

Frank Viola on the Postchurch Perspective

Is "where two or more are gathered" a church? (unedited version)

by [Frank Viola](#)

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There is a growing phenomenon in the body of Christ today. Alongside of the missional church movement, the emerging church movement, and the house church movement, there is a mode of thinking that I call “postchurch Christianity.”

The postchurch brand of Christianity is built on the premise that institutional forms of church are ineffective, unbiblical, unworkable, and in some cases, dangerous. Institutionalization is not compatible with *ekklesia*. So say postchurch advocates.

But the postchurch view goes further saying, “any semblance of organization whatsoever . . . any semblance of leadership ... is wrong and oppressive. Church is simply when two or three believers gather together in any format. Whenever this happens, church occurs.” So the thinking goes.

Here are some examples of what you might hear a postchurch advocate say:

“Sally and I had coffee at Starbucks last week. That was church.”

“I get together with two other men once a month at Sonny’s BBQ. That’s church for us.”

“I travel a great deal and whenever I visit Christians in other cities, we’re having church together.”

“I belong to the same church that every other Christian belongs to. I live in Dallas, TX. Last week, I talked to my friend on the phone for an hour. He lives in Miami, FL. The week before I talked with a friend who lives in Portland, OR. We were having church on the phone. I belong to the same church that they do.”

“I don’t attend any Christian meetings. Not regularly anyway. I have church on the Internet. I belong to several Christian discussion groups and social networks, and that’s church for me.”

“I don’t understand how people can talk about church planting? How can a church be planted when we are already the church? I’m the church. You’re the church. So just *be* the church. Church happens. “

To my mind, all of the above reflects an entire redefinition of *ekklesia* as it is found, used, and understood in the New Testament. No first century Christian would have used “church” in this way. While there’s certainly nothing wrong with fellowshipping with Christians at Starbucks, on the phone, or through the Internet, the biblical meaning of *ekklesia* is something quite different.

In order to understand the Scriptural meaning of “church,” the New Testament must be understood within the framework of the biblical narrative. And it must be read and interpreted in its cultural and chronological context.

The biblical text that postchurch advocates hang a great deal of their doctrine on is Matthew 18:15-20.

Let’s look at this passage in context:

“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

Here, Jesus is speaking of a local *ekklesia*. He is speaking of a local community of Christ-followers who live in the same locale. (That is what the word *ekklesia* meant in the New Testament. More on that later.)

The people in this *ekklesia* know one another. The context makes this clear. This passage has in view an excommunication meeting. Therefore, it’s a horrifying text—a text that no Christian should ever want to use. It has to do with a person who is acting in a wayward manner and refuses to stop.

When this happens, the injured person must go to the offending person in private. If the offending person refuses to reconcile, two or three others from the local *ekklesia* must talk to the offending person. If the offending person still refuses to stop their wayward conduct, the offending person must be disfellowshipped from the *ekklesia*.

Note that Jesus says that after two or three have talked with the offending person, and the person still refuses to stop what they are doing, then the news of his unrepentance must be taken “to the church.” Now think: If the two or three people are the church, then this text becomes incoherent. Jesus says that the two or three should “tell it to the church” if the offending person doesn’t repent. Consequently, the two or three cannot be the church. They are simply a part of it.

The two or three at the end of the passage are the same two or three at the beginning of it. The implication is that the two or three who went to the unrepentant person should be praying for him. And the Lord will be with them in a special way as they do. He will stand with them.

This context indicates that the *ekklesia* is an organic entity where a group of committed believers in a locality “bind and loose,” using the keys of the kingdom that Jesus has given to them.

Consequently, Matthew 18 is not a text where Jesus is trying to define the church for us. It’s rather a text describing the awful process of excommunication.

Having said that, I’m of the opinion that the postchurch viewpoint cannot stand up against the light of the New Testament. Let me unravel that statement and you be the judge.



THE ORIGINAL LANGUAGE TEST

New Testament scholarship agrees that the word *ekklesia* (translated “church”) meant a local community of people who assemble together regularly. The word was used for the Greek assembly whereby those in a city were “called forth” from their homes to meet (assemble) in the town forum to make decisions for the city. Consequently, the word also carries the flavor of every-member participation in decision-making. The Christian *ekklesia* is a community of people who gather together and possess a shared life in Christ.

As such, the *ekklesia* as used in the New Testament literature is visible, touchable, locatable, and tangible. You can visit it. You can observe it. And you can live in it.

Biblically speaking, you could not call anything an *ekklesia* unless it met (assembled) regularly together.

New Testament scholar Robert Banks makes this point loud and clear in his groundbreaking work of biblical scholarship entitled *Paul’s Idea of Community*.

THE EPISTLE TEST

The word “epistle” means letter. The NT contains twenty-one epistles. And most of them were written to local churches—*ekklesias*—in various cities.

Now here is a test. Those who belong to a postchurch “church” (which I also call the “phantom church” or the “ghost church”) should ask themselves a question: *Can a person write a letter to my church? Can it be received by the church and read together by all of its members at the same time?*

Paul of Tarsus wrote such letters to the churches he planted.

He wrote a letter to the church in Corinth, for instance.

There was an actual, physical, locatable, visit-able body of believers that met together in the home of Gaius. Paul could write a letter to that church and everyone read it at the same time.

Paul did the same for the church in Thessalonica, Colosee, Philippi, Laodicea, etc.

And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it to be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea.” (Col. 4:16)

THE VISITATION TEST

Can you visit a postchurch “church”?

If you were living in the first-century, you could literally *visit* any of the churches that existed.

You could also visit the church in Jerusalem in A.D. 35 and meet Peter, James, John and Mary, the mother of Jesus. These were real people who met together regularly. They were part of the same believing community—the same church.

You could visit the church in Corinth and sit in a living room in Gaius’ home and talk with Stephanus, Fortunatus, and Achaicus.

The house of Chloe could visit the church in Corinth and attend its meetings (1 Cor. 1:11).

If you were to visit the church in Rome before Nero annihilated it in A.D. 65, you could sit in the living room of Priscilla and Aquila’s home and meet all the believers who regularly assembled together. (Their names are mentioned in Romans 16.)

Paul could also send Timothy to visit the church in Philippi where Lydia, Euodias, Syntyche, and Clement gathered. He could send Titus to visit the churches on the island of Crete. He could also send Tychicus to visit the church in Ephesus. And on and on.

Question: You who belong to the postchurch “church,” does your church pass the visitation test?

If someone comes to your town, can they locate and visit your church? Can they meet the members and stay in their home for a week?

THE NARRATIVE READING TEST

I would like to challenge you to go through your New Testament very carefully, beginning with the book of Acts, and try to find in the whole sweeping story support for the postchurch “church.” Not by proof-texting verses together, but by looking at the entire first-century narrative in chronological order.

I suggest picking up *The Chronological Study Bible* or *The Narrated Bible* and go through the New Testament story in chronological order from Acts to Revelation. And see if the postchurch view can fit into that beautiful saga.

THE CONSISTENCY TEST

Three common critiques that postchurch advocates level against the institutional form of church are:

1) It breeds low commitment.

2) It feeds the consumerist, individualistic Christianity that plagues the Western church today. (In consumer Christianity, religious teachings and experiences are goods that one “buys into” by becoming a subscriber to a particular church that “sells” those goods. Religious professionals produce these religious goods, and consumers pay to keep them in business. Those who consume the same sort of religious goods are no more members of a real community than those who shop at Walmart.)

3) It produces little transformation in the lives of the people who are part of it.

Ironically, these same three critiques can be appropriately leveled at the postchurch “church.”

The postchurch breeds low commitment because there are no regular gatherings nor is there any real community life that’s consistent. (Talking to Christians on the Internet is virtual. It’s not a substitute for authentic Christian community where people’s lives are shared in Christ.)

The postchurch view also reflects the consumerist, individualism that reflects our culture. Why? Because there’s no devotion or commitment to a regular community of believers. It’s church on your own terms. Whenever you feel like it.

The truth is, the postchurch “church” is actually more convenient and easier on the flesh than virtually every other form of church.

THE “ONE-ANOTHERING” TEST

Throughout the New Testament epistles, there are nearly sixty “one another” exhortations given to churches. All of them imply close-knit community, such as “forbear with one another.” Here are some others:

- live in harmony with one another (Rom. 12:16; 1 Peter 3:8)
- be devoted to one another (Rom. 12:10)
- edify one another (Rom. 14:19; 1 Thess. 5:11b)
- care for one another (1 Cor. 12:25)
- serve one another (Gal. 5:13)
- bear one another’s burdens (Gal. 6:2)
- bear with one another (Eph. 4:2)
- be kind and compassionate to one another (Eph. 4:32)
- speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Eph. 5:19)
- submit to one another (Eph. 5:21)
- forgive one another (Col. 3:13)
- teach one another (Col. 3:16)
- admonish one another (Col. 3:16)

These “one another” imperatives assume ever-deepening relationships and community, not casual and occasional get togethers.

THE PURPOSE OF GOD TEST

In my book, *From Eternity to Here*, I've sought to trace God's "eternal purpose" from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22.

The New Testament makes abundantly clear that the eternal purpose of God is intensely corporate. God isn't after a group of individual living stones, He wants those stones to be "built together" to form a house for His full-dwelling and expression.

You are not the church. And neither am I.

The church is the *corporate expression* of Christ that is expressed visibly in a locality, where human beings can see, touch, hear, and know one another and live a shared life together in the Lord.

While God never seeks to take away our *individuality*, He does desire to take our *individualism* to the cross.

Why? Because the Lord is after a bouquet of flowers, not simply a bunch of individual roses.

Consider the analogy of a father who has seven children. One Christmas day, he gives his oldest son a trumpet. He gives his youngest son a trombone. For his oldest daughter, he gives a violin. He gives another child a drum kit. Another he gives a bass. Another he gives a flute. And another he gives a piano.

Each child learns to play their instrument. The years pass, and each loves playing their individual instruments. It's a joy to them.

Years pass by and one day the father sits down with all of his children and says, "I am so happy you have mastered your instruments. Each instrument was given to you as a free gift. And I'm glad that you have come to enjoy and treasure your gifts.

But I didn't give you these instruments to enjoy by yourselves. I'm creating an orchestra that will produce music that this world has never heard. *And I've invited you to be part of it.* That is why I gave you these gifts."

And so it is with our Lord. The gift of eternal life is not for ourselves. God wants an orchestra in every city. He wants a spiritual building, not a collection of individual living stones. A body, not a collection of individual limbs and appendages. He wants a corporate expression through which to reveal His glorious Son. And this requires the loss of our individualism and independence.

It seems to me that the postchurch view denigrates Christian community (at worst) or deemphasizes and redefines it (at best). For that reason alone, it fails to fulfill God's ultimate intention and grand mission in the earth.

SUMMARY

In my personal judgment, the postchurch view fails all seven tests.

The postchurch paradigm is rooted in the attempt to practice Christianity without belonging to an identifiable community that regularly meets for worship, prayer, fellowship, mutual edification, and mutual care.

Such a concept is disconnected with what we find in the New Testament.

The first-century churches were locatable, identifiable, visit-able communities that met regularly in a particular locale. They were not amorphous entities. For this reason, Paul could write a letter to these identifiable communities (local churches) with some definite idea of who would be present to hear it (Rom. 16). He would also have a good idea of when they gathered (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 14) and the struggles they experienced in their life together (Rom. 12—14; 1 Cor. 1–8). He can visit these churches and/or send others to visit them as well. The same is true for the other apostles.

Again, there's nothing wrong with fellowshipping with Christians on the Internet, over the phone, or meeting with friends at Starbucks. I personally love doing these things. (And for some folks who have been hurt in their Christian life, this sort of casual fellowship is a good form of temporary "detox.") But calling these activities "church" or substituting them for *ekklesia* is misguided in my opinion.

It is my observation that *many* (not all) who embrace the postchurch viewpoint have been hurt in churches that had organization, so they have concluded that any organization is bad. Consequently, the viewpoint seems to have been born out of personal pain rather than a revelation of Christ and His Body.

To put a finer point on it, the postchurch paradigm appears to be an expression of the contemporary desire for intimacy without commitment. (Commitment and devotion to a body of believers are the same thing.) And commitment/devotion often brings injured feelings. This is especially true in Christian community, where very fallen people are learning Christ together.

So it seems to me anyway.

*For further reading, see [Pagan Christianity](#) for a biblical and historical critique on the institutional form of church and [Reimagining Church](#) for a presentation of the organic expression of the church.

—Frank Viola is the author of numerous books on the deeper Christian life and church reform, including [From Eternity to Here](#). For more, visit www.FrankViola.com.