itself out in the ekklesia? That’s what “Reimagining” seeks to grapple with.
- 22) Because apostles publicly endorsed overseers in some churches, Ben says that they were appointed from “the top down.” Notice how he assumes that apostles were at the top of some kind of chain-of-command hierarchy. Acts 20 says it’s the Holy Spirit who chooses overseers. Apostolic workers had the discernment, no doubt along with the input of a local church, to perceive who were already functioning as overseers. In the book, I give many more examples of this paradigm that’s consistent with the NT narrative. Yet some of us can’t seem to resist connecting the dots of hierarchy wherever we look.
- 23) Ben observes that I don’t say a single word about Paul’s stern warning about what happens when someone takes the Lord’s Supper unworthily. And on that point, he’s right. I mention this in “Pagan Christianity” on page 192 and 196. I disagree with Ben that Paul is saying that we should take the Supper after we mourn over our sins. (The self-examination there had to do with ruptures in the believing community.) Like other scholars, I believe that Paul doesn’t have in mind being unworthy while you partake, but partaking in an “unworthy manner.” Nonetheless, I should have added a bit about this to the chapter on the Lord’s Supper in “Reimagining.” My bad ☹ <Frank reaches out to give Ben a hug.>
- 24) I stand by my statement that the church met in homes for the first 300 years of its existence. I don’t ever recall saying nor do I believe that they met *exclusively* in homes, as Ben asserts that I said. I’ve stated in both “Pagan Christianity” and in “Reimagining Church” that the early Christians met in other places such as courtyards, cemeteries, rented halls, by rivers, along dusty roads, etc. I don’t decry buildings altogether. Not by any means. In fact, in the book, I discuss different ways in which organic churches have and can use them.
- 25) The so-called findings of early church buildings in the second century, etc. have been challenged by other archeologists and historians. Upon closer inspection, most of these “findings” turned out to be no more than a home in which a wall was knocked out to create a larger space. Some have been shown to be burial places, not “churches.” It’s a stretch, therefore, to call such adaptations religious buildings. We who gather in organic churches will often renovate a home to make it larger. We also knock out walls and revamp garages often. Imagine someone 1,500 years from now digging these renovated homes up and calling them, “church edifices.” Umm ... okay. In short, these discoveries are being disputed. Just like the so-called ossuaries of Jesus that Ben himself has challenged. (Three cheers for BW3 for doing that for us! He da man. <smile>)
- 26) I don’t understand how having a large church is a “major bump” in my thesis. As I say in the chapter in question, when the church becomes too large for open participatory meetings, it meets in several locations and comes together periodically for special events. This is what the Jerusalem church did. I’ve been in organic churches that did the same thing. No “bump” there. <smile>
- 27) One small observation for those who have a hard time understanding how I could cite people whose ecclesiologies and other theological views don’t line up with my own. I’m not a person who believes that someone has to be theologically correct in every point to glean truth from them. This, to my mind, is just plain silly if not narrow-minded. Therefore, I could read someone like Augustine and benefit from his theological insights in some areas, while disagreeing with him in others areas. I seek to root all my beliefs in Scripture; but countless scholars, theologians, and ministers of the Word – both past and present – have benefited the church by providing both language and insight into the Scriptures, regardless of their religious pedigree or denomination or belief system. I’ve always believed this and probably always will. Shucks, there were things I myself believed years ago that I disagree with today. I find nothing inconsistent about this at all. For that reason, I can *even* learn from a Ben Witherington! <grin>

Don't fall asleep yet, folks. The next post will include my response to Parts Three and Four of Ben's review.

Yours in His bonds,

FV2

Frank Viola, the second

(Continued on next page)

A Frank Response: Part Two

My first thought after reading Part Three was: "Wow, Ben actually complimented my book on a few occasions. And he actually said that some of it "edified" and "helped" him. (I was pinching myself as I was thinking those thoughts to make sure I was awake.)

My first thought after reading Part Four was: "Take a deep breath, Ben. Everything's gonna be okay." Albeit, he did say at least one kind word when he wrote: "More ministers in my tradition need to read this chapter." <Frank gives Ben a high-five.>

This post will come under 7,000 words.

MY RESPONSE TO PART THREE

- 1) Ben's caution about people who have been abused and their inability to show or receive affection is correct. And we should be aware of it. At the same time, our goal is to bring healing to such people that eventually reopens their traumatized heart to others. So it seems to me anyway.
- 2) Ben's belief in a functional, unilateral subordinationism comes into view again. The problem with this is that it lacks the mutuality of the Trinity. Subordination is mutual in the Godhead. The Father totally gives Himself in His fullness to the Son. That's why the Son is the Logos, because He contains the Father in His fullness. The Son's very essence is that of a gift from the Father. How, then, can that not imply some moment of mutual subordination in the Trinitarian dance of love? The Father isn't saying to the Son, "Hey, I'm here to run your life." That's not the giving of a gift. The Father's relationship to the Son is an act of love, and act of self-giving, of dispossessing Himself for the sake of the Son, who in turn, dispossesses Himself back toward the Father and surrenders Himself to the same Father who in effect surrendered Himself to Him. So there's a mutual surrender involved. Ben's rejection of this is at the heart of his view of the Trinity. Functional subordination, then, occurs among all the members of the Trinity, not just of the Son to the Father. It happens in a distinctive way in each case, nonetheless it really happens. The Spirit also subordinates Himself in that He comes to glorify Christ.
- 3) In the chapter on church unity, I root the origin of sectarianism and division to the clergy/laity divide. Ben's opinion is that this is wrong because 1) there wasn't a clergy/laity division in the early church, and 2) denominationalism began with the Protestant Reformation. We're talking apples and oranges here. I was speaking of the third century when the clergy/laity *did* begin. One can trace the disputes and divisions between churches at that time and afterwards. Also, sects within the Christian church predate the Reformation by many years.
- 4) In the book, I make a statement that implies that in most institutional churches, the pastor does not share his pulpit on a continual basis with laymen who have no theological training. Ben asserts that this is "simply false." <Ben loves the word, "false". He used it around 20 times in his review.> I have to scratch my head and say, "really?" For those of you who are part of institutional churches and don't have any theological training at all, here's a test: Tell your pastor or priest next Sunday that you wish to mount the pulpit once every month to preach to the congregation. Please email me if your pastor or priest says "yea, sure" and you actually do it. I look forward to hearing from you. We can keep a tally going.
- 5) Ben gives a conventional defense of denominationalism. But he also gives the impression that I'm urging and expecting all denominations to fold and be abolished. I'm not. My chapter on church unity makes two main points. The first is to examine God's will with respect to denominationalism and sectarianism and where it weighs in on the issue of unity. My thesis is that modern denominationalism has made division in the body of Christ acceptable. I then discuss the implications and ramifications for those who gather in non-denominational, non-institutional churches or who are embarking on that journey. No practical solutions or instructions are given. A quote from the book: "Perhaps you are wondering if I believe that the denominational system will one day disappear, and Christians everywhere will begin to practically express their oneness in Christ. Unfortunately, I don't see a day like that coming in my lifetime. But I do hope that those of you who read this book will apply its message to your own life and act accordingly."
- 6) I don't see the various meetings that Paul makes reference to in a particular city as being "hostile"

to each other and functioning as different denominational churches. I would argue that there's precious little evidence of this in the text themselves. Surely there was tension between Jews and Gentiles in some of the Pauline churches, but it doesn't follow to argue that they denominated themselves into separate churches. Sounds to me like a justification for modern denominationalism.

- 7) Ben's modern hermeneutic emerges again which says that authorial intention is the meaning of the text. For this reason, he cannot accept my discussion of Adam and Eve as being a picture of Christ and the church and adds some extremely odd concepts to it that I've never stated nor do I believe. I address the hermeneutical issue behind this in my first response. While my discussion of Gen. 1 and 2 is "bad exegesis" according to Ben's limited hermeneutic, it's perfectly legitimate exegesis according to canonical criticism and other methods of biblical interpretation. Some of which were routinely employed before modernism emerged.
- 8) Ben rejects my notion that the church expresses Christ as the second member of the Trinity. He says instead that the church expresses the image of Christ specifically. My response is, Can the image of Christ specifically be separated from Christ being the Logos, and can Christ being the Logos be separated from the Trinity? In other words, Ben builds a wall between Christology and the biblical teaching of the Trinity. And he seems to assume that the one has nothing to do with the other. Jesus Christ Himself cannot be separated from the second member of the Trinity.
- 9) Ben goes on further to argue that what we see in the church has to do with Christ's death on the cross and has nothing to do with the interrelationships of the Trinity. The problem with this is that it overlooks the intimate connection between the cross and the nature of God Himself in the Trinity. The principle of the cross reaches back before Calvary. It's rooted in the inner life of the Triune God. Each member of the Trinity dispossesses and gives of themselves to each other. Therein lies the headwaters of the cross. It's part of God's eternal nature and at the fore of Christ's gift of Himself at the cross. Here again Ben builds another wall in his theology, setting the Trinitarian nature over against the cross.
- 10) I agree with Ben that the church was born on the day of Pentecost. However, Pentecost isn't an event that happens in isolation of the resurrection. If there had been no resurrection there would have been no Pentecost. Pentecost, in a sense, is the church's receipt of the fruits of the resurrection. Ben again builds an unnecessary wall in his theology.
- 11) Ben also has the view that since the church is the bride of Christ, it's related exclusively to Christ, and it has nothing to do with the Trinity. Christ is the Eternal Son of the Father, this doesn't stop when He becomes the bridegroom. Christ doesn't cease from being the second Person of the Trinity to become the bridegroom. Repeat: at the heart of many of our differences is Ben's disconnection between the doctrine of the Trinity and Christology.
- 12) Ben says the purpose of the church is embodied in the Westminster Catechism. I would argue that God's eternal purpose goes beyond this and is far more glorious. I'd recommend DeVern Fromke's book "Ultimate Intention" as an introduction on this point.
- 13) I don't recall saying that God has a "need" like we humans do, nor do I believe that God is incomplete without us.
- 14) I don't disagree with Ben's emphasis on the church having a missional purpose that goes beyond itself. I both strongly believe this and make mention of it in the book and elsewhere.
- 15) Again, Ben makes the mistake of assuming that because some are gifted as teachers in the body (which I completely affirm), that this naturally means that there is a hierarchy in the church. This does not follow. I also agree with him that different members of the body are gifted for specific tasks and functions. This is major point of my book. But again, diversity of gifting doesn't imply hierarchy. I also spend a lot of time in the book showing how apostles, prophets, teachers, etc. are not officers, but functions in the body.
- 16) Ben believes that because some are called to ministry and receive power from on high, this means that they are part of a hierarchy. Again, this is a *non sequitur*, it doesn't follow. I also disagree with Ben's statement that "the kingdom of God is indeed a hierarchical notion." Hmmm. Jesus made quite clear on many occasions that it wasn't. "Don't be like the Gentiles who operate by top-down leadership. For it shall not be so among you." "Don't call any man Father, Master, etc. for you one is your Master (Christ) and you are all are brethren," etc.
- 17) Ben says that "the concept of the priesthood of all believers implies a notion in which all Christians can assume all leadership functions at one time or another." Not sure where he got

that idea, but I don't agree with it and don't know anyone who does.

- 18) Ben fails to recognize that I'm not talking about "pastors" who led in a wrong way, but instead, I'm talking about the clergy *system* and the *structure* of leadership in that system. He spends a lot of time on this, but it didn't resonate because he's addressing a point I never made.

MY RESPONSE TO PART FOUR

Ben's Part Four exceeded 10,000 words – 'twas a mini-book, indeed. "A stream of consciousness" on steroids with some emotion peppered in for good measure. But sadly, for most of it, Ben got a bit carried away, I feel. A few people who read the book told me that they were shocked at some of the misrepresentations that were included in this part of his review. In addition, he -- in a very cavalier way -- dismissed many of the main points in the book, a large number of which answered the very objections he wrote in his diatribe. I don't believe this was intentional, but merely a facet of the particular manner in which Ben read the book.

- 1) Ben doesn't mention the fact that in every area where he disagrees with me, there are top-drawer scholars, theologians, and teachers who are in agreement with my positions. In the book, I both cite and quote most of them as I make various points. Some of them are John Howard Yoder, Karl Barth, Robert Banks, Howard Snyder, F.F. Bruce, Stanley Grenz, Deitrich Boenhoefer, James D.G. Dunn, Leonard Sweet, Roland Allen, Watchman Nee, T. Austin-Sparks, et al.
- 2) Ben asserts that Christian elders were essentially the same as the Jewish elders of the synagogue. This is an assumption. Most of the arguments for this view are based on the idea that the Talmud accurately reflects second temple Judaism. And then the assumption is made that synagogue elders *had to* influence Christian elders. Robert Banks and Jacob Newsner (one of the best Talmudic Jewish scholars out there today) strongly disagree with him. Both of them point out that we have very, very little contemporaneous documentation for the practices of second temple Judaism. According to Newsner and Banks, the Talmud (the major source for second temple Judaism) takes the practices of Judaism of its day and projects it back -- retrojecting it -- into the second temple period. In so doing, it attributes to the second temple period things that were not really true. Hence in their view, the Talmud is unreliable as a source for second temple Judaism. In their research, Newsner and Banks demonstrate that elders at the time of second temple Judaism were not synagogue officials. They were in effect civic officials in the local Jewish civic community. And they didn't receive ordination. All of these were later developments. More can be said, but I'll leave it there.
- 3) As I state in the book, "elder" (since it's not an office) is a relative description. It doesn't, therefore, reflect an *absolute* age threshold. It's more of a relative description of spiritual maturity within a spiritual community rather than an indication of a set physical age. Spiritual maturity and wisdom often come with age. But not necessarily.
- 4) Ben again incorrectly assumes that I don't recognize distinctions in function. What I disagree with him on is whether these distinct functions have some sort of official status. I demonstrate in the book that I don't believe they do and why.
- 5) Ben says that elders were expected to do their teaching in the church meetings. My question is, where's the evidence for this? I don't doubt that those elders who had the gift of teaching did some teaching in the church meetings, but the rest of the body was also free to participate in those meetings also (1 Cor. 14:26ff.; Heb. 10:24-25, etc.). There's no evidence in the NT where we see an elder dominating a "church meeting" with a sermon of sorts.
- 6) A related point: Ben doesn't seem to grasp my distinction between church meetings, apostolic meetings, decision-making meetings, and evangelistic meetings -- all of which I define in the book. To Ben's mind, everything is a church meeting. This creates monumental confusion in our discussion.
- 7) In order to justify "sola pastora," Ben goes out of his way to dismiss the fact that elders were plural in the churches of the first century. He incorrectly states that I "insist that elders were always appointed in every church." I don't believe that all churches had elders and state so in the book. Some churches don't appear to have elders. Antioch (of Syria) and Corinth are examples. We can't be sure if they did or not.
- 8) Ben argues that every mention of elders has in view various churches in a region, so there's no

way to tell if a particular church had plural elders or one elder per church. But then his argument shifts to stating with confidence that there was a single pastor for each church, yet he gives no clear evidence for this. But does the Bible support Ben's idea – that elders (plural) were appointed in churches (plural), so each church had one elder/pastor "over" it? Or does it support my thesis that in those churches where elders did exist, they were plural in each church? Let's look at some texts to answer this question: Galatians 14:23 – and they appointed ELDERS (plural) in every CHURCH (singular). In Acts 20, we are told that Paul called for the ELDERS (plural) of the CHURCH (singular). James 5:14 – call for the ELDERS (plural) of the CHURCH (singular). In short, Ben cannot demonstrate the notion of one elder per one church. More can be said about this, but I'll stop there.

- 9) "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks," the Lord said. Sometimes this happens with the keyboard too. Listen to Ben's words. "On the contrary it is an ongoing role that the leader needs to perform, because sheep can't lead themselves anywhere, and need constant guidance and supervision." I believe this statement is at the root of Ben's entire ecclesiology. Note his words: "THE leader" ... "sheep CAN'T" ... "sheep NEED CONSTANT." Ben seems to think that Christians are incapable of taking care of one another so they need the help of a human pastor to care for them and tell them what to do. Here he presses the shepherd metaphor very hard. But I object: Christians aren't the property of a pastor like sheep are to a shepherd. Neither is it okay for a pastor to exploit them for his own benefit as a shepherd does his sheep. Every metaphor has its limits. If you press the shepherd metaphor too hard, the results are very unpleasant. As I say in the book, "If we push the shepherd-sheep metaphor beyond its intended meaning, we'll readily see its foolishness. Shepherds are incapable of breeding sheep. They also steal their wool and eat them for dinner!" Ben essentially makes the pastor out to be a clergyman over a laity. To my mind, these remarks from Ben reveal a very low view of the Holy Spirit's work in and through God's people. It would seem that Ben envisions the church spiraling into chaos if it doesn't have one local human shepherd. But I completely disagree. See my next point.
- 10) I have known scores of churches where 1) there was no need for a clergyman, a.k.a., single pastor, 2) the body was equipped to take care of one another just as Paul encourages the church to do in 1 Thess. 5:14, Romans 15:14, and in so many other places, 3) shepherding occurred organically and it manifested itself in the plural. And most of it was done behind the scenes, and 4) those "poor dumb" sheep were knowing Jesus Christ together, experiencing His riches together, expressing those riches together, and taking care of one another by the grace and power of His indwelling life. Without a professional minister present. They were also impacting people's lives, displaying our glorious Christ to a broken world. None were perfect. All had problems. Mistakes were made. Lessons were learned. But God did wonderful things in and through them all. A main point of "Reimagining" is to show that such churches are 1) rooted in Scripture and 2) possible in our day. Right or wrong, I believe that Jesus Christ, "the Great Shepherd of the sheep," is alive enough to be head and pastor over His own sheep. And I have witnessed it dozens of times in dozens of places.
- 11) Ben then talks about Paul's authority. He seems to have missed my entire discussion on the difference between organic (or moral) authority vs. official authority. These are two very different things. Paul often exercised moral authority, but not official authority. One of the things that Jon Zens, another NT scholar, observed and pointed out to Ben was his penchant for reading back into the NT our contemporary church practices. (This was not an accusation of intention by the way; it happens quite unconsciously.) As I read Part Four, I couldn't help but agree with Zens' observation. In response to what Ben had to say in defense of Paul's use of "official authority," the official authority of elders, justifications for top/down leadership and chain of command hierarchy in the church, I'd encourage readers to take a look at Robert Banks' article, "Church Order and Government" in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993. It's very powerful. Also see his book "Paul's Idea of Community," Chapters 15-17. There Banks gives a ground-breaking look at Paul's view of authority.
- 12) Yes, Paul corrected two women in Philippi, but that was clearly a case of moral/spiritual authority, not one of official authority. Paul wasn't asserting that he had the power to regulate personal relationships between two individuals. As such, this is clearly a case of moral authority. (I devote two chapters to this subject in the book.)

- 13) In this connection, one of the interesting things about Rob Banks is that he's watched the spiritual and practical dynamics of organic church life firsthand for years. He's also witnessed the way that institutional churches operate. So have I. When one gets this sort of experience on both ends, the NT begins to open up differently. The clerical, institutional glasses fall off. And so much of it makes sense. No longer do we have to resort to exegetical gymnastics to try and support a clergy system. We also understand elders, not from an institutional standpoint, but from an organic one. Why? Because we've watched them emerge organically in the context of Christian community. The headship of Jesus Christ ceases to be an abstract, positional doctrine. It instead becomes a breathing reality. Consequently, when someone tells us "there must be a leader in a church as well as a liturgy. If not, the gathering will turn into chaos," we look at them with mild amusement. We've been in hundreds of meetings that operated without leader or liturgy, and many of them were drop-dead glorious. We've been in countless meetings where decisions were made by consensus with elders and apostolic workers present. And they look identical to what we read in Acts 15. There's no chain-of-command or hierarchy in place. And no one, including the elders and workers, are barking out orders to the church or telling her what to do. Yet some declare the sense of the meeting. We've also endorsed elders in churches, but as Marjorie Warkentin discusses in her seminal book on ordination, it's not a matter of setting someone into a sociological slot of human convention (an "office"). As Rob Banks points out in his many lectures, our institutional ideas are "read back into the NT." We put 21st century clerical glasses on and filter everything in the NT through them. In short, Ben and I are living in two different ecclesiastical worlds. It's not a matter of one being bad and the other being good. They are just very different. And this is one reason why his interpretation of certain texts differs so drastically from mine, Robert Banks, Jon Zens, Watchman Nee's and others who have lived in organic church life. (Add to the list my good friends Tony Dale, Felicity Dale, John White, Hal Miller, and many more.). D. Bonhoeffer also got a taste of it and wrote about it in his book "Life Together" and so did Emil Brunner (see his book "The Misunderstanding of the Church").
- 14) Yes, Paul and the churches knew who the elders were. But this doesn't mean that they held an office, or that they led the meetings, or that they preached weekly sermons. It simply means that everyone in the community knew who the most mature Christians among them were. And from what we can see in the NT, elders emerged sometime after the church was planted, not immediately following.
- 15) Ben cites the Didache in his argument. As Jon Zens already pointed out, the Didache doesn't reflect primitive church practice. Look at Jon's argument at <http://www.paganchristianity.org/zensresponds1.htm> It's quite compelling.
- 16) I have already answered many of Ben's points about leadership and clergy salaries at <http://www.ptmin.org/answers.htm> Sources are cited there as well. That page also includes a discussion regarding honorariums, and I answer personal questions on that point.
- 17) I don't deny that "honor" could involve giving money to elders as a gift at times. I state this in the book in fact, saying that it could include "freewill offerings as a token of blessing from time to time" citing Gal 6:6. What I'm objecting to is a professional clergy salary. I'm sorry, but even after reading Ben's lengthy discussion in support of clergy salaries, I remain unconvinced that such a thing can be sustained by the NT. The statement that elders were not to be money-grubbers is not a defacto proof that elders were going to receive a salary. No more than the statement that they were not to be drunkards meant that the church was going to be giving them wine on a regular basis, or that the elders were required to drink wine. That the elders were known in the community (no doubt through work) is shown in the little phrase, "they must have a good reputation among outsiders." Point: Loving money is a character defect according to Paul regardless of what form of employment one may have. People who love money are open to bribes, etc. This in no way proves that elders were paid a professional salary.
- 18) Ordination of elders was simply the public recognition of something that was already true. People should respect them and put weight in their words. Ordination did not give a person new powers that they had not had beforehand. I develop this thought in the book and cite other scholars who agree.
- 19) Ben says with absolute confidence that "the call for all Christians to exhort one another is never specifically linked to the worship or teaching service." This is misleading. First, I can't find a "worship service" in the NT. Second, the call to mutual exhortation is indeed tied to the corporate

meetings of the church where the ekklesia assembles together. Just read 1 Cor. 14:26ff. and Hebrews 10:24-25. The plain reading of these texts refutes Ben's statement. Incidentally, for those who assume that 1 Cor. 14:26 is descriptive only and not prescriptive, or that it's a rebuke of some sort, consider Gordon Fee's comment: ... "the first sentence, which offers a description of what *should be happening* at their gatherings, echoes the concerns of chap. 12, that each one has opportunity to participate in the corporate ministry of the body. The second sentence, the exhortation that all of the various expressions of ministry described in the first sentence be for edification, echoes the basic concern of chap. 14—as well as of chap. 13." Fee's interpretation is echoed by many other scholars.

- 20) Ben is confused on my view of spiritual gifts and ministries. Not all Christians are prophets or teachers or apostles. But again, I don't see these functions as titles that carry official authority with the power of command. Ben seems to assume that because I deny "offices," I'm somehow denying that there are prophets and teachers and apostles. Also: those who are gifted to teach and preach aren't necessarily leaders in overseeing churches. While all overseers can teach, not all teachers are overseers (1 Tim. 5). It seems to me that Ben thinks that ministers of the Word are part of an ecclesiastical chain of command. I disagree. The ascension gifts are no such thing. I address this in the book as well as in my article, "Rethinking the Five-Fold Ministry" – <http://www.ptmin.org/fivefold.htm>
- 21) If the churches in the first century had a single pastor or offici-elders in the way that our modern churches do (as Ben asserts), then why, pray tell, do we never find a NT epistle that's written to a church addressed to the pastor of that church? Or even to the elders? Without exception, every letter in the NT that is written to a church is addressed *to the community* itself. It's not addressed to a pastor or offici-elders. Even in the letter to the Philippians, Paul addresses the whole church and off-handedly mentions the "overseers," but only after he greets the church.
- 22) Ben agrees that we don't see elders commanding the church to do things in the epistles. (Paul never blows the whistle for the elders to rise up and start taking care of problems. No doubt, he should have in Corinth and Galatia. Unless ... elders were a different creature than what we've made them out to be.) Ben faults this as an "argument from silence" and hence he feels it's weak. I do not. If the church in Century One operated like Ben claims it did, we would expect these things to be reflected in the epistles. (Paul would be writing to the elders. Or at least, he'd be telling them to straighten the mess out.) When they do not, the silence becomes deafening. Ben then says that there may be proof of elders barking out orders to churches in *private letters* that we don't have. My response: An argument based on hypothetical, undiscovered, possibly non-existent letters is *beyond* weak. I'm arguing from what we actually have. Ben argues from what may have never existed. I affirm that arguing from thoroughly hypothetical documents is not compelling at all.
- 23) Ben tries to challenge my thesis that in the first century, a pastor wasn't imported from one church to be "the pastor" of another church in a different city. (Like the common practice.) He then invokes the language of absolute certainty again saying "this is false." An example he cites is Apollos. But where does it say that Apollos was a pastor? Or even an elder? Apollos, clearly, was a traveling teacher (1 Cor. 3). He wasn't sent to Corinth to be their pastor. He, like Barnabas and Peter, visited Corinth to minister to the church temporarily, as traveling workers do. Years later, Paul urges him to visit again. Thus to use Apollos as an example of an imported pastor is a perfect example of reading the NT with clerical glasses. So it seems to me anyway. (The same could be said about Phoebe. I don't see any evidence that she was a pastor being sent to take over another church.)
- 24) Again, being itinerant doesn't exclude temporary residence. Temporary residence is *temporary*. Paul is most often on the move.
- 25) Also, this business that Paul really writes his letters to the leaders of the churches when he says "you" doesn't hold water. (I'm not speaking of Titus, Timothy, or Philemon, but of the epistles to the churches.) When Paul or the other apostles want to address an individual in a particular church, they name those individuals. And when they want to speak to the elders, they call them out clearly (see 1 Peter 5 for instance). I think what we have here yet another example of trying to stretch the NT to make it fit the modern clergy system. Right or wrong, that's how I see it.
- 26) While Ben denies a clergy/laity dichotomy, he affirms it in all of his rhetoric and arguments. I fail to understand why he feels he needs to deny it. I see no difference in his thinking from those who

hold to a clergy/laity system. The arguments are identical.

- 27) Ben expresses dismay that I would find worthwhile insights in someone like Leonardo Boff, and he implies I'm being influenced by Marxism because of that. (?) Leonardo Boff believed in the Trinity. I believe in the Trinity. Does that make me a liberation theologian? One may agree with pieces of Ben Witherington's exegesis without adopting Ben Witherington's Arminianism. By the same token, one may agree with points made by Leonardo Boff without sharing his attitudes towards Marxism. The charge that Boff's theology is based *in toto* on Marxism cannot be sustained. This is flatly untrue; it's a libel that some conservative evangelicals have made against certain liberation theologians. But more importantly, Boff's "Trinity and Society," which I cite in the book, draws on the Catholic and Orthodox history of doctrine. It doesn't draw from Marx at all. As such, Boff's key points are in line with Grenz, Bilezikian, Giles, etc. in their understanding of how the Trinity and the church are related. I trust Ben doesn't think they're Marxists.
- 28) Also, I wouldn't consider myself in the terms that Ben has. I'm not a charismatic; I'm post-charismatic (see my book [REVISE US AGAIN](#)). And I don't consider myself to be an evangelical, but rather a post-evangelical. But who's paying attention? <smile>
- 29) I don't get Ben's argument about Jesus having a differing will from the Father. The point about consensual-decision making is that the body seeks the will of God and then acts once it gets the mind of God together. The church struggles to find God's will, agrees on it, and then acts. It doesn't take a vote nor does it take orders from a few special members. That's the point of my chapter on decision-making. Jesus Christ is Head of His church. Decisions that are made independent of the Head constitute conspiracy.
- 30) Ben's argument that Paul and Barnabas separated without a consensus of *the church* fails to recognize that Paul and Barnabas (a) aren't a congregation, and (b) were involved in "the work." And (c) the matter that they disagreed on had to do with "the work" and not a local church. No time to develop this, but see Robert Banks' discussion on the difference between "the church" and "the work" in "Paul's Idea." Watchman Nee discusses it also in "The Normal Christian Church Life." This is a very important distinction.
- 31) Ben misrepresents my views on accountability. He says that I deny accountability. He characterizes my belief to be one of saying that Christians should be accountable to no one on earth, and it's okay if they disconnect themselves from the body. My entire thesis in Part Two makes the exact opposite point. And I condemn this sort of thinking in the book as well as in my own life. We are mutually subject to one another in the place where we fellowship. We are mutually subject to those Christians who God puts in our lives and bonds us with spiritually. Accountability/subjectation are only safe in Christian community. On the other hand, the idea that says you are "covered" by being in a church where the people hardly know one another, let alone the pastor, is a sham. There's a kind of accountability that's real and living; and there's a kind that's artificial and nominal. "Reimagining" champions the former.
- 32) Ben didn't like my Appendix. After reading Parts Three and Four of his review, I can understand why. For those of you who haven't read the book yet, the appendix lists virtually every text in the OT and NT that people use to justify the clergy system, hierarchical leadership, authoritarian practices, "covering," officers in the church, etc. "Touch not my anointed and do my prophets no harm" is even included. In many of my answers to those objections, I go to the Greek and cite reputable sources like F.F. Bruce, Robert Banks, Gordon Fee, Bauer, et al. Even so, the Appendix answers about 75% of Ben's objections to the book.
- 33) When I read Ben's sober words about loving one's vision more than the Word of God which challenges all of our inadequate notions of ministry, the thought that went through my head and heart was: "Every servant of God should heed this, including Ben." We who have spent time in Babylon ought to beware that we do not adopt the ways of Babylon nor seek to defend it. For if we do, its scent will not leave our garments and God's people will not fail to smell it eventually.
- 34) Ben references Paul's remark about the household of Stephanus, but he assumes that Paul means that the household of Stephanus can give the Corinthians orders. I disagree. Paul was urging respect and recognition of spiritual maturity here. Not the authority to dictate orders. I handle this text in the book.
- 35) Ben says that the church sometimes fails to recognize ministry so you can't rely on the church for this. (Of course, Ben is speaking of the churches that he knows, which are traditional/institutional). My response: Is Ben claiming that denominational authorities never fail to

recognize ministry? This, to my mind, is a straw man. It would be foolish for either of us to argue infallibility on either end.

- 36) Ben says that it's the Holy Spirit who works through the church, not Christ. Look at Acts 1 and 2. The Holy Spirit is poured out by the ascended Christ. Look at John 14-17 where Jesus clearly says that He will come to us in the Holy Spirit. And that the Holy Spirit reveals Him. I recommend Andrew Murray's book "The Spirit of Christ." Murray was not simply a devotional writer. In this book, his insights and exegesis are superb. Ben also tries to argue that God doesn't act through the congregation (church). My question then becomes: So does that mean that God cannot act through denominational authorities too? If God's actions and human actions are two totally separate things always, then it follows that God cannot act through denominational authorities either (=pastors, clergy, even seminary professors ... Yikes!).
- 37) Ben again uses the rhetoric of absolute certainty asserting that my statement that the churches in the first century were not autonomous and fraternally related. He then attempts to prove this by trying to make an argument that the Jerusalem church "required" a collection of Paul. I'll just say that F.F. Bruce and Oscar Cullman disagree with Ben on this, along with many others. The fact is: autonomy and fraternal relationship do not exclude one another. Churches may be autonomous and fraternally related at the same time. I have an adult sister who is younger than me. I have no authority to command her to do anything. She may still respect me, however. (And on some days she actually does! <smile>) So churches may be both fraternally related and autonomous. Autonomy isn't the same thing as isolation. And fraternal relationship isn't the equivalent of command-styled relationship.
- 38) Ben argues that John had authority over the seven churches in Asia Minor. My question: what sort of authority was John exercising/using? Again, this goes back to official vs. organic/moral authority. Ben seems to assume officialdom constantly.
- 39) Ben argues on the lexicon questions about the meaning of the words for leadership in the NT. In the book, I cite F.F. Bruce, R. Banks, W.E. Vine, Bauer, Gingrich, Danker, etc., on what those words mean. In a number of places, they differ with Ben's opinion. I hope I can be excused for agreeing with them instead of him. <smile>
- 40) NT scholar Jon Zens did an outstanding job responding to an earlier review by Ben at <http://www.paganchristianity.org/zensresponds1.htm> Many of the same points Ben makes in his review are beautifully addressed in JZ's response. So instead of taking up any more bandwidth, I refer you to that piece. It's formidable.

THOUGHTS IN CLOSING

I trust that my response to Ben was charitable and gracious; for this is what was in my heart. I ask for forgiveness if I said anything contrary to the spirit of Jesus Christ. This certainly wasn't my intent. I personally loathe engaging in academic debate, for I feel that in *most* cases, such dialogues swell the cranium and grieve the spirit. May it not be so in this case.

I shall end this post with a kind word about BW3. I have found his work of digging up the historical and social background to certain texts in the NT to be very helpful. For that reason, I relied a good bit on his socio-rhetorical commentaries in the research for my book *The Untold Story of the New Testament Church*. (By the way, contrary to rumor, I haven't burned my BW3 library just yet.<smile>) To my mind, this kind of "NT background" work is Ben's forte. And he's good at it. I also appreciate how accessible he is to his readers. Even more, I appreciate that he has a sense of humor. (I wasn't sure that he did until I "tested the waters" so to speak and teased him a few times privately. He took it well, returned some himself, and that's when the friendly banter began.)

And probably most important, I'm grateful for his gracious invitation to have me respond on his blog. This speaks volumes about him – all good. (Again: I reserve the right to retract that sentence upon seeing his response. <smile>)

Alrighty then, I think I've taken up enough bandwidth on Ben's blog today.

I'm through (exuberant applause of relief).

Ben now has 500 words to reply ;-)

Your brother in His unfailing grace,

Frank V.

(Continued on next page)

A Frank Coda: Final Word Wrap-Up

I appreciate Ben's Epilogue. As I read it, two things stood out immediately:

One: I was quite impressed that Ben could craft a response in less than 7,000 words! ;-)

Two: I don't think the mug shot at the top of the Epilogue is a very good photo of Ben. He's a bit better looking than that ;-)

I'm glad to see that BW3 acknowledges that both he and I have misread each other on some points. This is inevitable given the stale medium of Internet discourse (which I have never liked). And it's only exacerbated by our profoundly different paradigms and experiences.

On a personal note, I'm happy to learn that I misunderstood a few of Ben's points. It's good to know that he's not as far out in left field as I had originally thought. (grin)

Let me repeat something I said at the front (in Part One of my Response). I could be completely wrong in all my views and Ben could be completely right. However, his arguments aren't new to me. I, along with many others who I personally know and respect in the Lord, have grappled with them for many years. We have listened carefully to those with whom we disagree, we have weighed their arguments, and we have not found them convincing. Of course, that could be an oversight on our part. Or it could mean that we who disagree with the conventional view of church may be on to something. (Hold that out as a possibility.)

In addition, I never asked or sought to be published. Each of the publishers sought me out (to my shock). And after much prayer and counsel from people who I know and respect in the Lord, I agreed. I'm very encouraged that these books are "getting out" and creating conversation that touch on those things that relate to the headship and centrality of Jesus Christ. I stand with all that I've written, yet I'm keenly aware that I could be mistaken. So I welcome this sort of civil and gracious dialogue and feel that it's healthy.

That said, let me wrap this discussion up by focusing on a number of topics that Ben addresses in his Epilogue. I trust that it will help our readers to better see my line of reasoning and why I've come to various conclusions.

Counting Heads and Sitting on Limbs

The bulk of Ben's Epilogue invokes with I would call the argument of "counting heads." Ben appeals to it twice. It goes like this: "What the majority of the church has believed is correct. The minority view is incorrect." Ben asserts that my views on the church represent a tiny, tiny almost invisible minority of Christians. Using his words, I'm "out on a limb" that only a few others share.

(Frank clears his throat.)

I concede that in terms of my complete ecclesiology, I'm part of a minority voice in the Body of Christ. (In terms of my views on the Trinity, however, I'm in the majority. More on that later.)

A few facts to consider.

The Radical Reformation, which I and others identify mostly with, has always been in the minority. Most of these brave souls were exterminated in years past. In fact, if Ben and I were discussing these same issues some 500 years ago, after my "rejoinder" (if I was even given a chance to write it), I would have been taken out and burned at the stake.

Interestingly, however, this minority is growing in our day.

Reportedly, 1500 pastors a month leave the clergy system (traditional pastorate) in the United States. (That number has been reported by Rev Magazine, Leadership Magazine, CT, Focus on the Family, et. al.)

According to Gallop, 1 million adult Christians per year leave the institutional church in the U.S. and the number is growing. Most of them are still following the Lord and fellowshipping with other Christians. As Reggie McNeal has said, "A growing number of people are leaving the institutional church for a new reason. They are not leaving because they have lost their faith. They are leaving the church to preserve their faith." George Barna has written extensively on this in recent years.

Note: By nature, I'm skeptical of statistics. Part of my early Christian journey was in the Pentecostal movement. And I quickly came to the conclusion that if a Pentecostal gives you a figure of those healed or saved, cut it in half and divide by two and you'll *probably* get the real figure ;-). Frankly, I have no idea what the real numbers are. But what I do know is that according to many researchers all across the board, the typical American evangelical, conservative, traditional church is on the decline. Many Christians are either shifting toward more liturgical church forms (Catholic/Anglican/Eastern Orthodox) or they are seeking to gather in more simple/organic forms of church life.

I think it's unwise to ignore all of this or fall into the temptation of judging those Christians who've taken those turns.

What "Reimagining Church" does is bridge the gap between the Catholic/Anglican/Orthodox emphasis on the Godhead and authentic Christian community and practically applies it to organic forms of church life.

But beyond all this, the most striking thought that shot through my mind while reading Ben's "counting-heads/Frank's-out-on-a-thin-limb" argument was . . .

This is the same exact same line of reasoning that was launched against John Wesley some 200 years ago. And it was launched by the clergymen of his day.

Early on, Wesley's critics were filled with sentiments that he and his movement had departed from the historic church.

I find this ironic seeing that Ben has been serving in a denomination that owes its very existence to John Wesley.

Add to that: this same line of argumentation was leveled against all the Reformers, who in turn, leveled it against the Radical Reformers.

And history repeats itself as it so predictably does.

Historical sidelight: Shortly before the Diet of Worms, the pope dispatched one of the major theologians of the day, Cardinal Cajetan, to speak to Luther. What the pope told him was "do not argue with him on the substance of the issues. Just simply insist that he's obligated to submit to my authority and the authority of the Church."

Hmmm . . .

Note that I (and everyone else I know for that matter) cannot fill the shoes of a John Wesley or a Martin Luther. But the point remains. As one writer for Leadership Magazine put it recently, "The heroes of church history began as reflective Christians who doubted what everyone else took for granted, and as a result, were in almost every case marginalized . . . If renewal comes from the margins—as it nearly always appears to do—then by amputating our margins, we do what the chief priests and scribes did when a needed voice showed up at the margins of their community."

If we will take “the counting heads/out on a limb” argument to its logical conclusion, then Ben and I ought to join the Roman Catholic Church and submit to the pope. The last time I checked, the RCC is the largest segment of the Christian world today.

The fact is, the church as an institution has been wrong on the issue of slavery throughout the centuries. It’s been wrong on the issue of “the sword” (shedding blood over doctrinal differences) since the fourth century. It’s been wrong on the unholy wedding between church and State since Constantine. It’s been wrong on the place of women throughout the centuries – treating them as second-class citizens and degrading them in its theology. (Interestingly, Ben himself broke with the majority historical voice on this issue.)

Point: the “counting heads/out on a limb” argument doesn’t seem to hold up very well when put under the magnifying glass of church history. The tiny, tiny minority has often been proven in the long run to be correct.

Consequently, I think the question of ecclesiology should be settled (where possible) by comparing arguments rather than by counting noses.

Exegesis vs. Theology

One of the constants in this discussion has been the hermeneutical question. To my thinking, because the Scriptures point to Christ, we cannot restrict ourselves to authorial intent. We must ask and answer relevant questions about the God to whom the Scriptures so truly and reliably reveal. In other words, we can’t build our views about God on exegesis alone. We must also do theology because theology is ultimately about God.

In this connection, Ben accuses Grenz, Giles, Volf, and Bilezikian of not “grounding their theologizing in a close reading of Scripture” and then says there’s “not an exegete among them.”

Really? I encourage our readers to pick up Stanley Grenz’ monumental work, “Theology for the Community of God.” Flip over to the back. You will find a 13-page, tiny-font Scripture index referencing the scores of texts that Grenz grounds his theology in. Throughout the book, Grenz’ roots his theology solidly on compelling exegesis. Also pick up Gilbert Bilezikian’s “Community 101” and watch how he grounds his theology in the NT text time and time again. Do the same for Kevin Giles’ books, “The Trinity and Subordinationism” and “Jesus and the Father.” Giles grounds his views solidly in the NT and the consensus of the church historically. Read those books and then decide whether or not Ben’s charge that these men “do not ground their theology in a close reading of Scripture” is true or not.

Incidentally, Giles and Grenz appeal to Scripture in the books I’ve cited above far more than Ben does in his theological book, “The Problem of Evangelical Theology.” (I just plugged your book, Ben. (smile))

I believe that Ben has set up a straw man implying that theologians don’t do exegesis. That’s just not true.

Right or wrong, it’s my opinion that Ben confuses exegesis with theology. Karl Barth believed that exegesis was not theology; it was only the beginning of theology. I would agree. Very simply, the biblical text points us to something outside of itself. The Bible is not a book about the Bible. The Bible is a book about the Lord Jesus Christ.

Canonical Criticism vs. Historical Criticism

Ben suggests that we don’t have “permission” to read the latter part of the canon back into the earlier part. My question is: “Who is the permission giver?” “Who can give or deny us that permission?”

I wonder if implicitly Ben is suggesting that the exegetical scholar is the one who grants such permission. If that’s the case, then the exegetical scholar who denies canonical criticism is viewed as standing as king over the whole realm of biblical interpretation and tells everyone what is and what is not permissible.

Interestingly, not all exegetes are bound to the narrow methodology that says you must interpret a text by just restricting yourself to ask one question, "What did the author have in his head at the time when he wrote that text?"

Again, I address this in "Beyond Bible Study," www.ptmin.org/beyond.pdf I'll just say that we can learn a great deal by looking at the NT's own way of interpreting the OT. Matthew quotes Hosea saying, "Out of Egypt have I called my Son" and applies it to Jesus Christ. Such an interpretation clearly had nothing to do with the authorial intention of Hosea. But this is typical of the way the NT utilizes the OT. It sees the full meaning of a text coming in the fullness of light that we've received in Christ.

Just so we're clear: I believe that the meaning of Scripture *includes but exceeds* the product of the modern hermeneutic. The modern historian doesn't have the last word on the meaning of Scripture. The interpreters of Scripture prior to the Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment still had the basic equipment they needed to understand Holy Writ: the Holy Spirit and their fellow Christians through the ages. Just because they didn't have modern historical science does not mean that they were incapable of understanding the Scriptures. Such a thought is absurd to me. To think it is the height of Western, Enlightenment arrogance in my view.

Brevard Childs, like myself, accepted historical criticism. Childs' position was that historical criticism is a good beginning, but not a good stopping place. We don't stop with the historical information of the text. We rather go on to see the fullness of the canon. Thus Childs didn't deny historical criticism. The problem is that some are setting canonical criticism and historical criticism up as an either/or choice. But that's a false choice. One can advocate the historical study of Scripture and yet say that historical study needs to be inserted into a larger and richer context, i.e., the existing canon of Scripture which contains a revelation of Jesus Christ.

My book, "The Untold Story of the NT Church," is mostly a work of historical criticism written on a popular level. But just like Childs, I'm insisting that the interpretative process is not completed by historical criticism alone.

Put another way, the biblical texts are not just a grab bag of individual books. They are an organically united, canonical collection and they are only fully intelligible as such.

Jesus Christ Speaking Through the Members of His Body

This is not a black vs. white matter. I can't identify with Ben's statement of speaking "AS Jesus." I have no idea what that means.

I affirm that Paul's statement, "yet not I, but Christ lives in me" is an actual, and not a metaphorical, reality. Therefore, I believe that Christians can "speak by the Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3). Prophetic utterances occur in the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12-14). The Spirit of Christ still inspires, anoints, and speaks through His people. At the same time, we are exhorted to judge every prophetic utterance and discern what in it rightly represents the mind of God. Why? Because NT prophecy is not understood by looking at the OT mediatorial prophet as its model. NT prophecy is not the same thing as the ministry of the OT prophets, because OT prophets had a mediatorial position. NT prophets and those who prophesy do not have this mediatorial position. So what they say must be judged.

By the way, it's reported that Bishop Butler, an Anglican clergyman, supposedly scolded Wesley once saying to him, "Sir, this matter of Christians being inspired by the Holy Spirit in spiritual gifts is a horrid thing, a horrid thing." I find that interesting, given this discussion.

The Godhead and the Church Fathers

Ben says with absolute certainty that the NT says nothing of the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit before creation except that God “created the universe, or God was planning to redeem it. That’s all folks.”

I can’t agree. John 17:24b is just one example of a text that tells us something about the relationship between the Father and the Son before the foundation of the world. And there are more such texts folks. ;-)

I’ve never said nor do I believe that the Father died on the cross. My point was that the principle of the cross is found in the Godhead. God is love. Thus His nature is to dispossess Himself and pour His life into the other members of the Godhead. Calvary was merely an outworking of this principle, which is rooted in God’s nature and worked out among the Trinitarian Community.

The views on the Trinity that “Reimagining Church” advocates is held by Catholics today, by Orthodox today, and by most Anglicans and Lutherans, as well as many people in Reformed and other denominations.

Regarding my views of the Trinity, Ben says I’m wrong on the Eastern Fathers and I’m wrong on the Trinity. First, when I wrote about what the Eastern Fathers believed in my response, I was essentially quoting their writings themselves. Second, those who have studied the writings of the Fathers in detail know that subordinationism was considered a heresy and that the Fathers did not believe that there was a chain-of-command hierarchy in the Godhead. Some, however, have quoted the Fathers out-of-context in their attempt to try to justify a hierarchy in the Trinity (Augustine is sometimes used for this).

A challenge to our readers. Read Kevin Giles two books (mentioned above) and the Appendix in Gilbert Bilezikian’s “Community 101.” They will clearly show that the view on the Trinity taken in “Reimagining Church” is in line with the historic teaching of the church. Note that I quote them in the book also.

Case in point. When the Eastern Fathers – Gregory of Nyssa and the other Cappadocian Fathers – stated that God the Father is the fount/source of the Godhead, some said, “You’re teaching subordinationism.” And they insisted, “No, we aren’t. The Father is the fount of the Godhead, but what He begets is One who is fully like Himself, and therefore, He is not subordinate to Him.” So the accusation of the subordination of the Son was specifically made and denied by the Eastern Fathers.

Contrary to Ben’s claim, I am not blending together the three Persons of the Trinity. I’m simply insisting that their glorious distinctive relationships are intelligible only when seen in the context of an overarching analogical resemblance. Yes, the three Persons are different. But they have an analogical resemblance to one another. They are distinct, but not separate. The Father’s gift of Himself to the Son is not the same as the Son’s gift to the Father. But they are analogous, and the term “subordination” can name one element of that analogy. Further, their relationship to one another is rightly named “love,” and therefore can be understood as being analogues. The relationship between Father and Son, then, is a matter of mutual submission. They just submit in different ways. “Perichoresis,” as the early Christians called it, the “Divine dance,” is what makes our human relationships intelligible in our relationship to God.

Regarding Ben’s comments on the members of the Trinity having different functions, this is what theologians call “appropriation.” The great theologians throughout the centuries, without any exception that I’m aware of, have all said that appropriation must be done very carefully. It should not be thought to mean that if we appropriate creation to the Father, that only the Father is involved in creation. In fact, all the members of the Trinity are in their own distinctive ways involved in creation. The same is true for every Divine act. All the members of the Trinity are involved in the incarnation, in the atonement, in the resurrection, in regeneration, in sanctification, etc. Each Divine act is associated with a specific member of the Godhead, but that doesn’t mean that it’s an activity *exclusive* to that member.

Soundbytes or Building Blocks?

I believe that Ben misses the point, here. I’m not naming various scholars as members of a single school

of thought that I subscribe to. Not at all. I'm simply crediting those people who have helped me answer specific questions.

Thus when I quote and cite scholars who are Roman Catholic, Anglican, and part of other denominations, I do so because they drew the same conclusions that I have on certain questions. Quoting them doesn't mean that I agree totally with their entire model or vice versa. What it does mean, however, is at a minimum, their handling of certain texts draw the same basic conclusions that I've drawn.

To get more specific: I own all of F.F. Bruce's work and have studied his exegesis and life for years. Bruce wasn't your typical Plymouth Brethren. He believed in 1 Cor. 14:26/Heb. 10:24-25 open-participatory meetings (as do I); he believed that women could speak in those meetings (as do I); he disagreed with J.N. Darby's "biblical blueprintism" approach to ecclesiology as well as his dispensationalism (as do I); he didn't believe in a clergy nor a single pastor system (as do I); he believed that elders were plural in the local assembly (as do I); I could go on.

The fact is, F.F. Bruce's ecclesiology was far closer to mine than it is to BW3's. Further, Bruce was a formidable exegete. And in my view, one of the greatest NT scholars of this age.

The same is true for Gordon Fee. While we may not agree on every detail of our ecclesiology, there's wide agreement. For instance, Fee believes that 1 Cor. 14:26 was prescriptive. He believes that God through the Spirit speaks through the church, etc. He believes that Paul was an itinerant apostle. He believes in a plurality of elders in every church. He denies top-down authority leadership structures.

What follows are some direct quotes from Fee that make the same identical points that I make in "Reimagining Church" that Ben took issue with in his review.

"God as Trinity, including the Holy Spirit, is the ground of both our unity and our diversity within the believing community..." ('God in Three Persons: The Spirit and the Trinity' in "Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God," p. 45).

"One of the more remarkable features of the New Testament Epistles is the twin facts (a) that they are addressed to the church(es) as a whole, not to the church leadership, and (b) that leaders, therefore, are seldom, if ever, singled out either to see to it that the directives of a given letter are carried out or to carry them out themselves" ('Laos and Leadership Under the New Covenant' in "Listening to the Spirit in the Text," pp.132-133).

"Closely related to this is another reality that is easily missed in an individualistic culture, namely that the imperatives in the Epistles are primarily corporate in nature, and have to do first of all with the community and its life together; they address individuals only as they are part of the community. In the early church everything was done *allelon* ('one another')" (p.134).

"Leaders do not exercise authority over God's people—although the community is to respect them and submit to their leadership; rather they are the 'servants of the farm' (1 Cor.3:5-9), or 'household' (1 Cor.4:1-3). The New Testament is not concerned about their place in the governance structures . . . but with their attitudes and servant nature. They do not rule, but serve and care for—and that within the circle, as it were." (p.136)

The truth is, Gordon Fee's ecclesiology is far closer to mine than it is to BW3's. Further, Fee is an excellent exegete. (I quote him at other times in "Reimagining Church.")

And Robert Banks' work on the anatomy of Paul's authority in the church is incomparable, bar none.

Point: The way that Bruce, Fee, Banks, Howard Snyder, and even in some places Dunn, handle the Biblical text is in *many cases* the same way that I handle the text.

Contrary to Ben's statement, the "building blocks" of my theology of the Godhead and the relationship between Jesus Christ and His church maps tightly with the theology of Bonhoeffer, Grenz, Volf, and Giles. The difference lies in the *practical application* of that theology. I believe that if we apply their theology practically, it will not lead us to justify a Catholic church, an Anglican church, a Lutheran church, or an American Baptist church. Instead, it will lead us to the organic expression of the ekklesia.

All told, I'm perfectly fine with being characterized by sitting out on a limb. The truth of the matter is that many Christians of the past and a countless number in the present have taken their seat there also. In my estimation, Bruce and Fee, and even Snyder, are sitting on that limb too, but some of them are closer to the tree than others. (Unfortunately, those who were part of the original Radical Reformation were tossed off that limb to meet horrid deaths.)

By the way, Ben's closing statement, "the consensus of the vast majority," is an oxymoron. A consensus means you don't think in terms of minorities and majorities.

Anyways, that's how the tree looks from my humble limb ;-)

Closing Words

I'd like to thank Ben once again for this conversation. As I said in Part 2 of my response, I loathe this sort of academic discussion because 1) it typically doesn't get past the frontal lobe, 2) it often degenerates into something that grieves the spirit, and 3) it rarely if ever ends up changing anyone's mind.

However, I sensed that there was a shot that Ben and I could demonstrate, by God's grace, how two Christians can have a vigorous, robust discussion on issues with which they strongly disagree and do it in a respectful, Christ-honoring way void of personal attacks and ad hominem. I certainly hope that this was the case. Our readers will have to decide if we pulled it off.

I also hope this discussion won't end here, but that it rather becomes a "starter" of sorts that others will continue in many other places.

Methinks that if Ben and I keep going round the bend on this topic (no pun intended), that his blog will become an echo chamber of sorts, where the same arguments will just be repeatedly echoed. (Counter-assertion arguments have already begun to show up, I think.) There's a lot to reflect on in what's already been said, I think.

Regarding the book that provoked Ben's review in the first place, there are plenty of positive reviews (see <http://www.ReimaginingChurch.org>). And there are some not-so-positive reviews (like BW3's). ;-)

There are credentialed professors who wholeheartedly agree with the book (like Leonard Sweet who has made it required reading for his doctoral students). And there are those who wholeheartedly disagree with it (like BW3). ;-)

There are renowned authors who have endorsed it (like Shane Claiborne and Alan Hirsch). And there are renowned authors who haven't endorsed it (like BW3). ;-)

Suggestion: If this conversation has been of interest to you, I seriously hope that you will read "Reimagining Church" for yourself instead of relying on someone else's review— whether good or bad. Many of the arguments made in it haven't been touched on in this conversation by the way.

Add to that: if you suffered the pain of reading "Pagan Christianity," then you owe it to yourself to read "Reimagining." For one simple reason: "Pagan" was only the first half of a conversation – the deconstructive side. The constructive half – which is the most important – is found in "Reimagining." "Pagan" was never meant to be a "stand-alone," and it's not complete without "Reimagining."

That said, I hope our conversation will continue in the church at large, and I trust that it will be Christ-honoring— friendly dialogue among brethren rather than hostile debates among enemies. I'm of the opinion that with respect to dialogue, the journey is more important than the destination— the process more important than the outcome.

Despite our differences in ecclesiology, I stand with Ben Witherington III in our shared testimony that Jesus Christ is this world's true Lord. And I affirm him as a gifted member of the body of Christ.

It's been an honor.

Your brother who sits on a limb,

Frank

p.s. I've not watched too much of Bill O'Reilly. But in some of the episodes I've seen, he doesn't really give his guests "the last word" despite his claim. However, to quote Hebrews, "I shall think better things" of my brother Ben. (smile) Ultimately, the Lord Jesus Himself will have the last word, eh?

September 2008