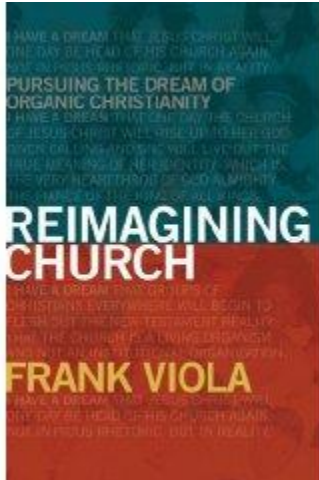


## The Frank Viola Project (And Why You Should Take It Seriously)

By Michael Spencer (iMonk) originally posted at [www.internetmonk.com](http://www.internetmonk.com)



Sometimes, I think we evangelicals talk way too much about the wrong things and far too little about more important things.

I hardly ever- ever- find myself in a conversation about what is the Gospel. Or what Jesus would be teaching us about the kingdom today. Or how to meaningfully repent of our entanglement in various American idolatries. These conversations just don't happen around me (and I am surrounded by evangelical Christians.)

But the church? Oh yeah, we talk about church all the time. Preachers. Sermons. Music. Corporate Music. Programs. Buildings, Budgets. Music. Why we changed churches again. What we like. What we don't like. How great such and such a church is. What our church needs to start doing. Why this group at our church is wrong, or bad, or stubborn. Why a particular worship leader gets it right. Why we need a new whatever.

The talk about church is endless.

Now I believe deeply in the church as a place of spiritual formation, but I am also deeply aware of the problems and limitations of the church.

For instance, I realize that the church has a tendency to become self-defining. Worship becomes those songs we're singing in the service. Discipleship becomes participation in church programs. Commitment is time spent at church and jobs at church volunteered for.

Spirituality is....well...we don't like that word. Evangelism is what we're always training to do and telling ourselves we should be doing. Missions is whatever church program lends a hand, money or food to someone in the community. And so on.

Or there's the tendency of church's today to think marketing at every turn. The morning worship service is suddenly all about people who have never been to church. All kinds of changes appear with the same justification: reaching Unchurch Harry and Sally. Ads, signs, logos and scenery worthy of a theatrical production are now very important, because every church is in competition with every other church and everything else people like to do.

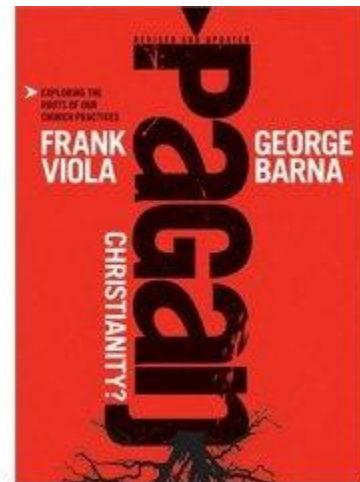
Of course, it's very important your church win this little competition, or at least that's what the pastor says.

Then you have churches that pull rather stupid stunts with money, or authority. Some churches talk about leadership or gender roles to the point you want to put your head into a fan. Justifications for expenditures, new building programs and more staff all seem to come from the same playbook. These are the kind of churches that persuade thousands of people to never go back to what they've known as church again. Who can blame them? (I know some will, but seriously....think about it.)

If you have the kind of Christianity that needs an emphasis on the basics, spiritual formation, authentic human interaction, or some occasional experience of spontaneity, good luck finding a typical evangelical church that cares about such things.

And then, there are those of us who've gotten burned. Fired. Hurt. Rejected. Sent packing. Thrown under the bus and kicked to the curb. Told we weren't supporting the pastor or were quenching the Holy Spirit.

We talk about the church too much because we can't get it out of our system or get over what it's done to us that is completely outside of Christian humility and decency.



Yes, we talk about the church too much because, unfortunately, the church looms very, very large in evangelicalism. Too large, in my view, at least in its current evangelical version.

But we aren't going to get away from it either. Many of us are continuing to wrestle with what it means to be Christian in some form of community. We know the church is a long way from the ideals and commands in the New Testament, but it's like someone has removed all the roads and markers on the way back there.

That's where voices like [Frank Viola](#) come into the conversation.

Viola is the primary voice in evangelicalism these days advocating organic church. That's not as simple as rejecting the institutional church and adopting a house church. It's not as simple as having a massive historical, Biblical and practical critique of the denominational church, its leadership and programs.

No, it's more complicated than all of that, and you will make a terrible mistake if you read either of Viola's recent books with that mindset.

It's not simple at all, and it's not the way of protest and accumulating reasons to never go back to church.

What Frank Viola is doing for all of us- even those of us who don't come out entirely where he does- is practicing that Protestant thing of reimagining the church in the light of the scriptures, right down to the foundations; right down to the stuff we generally don't ever hear from the clergy (surprise!).

What Viola is doing that will probably make thousands of readers mad and thousands more glad is exactly what Catholic apologist Louis Bouyer said is wrong with Protestantism in the first place: It keeps trying to reinvent the church again by going back in history and back to the scripture without going back to the Catholic church and admitting its infallibility, antiquity and endorsement by Christ.

Amen. Here's what I say: Good for Frank Viola. We need to listen to him, even if we aren't awarding him all ten points on every dive.

You need to read his books and when they make you angry, or when you disagree with his conclusions or spot a historical error, you need to keep reading. You may not wind up where Viola goes, but he goes somewhere, and once there, you can see that, contrary to that last announcement, there IS another way.

Frank Viola isn't content to just talk about the church. He isn't content to just live in all the usual assumptions. He's not content to assume that the way we use words or relate to leadership or experience fellowship is the real thing.

Frank Viola believes that there is a real church and a real church experience underneath all of the mess we've made of things. He loves the people of God and I, for one, can't fault a man who believes the people of God as a people are more important than the church as an institution.

Like any Socrates, there are people who want to get out the hemlock. This discussion makes us nervous. It ought to. We have a lot to be nervous about.

I don't for a moment believe that Frank's vision of organic church is the entire answer. I do believe that Frank's vision of organic church is a lot closer to the truth in the New Testament than the vast majority of institutional churches and Christians want to acknowledge. I don't think one guy has it all worked out. But I have to say, in Frank Viola's case, it's not for lack of trying, and most evangelicals have just quit trying to be the New Testament church and they are full on trying to be a bigger megachurch. The nuances Frank brings to various leadership and pastoral terms are much needed balances and reminders, even if they can't be pressed as far toward the option of the organic, non-institutional church as some might wish.

I've been reading about church renewal for years, having cut my teeth on Howard Snyder more than 25 years ago. If there is one thing I've learned, it's this: the people who made the problem, and who have invested large amounts of themselves in the way things have always been done, are unlikely to see any value in renewals and reformations that bring into question what has been their own religious security.

I'm not saying all of Viola's critics are purposely refusing to admit their complicity. No, I believe Viola's work can be critiqued by church historians and practitioners of Christian community in church and academy. But I believe Viola's critiques and proposals have serious merit, even with my own exceptions to them.

Many of us suspect that the church should be much simpler, more focused, more organic, more aware of its non-New Testament influences and more characterized as a movement with institutional expressions at times than an institution that struggles to remember when it was a movement.

I don't know exactly what a New Testament church looks like. I'm not sure how to detox the church from cultural influences and take a radically restorationist view of everything. I'm not entirely sure that it is particularly important that we try to fix everything or understand everything. Perhaps the church most of us are looking for is a matter of learning to see things like Jesus does and build up the church through the work of the Spirit in each of us as well as in the people of God.

On that journey, I count Frank Viola as a major asset. If we can't find the courage to read what he has to say and appropriate it as God leads, then we need more courage and more honesty. Both of Viola's books are helpful perspectives and words that will encourage us in the right direction.

## Recommendations and Reviews: From Eternity to Here by Frank Viola

By Michael Spencer (iMonk) originally posted at [www.internetmonk.com](http://www.internetmonk.com)



**From Eternity to Here** by Frank Viola

Let's be honest.

Guys like me- ordained in the traditional church, collecting a paycheck from the traditional church, investing a significant portion of our life in the traditional church- are supposed to be put off by Frank Viola's entire project. And depending on what you've read by or about Frank Viola, that may be exactly how you feel: defensive about an "open" house church model that dismisses traditional denominations as a selling out of the church.

Viola's work makes us defensive and rightfully so. Of all the contemporary critics of the traditional church, Viola has been the most effective. He's not ranted and railed. Instead, he's done the hard scholarly work to make his case, and offered a full and complete discussion and informed experience for his own model.

But what's been missing in Viola's project has been an extensive and foundational Biblical underpinning; specifically a foundational understanding of the church. With *From Eternity to Here*, Viola has given us that foundational Biblical discussion of the church, and in a compelling and creative way.

*From Eternity to Here* is a very different book from *Pagan Christianity* and *Reimagining Church*. It takes three major Biblical themes- marriage, house and family- and explores them extensively and in detail for what these themes have to say about the church. It's an excellent Biblical study, with hundreds of Biblical connections and insights that tie these great themes together. Viola hasn't written a Biblical theology or a narrative approach to the Bible. He's written a Biblical theology of the church, focusing on those themes with the most influence on how the church sees itself.

I was taken aback with how much I liked this book. I read it quickly, and I'm going to read it again. Why? Because if there is a book on the Jesus-shaped church that I could recommend to everyone who identifies with my description of that journey, this has easily cleared the bar as my first choice. Not because I would sell all that I have and follow Frank Viola into the organic church movement, but because the way in which Jesus Christ dominates the ecclesiology is exactly what so many of us are searching for in the evangelical wilderness.

Viola is generous with his debt to mentors and teachers, some of whom will be new discoveries to some in this audience. The name Watchman Nee causes me some concern, but I'm not as concerned with where all of the sources for these Biblical themes come from as I am in whether the end result expounds all of scripture in a Christ-centered way. That is exactly where Viola succeeds. This is a uniquely original comprehensive tour of the threads that hold the Bible together.

I was most impressed with Viola's compassion for the church and for the Christians who love the church. He understands how the church and the individuals who make it up have been hurt, abused and sold out. He understands how shabbily the bride of Christ, the house of God and his children have been treated. If nothing else, a reader will come away from this book enjoying and reveling in the love that God has for his people.

**Update:** Frank Viola's new book ["FINDING ORGANIC CHURCH: A Comprehensive Guide to Starting and Sustaining Authentic Christian Communities"](#) (David C. Cook) releases today at a discount from [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com).

This is the practical follow up to all of Viola's other books. It's also a stand alone book exploring the subject of organic church planting in great detail. Here's an early review:

The author of "*Pagan Christianity?*" (with George Barna), "*Reimagining Church*," and the bestselling "*From Eternity to Here*" has written a detailed manual on how to start and sustain an organic church. Everything from what to do with the children, to the developmental stages of church growth, to the diseases of an organic church and their cures are all covered in this comprehensive volume. Church planting principles for organic styled churches are packed together with the author's practical experience of living in and starting such churches. Each chapter is full of advice, outlining the unique problems that such churches will face and their solutions. Church planters of all types will benefit from this book as well as those wishing to explore an alternative way of church gathering. — Christian Book Reviews, 2009

## On "Jesus Manifesto" by Leonard Sweet & Frank Viola

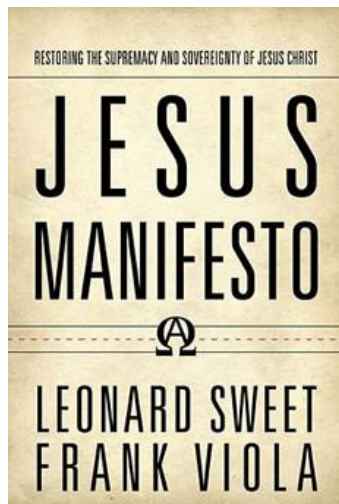
By Michael Spencer (iMonk) originally posted at [www.internetmonk.com](http://www.internetmonk.com)

Sweet and Viola, who are hardly theological twins, have detected something seriously amiss in the post-evangelical/emerging church understanding of the Gospel: the centrality of Christ. I think I have a nose for this sort of thing, and I know it can be very rhetorical, but Sweet and Viola are crucially and significantly right. And not just about Christianity becoming politics, but about theology that puts Jesus into an assigned "place" in someone's version of Christianity and doesn't make him the "all" of the Gospel.

As I will say in one chapter of my book, unless you do great damage, there's not going to be any escaping the narrowness of Jesus when it comes to putting the focus onto himself rather than anyone else's agenda. So whatever we have to say about "narratives," or "sources" or "confessions," we must be a people radically identified with Jesus. No "Jesus Disconnect" allowed.

## Christianity's Forgotten Man

By Jeff Dunn at [www.internetmonk.com](http://www.internetmonk.com)



Allow me to relate two recent incidents as a way of introduction to this book review. The first was on a recent Sunday morning in a church associated with a popular Christian movement (they do not want to be called a "denomination") located in the midwest. The man who preached is a well-known missionary, a man who has been on the side of Christ for more than 40 years. His message that morning was taken from Luke 15, the story we know as the Prodigal Son. The missionary made it through his sermon without once mentioning the name of Jesus. Not one time. Oh, and the message he shared from this parable was that there are three levels of maturity we all must pass through in order to be of useful service to God.

The second incident was also recent, also in the midwest as I was visiting family. A woman asked me if I knew of any DVD series that used New Testament characters to teach positive character traits. Another woman, a teacher in a Christian school, needed it for her middle school classes. I said, "No, I don't know of any." Then I continued, "And that would be the wrong use of Scripture." "What do you mean?"

"Scripture is given to us for one reason only," I said. "And that is to reveal Jesus to us. If you want to teach positive character traits, try a book like Mickey Mantle's *The Quality Of Courage*. That's much better to use to teach that kind of thing." As you can tell, I am not always a hit at family gatherings.

Both of these situations, along with many others I could relate but won't, tell me that Jesus may need to mount a PR campaign just to be remembered by his own followers. How is it that we who call ourselves "little Christs" can so quickly forget Jesus? Why is it that we talk about everything else but Jesus when we are together?

Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola have teamed up to write *Jesus Manifesto: Restoring the Supremacy and Sovereignty of Jesus Christ*. It is meant to draw the reader's focus back to the center, back to Jesus himself.

"Who do you say that I am?" is the question required of every generation, and every generation must answer it for itself..Unfortunately, "Who do you say that I am?" is no longer the only question. "What are you doing to bring in the kingdom of God?" is now an equally asked question, as is "What are you doing for justice?" and "In what causes are you engaged?" Or "What are you doing to evangelize the world?" and "To whom are you accountable?" and "What's your gift?" And especially, "What kind of leader are you?"

Yet Jesus quizzed Peter with one ultimate question, and only one. And that one decisive question is the same one He asks us today.

If you have trouble answering the question, "Who do you say that I am?" then this book is a great primer for you. And if you think you have a good handle on the answer, this book will show you insights into Jesus that just may cause you to rethink your answer. The authors spend time showing how that Jesus is the central figure in all of Scripture, both Old and New Testaments. "Jesus Christ makes Scripture intelligible," they write. "He is the key that unlocks the entire biblical canon." When they speak of Jesus revealed in Genesis, it seems that read Chaplain Mike's series on creation.

The book of Genesis further demonstrates the Scriptures' preoccupation with Christ. Genesis 1 and 2 were never intended to be the battleground for the Creation-versus-evolution debate. They are rather an unveiling of Christ and His church. Jesus is the new Adam. The church is the new Eve. And the gospel of John is the new Genesis.

Sweet and Viola hold that the New Testament writers were "completely consumed with Christ." They ask us to picture the three thousand new converts we read of in Acts 2. What would the apostles teach them? First, Sweet and Viola list some things that today's churches would teach new converts, including:

- how to live a good, clean life
- the mark of the beast and end-times prophecy
- signs, wonders, and miracles
- divine healing
- how to live by faith
- how to save the lost
- Creation versus evolution
- leadership principles
- social justice
- prosperity
- spiritual warfare

They compare that with what John tells us was taught in the early church:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life—the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us—that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ (1 John 1:1-3, NKJV).

Sweet and Viola spend a lot of time discussing the use of the Bible by those not focused on Jesus, by those whose eyes are on how they can live better lives.

[M]any Christians have turned the Bible into a form of the knowledge of good and evil. They approach the Bible as raw material by which they can gain control over their lives, so life can be more understandable and under control, less unnerving and

unpredictable. This is a profoundly grievous misuse of the Bible. Jesus didn't misuse the Scriptures to gain control and predictability in His own life. To Him, the Scriptures were simple the joystick on the Father's controller. They were the instrument through which He got to know His Father better and to discover how to live out His mission.

This book will make a great companion to Michael Spencer's *Mere Churchianity*. Both point to Jesus as the author and finisher of our faith, both point out the weaknesses of today's Western church. For instance, Sweet and Viola say,

In times of crisis, the church doesn't need rules established, laws passed, or wolves shot. She needs a seismic revelation of her Lord—the fullness of the Godhead in bodily form. Sadly, many of us today combat problems and erroneous teachings with laws, rules, religious duty—and the mother of all religious tools: guilt.

The authors do not fall into the trap so many preachers today succumb to, that is to try to exhort each of us to "try to be like Jesus." Sweet and Viola say this is an impossible task, and only leads to frustration. The answer, they say, is to do as Jesus did. Jesus only did what he saw his Father do, only spoke what the Father gave him to say. We need to be filled with the presence of God, say the authors, and live out of that rather than trying our best to be someone we can never be: Jesus. This seems to allow the reader to breathe a sigh of relief.

Be aware that this book is written in "popular style," by which I mean it is not a scholarly work, nor is intended to be. This is for the common man and woman, not the theologian looking for additional resource material for his doctorate. This is for the one who has gone to church most all of her life, has heard sermon after sermon telling her she needs to work harder to be like Jesus, has done the fill-in-the-blanks Bible studies about Jesus, but doesn't really know Jesus at all. This is meant to whet her appetite for Jesus so that she will bypass all of the fast food and go for the real meal. Don't get this book expecting to come away smarter. But if you read *Jesus Manifesto*, you may just come away changed.

Update: Frank Viola, a friend of the iMonk community, has a blog where you can discuss this book with him, as well as read interviews with him and Leonard Sweet. [Check it out at here.](#)