

Interview with Frank Viola, author *Pagan Christianity*

by [Brother Maynard](#)

In 2008, Frank Viola co-authored a book with George Barna called [Pagan Christianity](#).

Joyce and I had some time with Frank Viola near his home in Florida. We got a chance to hear his heart. Frank and I have known each other for a several years and I appreciate him and his pursuit of the Kingdom of God. He has taken some heat because of his views, but the heart of the man is for Christ and His Kingdom. Frank is for the "Body of Christ" moving powerfully together to impact the world in many expressions of faith. In "Pagan Christianity" he desires to challenge all of us in what we do, and who we are as Christ's ambassadors to the world.

I believe all that read the book will be challenged. I do not look at the book as divisive because I appreciate many expressions of Christ and can read it with the heart of love for the church. I think the challenge will be, can we become better representatives of Jesus? Is there a better way to see His people released into their destiny. If you read this book with the ideas of becoming challenged and better, you will enjoy it. This book challenges many paradigms, and if it is read to fuel division, then both Frank and I would both be disappointed. There is a tremendous work of historical evidence and truth in the book. How you use the truth in this book is the key. Walking in His love and mercy, the truth can be presented and absorbed.

I think this interview, given in 2008, will give you more on the heart and intent Frank had in writing the book. Enjoy!

Robert Ricciardelli

--

Bro.M. *Frank, thanks for agreeing to this — I always enjoy connecting around some of these subjects.*

Frank: Thanks for the opportunity to dialogue. I'm a fan of your blog so this is particularly encouraging for me.

Bro.M. *Great! So tell me something of your background, your journey to this point. You've published a number of books already and been engaged in the house church movement for some time now, isn't that right?*

Frank: I spent thirteen years in the institutional church, traversing many different denominations. I think I counted 13 different brands of church, from CMA, Southern Baptist, Independent Baptist, Presbyterian, Church of Christ, Episcopalian, Mennonite, AOG, COG, to virtually every stripe and flavor of charismatic Christianity. Add to that 5 parachurch organizations and dozens of church-sponsored Bible studies. I was intensely involved in many of

the above. And as I say in the book, I owe my salvation and my baptism to the institutional church. God has used it in my life as He has in the lives of countless others.

But in 1988, I dropped out. I gave it up for Lent. :-)

The reasons are complex. But in short, I was hungry for Jesus Christ, I was bored with church services, and I had grown weary of much of what I had seen in the churches I was a part of. I also had trouble connecting much of what went on to what I read about in the New Testament, particularly the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. To my mind, there was a disconnect between them and my church experiences.

That said, myself and a few others who also left the organized church began meeting around Jesus Christ in a simple way. At the time, we had no idea what we were doing, and we had no idea that others had forged similar paths before us. Looking back, I believe we were following our spiritual instincts. We Christians have a spiritual instinct to fellowship around Jesus Christ in a simple, relational way. As time went on, we discovered a church-life experience that I never knew existed. I call it “the organic expression of the church,” a term that owes heavily to T. Austin-Sparks.

In short, that experience wrecked me. I found Jesus Christ in depths that I never knew existed, and I found the experience of His Body in ways I never imagined.

Bro.M. *I find I'm meeting a lot of people with very similar stories about an exodus from the institutional church. A lot of us value the background, but for one reason or another don't want to be part of the institution anymore... so we're all in good company! Is when you were drawn into the house church movement, then?*

Frank: While I often speak at house church conferences, I wouldn't classify myself as a “house church” proponent. There's too much diversity in the movement. Some elements I agree with; others I do not. The movement also puts the emphasis on the wrong thing — the house. Meeting in a home doesn't make a group of Christians a church anymore than meeting in a donut shop makes them police officers. (No offense to police officers. Sorry cousin Joey!) I trust you get my point. There's nothing magical about meeting in a home. That's not the issue.

I think the same can be said about the “emerging church” movement or conversation (depending on what one wishes to label it). Many of the leaders in the emerging church are good friends of mine. I agree with certain elements of it; others I do not.

What drives me is the Lord Jesus Christ and the experience of His beloved Bride. I've made the discovery that Christ can only be known in the depths when His people live in a face-to-face community that's centered on Him. Perhaps that's not always the case; there are no doubt exceptions (Jeanne Guyon is one who comes to mind). But it's been my experience and observation that this is generally the case. We were built to love Him, know Him, experience

Him, and express Him in community, not as an individual. And that's what *ekklesia* is all about. So it seems to me anyway. To put it another way, [I believe in a deep ecclesiology](#).

Bro.M. *I like the observation about not emphasizing the house — it's the same argument as not emphasizing the "church building," which is consistent with the church being the people of God, the Bride. "Deep ecclesiology" is one of those terms we're starting to see more of, so thanks for the link to your article on it — it saves me a follow up question! So what led up to this book? It's been a long-time project for you, if I understand correctly. Tell me something about that, and about George Barna's involvement.*

Frank: Since the late '90s, I've written a number of self-published books that represent my very imperfect attempt to explain what I've discovered and experienced in the way of church life. All of those books, with the exception of "The Untold Story of the New Testament Church," have been revised, expanded, and re-written. "Pagan Christianity" is the first of those revisions. Others will follow.

This one took me about four years to write. The research was rather difficult, especially the footnoting. The original edition came out in 2002 and was released without an editor. (Gulp.) Consequently, what I thought to be humorous and witty comments were taken by some people to be strident and inflammatory. An editor pointed this out to me and for that I'm grateful. Those statements were removed from the new version.

One of the motivations for writing the book was to encourage Christians to rethink their church experience. To question their cherished traditions. To ask questions that few Christians seem to be asking. And to give God's people permission to experiment with new forms and expressions of the church which are faithful to Scripture.

When one realizes that much of what we're doing today has no root in the Word of God, it has a liberating effect. We are free to pursue the Lord corporately in fresh and creative ways.

Bro.M. *That makes good sense — the result should be freedom, not just a different set of constraints.*

Frank: My outstanding motivation is for the headship of Jesus Christ. Right or wrong, that's where my burden lies, and I'm quite jealous about it — His headship that is. I also have a lot of confidence in God's people if they are equipped and turned loose to express the Lord in creative ways. Ways that stand outside the box and color outside the lines. My experience of organic church life ruined me, and I believe that deep down inside, every Christian longs for it. "Pagan Christianity," for us at least, is designed to clear away some of the debris that we believe keeps us from experiencing what God desires all of His children to experience.

Anyway, George read the original version and wanted to publish it to get a wider audience. He went through the old manuscript and did a good deal of revising. He also contributed some new chapters, so the second swing was a collaborative effort, and it made the book much better.

While all the rhetoric in the first edition that caused some folks to have seizures have been removed, I'm told that some people are flipping out about the style. This is confusing to us because most of the feedback we've gotten has been on how gracious the spirit is behind the book. One man, a pastor of many years, said it was written "pastorally," and leads people by the hand.

A friend of mine who is part of the emerging church conversation made an interesting observation. He said that when people hear a radical message that's not just advocating tweaking the present system, but actually challenging its structural integrity and advocating a complete overhaul of it — and doing so confidently instead of insipidly — some confuse that with unsavory rhetoric and will attack the writing style.

I'm not sure. I'll simply say that we didn't write the book in the style of an arm-chair scholar. It's not a book disseminating sterile historical information. I'm someone who lives and breathes for the church of Jesus Christ. This incredible Christ has overwhelmed my life. And she, the *ekklesia*, is my passion. Therefore, the writing style and message is not just aimed at the frontal lobe, but at the heart, the spirit, and the conscience. There's passion and energy behind the book. For better or for worse, that passion is rooted in a jealousy for the centrality, supremacy, and headship of Jesus Christ and the freedom of His beloved Bride. That doesn't make me infallible in my conclusions; it just means that these issues have moved from my head to my heart. (I agree with N.T. Wright when he said that about 1/3 of what I'm telling you is probably not correct. But I don't know which 1/3 it is.)

Bro.M Frank, *I've got to confess that I struggled with the writing style a little as well — you probably saw that in my review. Ultimately I concluded that the issues are emotionally-charged, as we're all invested to some degree in the ways we've practiced our expressions of church. To shake that up can be quite disorienting! I love that perspective from N.T. Wright as well. I've heard Brian McLaren use it also, and it's a beautifully humbling posture for us when we can keep it at the forefront of our opinions. I have a cynical, sarcastic wit at times and I'm a writer as well, so I've been misunderstood with some of the things I've said and written — so I can sympathize.*

Frank: Brennan Manning is an incredible writer. I once (very literally) sat at his feet and asked him while he was seated: "As a more seasoned writer giving advice to a less seasoned writer, what is the most important piece of advice you can give me?"

His answer — "If it doesn't move you, throw it in the trash can. If it moves you, write it!"

Underneath the content of "Pagan Christianity" is what for me has been a breathtaking and electrifying vision of Christ and His church. And that vision burns within me still. It comes through the book at times as well as through my spoken ministry.

I've noticed that people who are used to objective-seminary-professor-styled-even-toned lectures often find fiery-preachers who have an emotional edge a turn-off. When I heard

Brennan Manning preach at a conference workshop last year, a few people didn't like the fact that he raised his voice while he preached nor the absolute way in which he talked about God. Most loved it, however, and they were mesmerized by the passion in his spirit. The same thing happened when I first heard Tony Campolo many years ago. He yelled, beat the podium, and gave an impassioned, fiery, high-pitched message about Jesus and the poor. Many were turned off by the style, thinking him an angry man. Others were moved greatly.

It seems we're all drawn to different styles. But I think it's counterproductive to impute base motives to a person whose style we don't like, whether in print or in speech.

I appreciate the words of A.W. Tozer on this score:

"If Christianity is to receive rejuvenation it must be by other means than any now being used. If the church in the second half of [the twentieth] century is to recover from the injuries she suffered in the first half, there must appear a new type of preacher. The proper, ruler-of-the-synagogue type will never do. Neither will the priestly type of man who carries out his duties, takes his pay and asks no questions, nor the smooth-talking pastoral type who knows how to make the Christian religion acceptable to everyone. All these have been tried and found wanting. Another kind of religious leader must arise among us. He must be of the old prophet type, a man who has seen visions of God and has heard a voice from the Throne. When he comes (and I pray God there will not be one but many) he will stand in flat contradiction to everything our smirking, smooth civilization holds dear. He will contradict, denounce and protest in the name of God and will earn the hatred and opposition of a large segment of Christendom."

Some recent movements in the Christian faith appear to be opposed to the kind of ministry-style that Tozer is speaking of, equating it somehow with arrogance and dogmatism, while others are captivated and changed by it.

Related question: Peter exhorts God's people when they minister to "speak as the oracles of God" ([1 Pet. 4:11](#)). That's a text worth discussing, I think.

On another note, it's fascinating to me how much attention this book is getting now that George's name is on it. It's like Frank Viola didn't exist before Barna... except in major league baseball of course :-). Maybe I should return to pitching!

(Disclaimer: I'm actually not the MLB pitcher of the same name (head drop). People confuse us all the time. I have been trying to swap jobs with the other Frankie V. for a while now, but he continues to decline for some reason. Sigh.)

Bro.M. *Well, don't give up on either career! I gather the reaction to the book has been mixed, to say the least. Some of the endorsements are pretty glowing, but I think I actually saw someone call you guys "antichrists" the other day. Are you surprised by this? What's been the strongest reaction or criticism?*

Frank: The overwhelming response to the book has been incredibly positive. We get encouraging letters constantly from readers.

As would be expected, the main criticisms seem to be coming from people who are invested in the institutional church somehow. I'm told that the book is making Reformed ministers scream and Fundamentalist pastors break out into apoplectic fits. As for the strongest reaction, I've been getting hate mail from Quakers and bodily threats from the Amish. Does that count? :-)

From what I've seen, some critics of the book are incredibly articulate. They are highly gifted writers — the kind of people you'd love to have in your corner if you were under attack. It's been reported that at least half the reviews are by people who didn't read the book or surface-skimmed it. (Interestingly, a friend of mine recently made the observation that "Pagan Christianity is the most reviewed book by those who haven't read it.")

Bro.M Ouch!

Frank: The main argument being made by those who haven't read it and/or who have skimmed it is that George and I are saying that everything that has pagan roots is wrong. That's not our argument at all, and we state this in the book numerous times. But I suppose it's a lot more fun (or effective in misleading others) by using straw-man arguments to discredit the book.

Before this interview, I had the privilege of speaking at a recent Emerging Church conference with Shane Claiborne and others, and I was encouraged by so many emergent folks who expressed appreciation for the book. A large number of the folks there, mostly in their 20s and 30s, also expressed deep appreciation for the message I delivered, expressing how much it impacted them. (I gave an abbreviated talk from my book [The Untold Story of the New Testament Church](#) with a focus on an indwelling Christ.) Their positive feedback was both humbling and encouraging. Many of God's people are hungering for a deeper experience of their Lord. I see it everywhere I go. Some of these folks lamented the fact that several emerging church bloggers have used the exact same tactics that John MacArthur used against my friend Brian McLaren's work in his book, "Truth War." This disappointed them monumentally. I'm thankful that most of my friends in the emerging church love the book and are supporting it.

Someone recently observed that some Christians "have pointed a pious finger at Constantine's influence on Christianity with respect to the nation-state while benightedly approving his unwholesome influence on church structure, ritual, and leadership." It's my observation that over the last 50 years, countless books have been written to try and reform the institutional church. Those books have been well received for the most part. Most of them talk about how pastors should give better sermons, how they should operate in a less-business-like fashion, how they should lead the flock more effectively, how they should pray more, how they should and can avoid getting "sheep-bite," etc. etc. etc. Elton Trueblood said, "The basic trouble [with the modern church] is that the proposed cure has such a striking similarity to the disease."

Bro.M *Now there's a phrase we could camp out on for a while, something to let sink in. But you're proposing changes — or "cures" if that's not overstating — that consist of much more fundamental changes.*

Frank: George and I have come out with a book that doesn't advocate repairing the system or tweaking the structure. Our position is that the modern pastoral office (the clergy system) just may be one of the major problems. (I think I heard dozens of computers shut off just now :-)

The book suggests that for too long we've been treating the symptoms and have failed to go to the roots. But this approach is unthinkable in the minds of many Christians. Our traditions are entrenched and even deified. J.C. Ryle put it best when he said, "Experience supplies painful proof that traditions once called into being are first called useful, then they become necessary. At last they are too often made idols, and all must bow down to them or be punished." Or perhaps Dresden James said it better: "A truth's initial commotion is directly proportional to how deeply the lie was believed. It wasn't the world being round that agitated people, but that the world wasn't flat. When a well-packaged web of lies has been sold gradually to the masses over generations, the truth will seem utterly preposterous and its speaker a raving lunatic."

Despite the fact that some don't like the message, we by conscience stand with the evidence, because that's where it has led us. Obviously, we could be wrong. At the same time, we wish that God's people would be open to the possibility that our conclusions just may be correct. I stand with John Howard Yoder's critique when he said, "The whole concern of Reformation theology was to justify restructuring the organized church without shaking its foundations." "Pagan Christianity" seeks to shake some of its foundations.

By the way, while we're on the subject of name-calling, I don't usually fancy people defending me. I have a friend who wrote me recently and said, "Frankie V., I saw this guy on a blog say that you were a heretic, that you are not a Christian, and that you are a poor writer. I want you to know that I defended you... I told him that you are a good writer!" :-) At the same time, what Martin Luther King Jr. said is right on: "It's not the words of our enemies that we remember the most; it's the silence of our friends."

Bro.M *Well Frank, my raving-lunatic friend, I need to pause for a coffee refill. Can I get you one as well? What about the rest of you — what do you think about the controversy around the book, and the way that we deal with intra-faith critique? Wait, maybe that's a good term, something we forget... intra- rather than extra- or inter-faith. What do you think?*

Bro.M. *Getting into some of the specifics of the book, I of course had a number of questions as I read through it, and there are naturally many points we could clarify or discuss at length. To pick a starting-point though, must church planters be itinerant? The book suggests this is the model or "divine pattern", but what about a couple of neighbors that want to start a house church? Would they need outside help or would they not be formally considered church planters unless they became itinerant? What does the ministry of an itinerant church planter look like today?*

Frank: You really know how to ask questions, don't you? Let me tell you, the book needs a lot of clarifying. We're dealing with an extremely entrenched mindset. My friend who is an ex-pastor made an arresting statement recently. He said that some people are reading this book through the grid of their church experience and understanding. And for that reason they are missing some of the main points. Perhaps this is true. I think another part of it is that we just touch on some issues and don't develop them. That's one of the reasons why [a series of books will follow "Pagan Christianity."](#) The other books will develop many of the issues we touch on.

Even so, I'm a perfectionist when it comes to my books. I cannot open up a book of mine without seeing all the shortcomings and flaws in it. What runs through my mind on virtually every page is, "I could have said that much better; I could have added this point; I could have changed this wording; this paragraph is horrible — what was I thinking?" It's a curse.

Now with tongue firmly planted in cheek, I shall use my prophetic insight and anticipate that someone is going to lift the above statement out of context and say, "See, Viola doesn't even agree with his own book. He admits it's flawed. So to prevent confusion for the people reading this interview, I agree with the entire book. But I'm my own worst critic. In this regard, I'm very much like the novelist E.L. Doctorow who said that he would not read one of his books for an entire year after it was published because he would find every possible fault with it. (Three cheers for Mr. Doctorow!)

Bro.M. *He's not the only writer who does something similar — when I began freelance writing, I complained to a writer-friend about how an article I'd written came out after editing; she told me she never read her articles after submission! I think most of us who write will always want to make "just one more set" of revisions — a few more additions that we missed.*

Frank: On the second reprint, we're going to add more Q&A to address some of the most common questions that people are asking. We have a [preview of many of them online](#).

Back to your earlier question: I'm not sure I can answer it successfully in this short space. I'll try to summarize, but this may raise more questions than it answers.

I believe the apostolic ministry in the NT is itinerant. Apostles sometimes stayed in cities for lengthy periods of time to lay the foundation for a new Christian community (the Twelve in Jerusalem for 4 years, Paul in Corinth for 18 months and in Ephesus for 3 years). But eventually they left and went to other places to preach Christ and establish new Christian communities.

Apostles are "sent ones." They, like Jesus Christ (the first apostle), travel. NT scholar Robert Banks makes this point wonderfully in his book, [Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Cultural Setting](#) — a classic in its field. He draws a distinction between "the work" and "the church" in NT usage. The work is itinerant; the church is local. That doesn't mean that non-apostles don't or can't play a role in establishing organic Christian communities. There is what I call the work of "site preparation" before a foundation is laid by an apostolic worker. Cornelius, Priscilla and Aquila, Philip the evangelist in Samaria, and "the man of peace"

that Jesus spoke about in the Gospels are examples of those who prepared the site in the NT era. But the NT militates against the idea that all Christians are apostolic workers (1 Cor. 12:28ff.). And that's a good thing to my mind. There are few ministries that a Christian can be called to that are as difficult and as demanding as that one.

Bro.M. *Indeed. You mentioned in the book that the church does not exist for the purpose of evangelism, but for community. This might perhaps have been a side-issue to the book, but how would you describe the fundamental purpose of the church?*

Frank: It's a bit more involved than existing for community, I think. When I was a young Christian, I was taught that the only reason why I existed was to win souls. And that if it weren't for that, God would strike me dead and take me to heaven after I received Jesus. That idea was expanded in several of the evangelical denominations I was a part of. The whole purpose of those churches was to save others from hell. That's it. Historically, this theology can be traced to D.L. Moody who was an incredibly gifted evangelist and a great man.

I would agree with people like DeVern Fromke and T. Austin-Sparks as well as Gilbert Bilezikian and the late Stanley Grenz. God has an eternal purpose that finds its headwaters in the Trinity before creation. And that purpose is centered on His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and His Body, the church. That purpose goes beyond salvation. Note that God created human beings not in need of salvation. There was something else that He intended for humans and His creation — something beyond the Fall and redemption. (I love N.T. Wright's emphasis on this as well and appreciate the work he's doing immensely. We had a lot of time to talk at a recent conference where we both spoke, and we share a great deal of agreement on Paul's ministry.)

Consequently, at the heart of the eternal purpose is the Divine impulse to expand the fellowship of the Trinitarian community on the earth and to display the glories, riches, and wonders of Jesus Christ through an every-member functioning Body — a Christ-centered and Christ-driven community that expresses the fullness of God visibly to all creation, including principalities and powers. The church, I believe, is called to bear God's image in the earth (Christ), and to exercise His dominion (bring His Kingdom) on the earth. But all of this is from Him, through Him, by Him, and to Him. It's for God, and not for us. We benefit of course; but what's in it "for Him" is what should drive us. That's a lot to unpack. I seek to develop this thought in my book [From Eternity to Here](#).

Evangelism is something she, the *ekklesia*, does naturally and organically when she's been raised up properly. That is, when she's given a steady diet of Christ. It's part of her mission in the earth. But it's not the whole mission. That's not arm chair philosophy — I've watched it happen dozens of times. For me, there are few things more glorious than to watch a group of Christians who deeply love one another share Jesus Christ with others in deed and word without guilt, condemnation, or any obligation whatsoever. And to do it without being commanded or pressured to.

Bro.M. *I remember being told it was all about “winning souls,” with the implication that I needed to be doing my part... it seemed a little narrow for me. Shifting gears a bit, There’s a great quote from Philip Hanson at the introduction to chapter 5 in the book, about reading back into earlier church practices and attaching theological explanations that didn’t exist at the time. In ascribing motives around the origins of some of the practices you highlight in the book, do you think you’ve done that at all not so much with the first century church, but with the church at later stages in history?*

Frank: Our arguments are largely based on the findings of reputable scholars and historians of the past as well as our readings of first-hand source materials. I suppose that each reader will have to decide if we are painting an accurate picture of history or not. We just want them to interact with the actual arguments and the scholarship behind it, rather than dismissing it out of hand because they may not like the conclusions we reach. I personally covet constructive feedback that actually interacts with the points we’ve made. That’s what healthy discussion is all about, I think.

I’m not beyond correction and appreciate it when someone can show me based on hard evidence where I’ve missed something. It encourages me personally that some heavy weight scholars have endorsed the book. That’s no small thing in my eyes, and I regard it as confirmation that we haven’t lost our marbles. Not yet, anyway! :-)

Bro.M. *Speaking of the source materials, I was curious that I didn’t see any mention of the Didache in the text or footnotes, but as a glimpse of second-century commentary on itinerant ministry and church practice, I would have expected to see it discussed. Was the omission deliberate, and if so, why?*

Frank: The *Didache* is an interesting piece of literature. One of the striking things it shows us is that itinerant ministry was still going on during the second century. We didn’t use it for two reasons. First, we didn’t find anything in it that can be traced as a first-mention origin. “Pagan Christianity” seeks to trace the origins for church practices. So that pursuit is what mostly governs which sources we selected. Itinerant church planting is a topic we only touch upon; it’s not part of the book’s thesis so we don’t develop it. Second, I agree with most scholars that it was written during the first half of the second century. That said, it’s not something that we should hold up as canonical, inspired, or as embodying God’s will for the church. The same would be true for the epistles of Clement of Rome, Barnabas, Justin Martyr, etc. Informative history; but not to be put on a par with the New Testament.

By the way, we don’t argue in the book that the church began going off the rails during the time of Constantine. We believe it was much earlier. We point out that the one-bishop rule began in a few places as early as the early second century. Greco-Roman influences were beginning to mix with the well of the Christian stream well before Constantine. Constantine, however, solidified, enhanced, and universalized much of it.

Here’s a pertinent quote by James D.G. Dunn:

“Increasing institutionalism is the clearest mark of early Catholicism — when church becomes increasingly identified with institution, when authority becomes increasingly coterminous with office, when a basic distinction between clergy and laity becomes increasingly self-evident, when grace becomes increasingly narrowed to well-defined ritual acts. We saw above that such features were absent from first generation Christianity, though in the second generation the picture was beginning to change.”

Bro.M. *I was surprised at your inclusion of references to works by Watchman Nee to further explain some of your points. Although a strong influence for a cell church structure, he was also quite authoritarian or hierarchical in his conception of the authority of church leaders, and some of his thinking in this area later informed the shepherding movement and the doctrine of “covering.” I know you’ve written against some of these things, but how do you reconcile Watchman Nee? Are there specific works or areas with which you agree or disagree?*

Frank: Like most Christian workers whom God raised up to begin a new work, Watchman Nee has been slandered, maligned, and misrepresented. The biography written by Angus Kinnear is one of the best treatments of his life. It’s entitled [Against the Tide](#). I highly recommend it.

One of my mentors was a co-worker of Brother Nee, and I’ve spoken to many who knew him and his work in China. To my mind, he was one of the great Christians of the 20th century. He was an apostolic worker who was incredibly gifted. I suggest that anyone who aspires to church planting read his book [The Normal Christian Church Life](#). To my mind, it’s a classic.

During the 1970s, some gifted charismatic leaders in South Florida took one of Nee’s books and used it to spawn an authoritarian movement. The book was misapplied and misinterpreted in my view. That particular book was a series of talks given by Nee to his church planting co-workers at a time when the Communists were about to take over China. If you remove the book from that context, the book becomes lethal. And that’s how it was used unfortunately. Juan Carlos Ortiz from South America warned these men not to run with it. He said it worked for them in South America; it may not work in America. His warning was... I won’t finish the sentence.

I believe that any Christian who reads [these titles by Nee](#) will be greatly enriched by his ministry. I’d make them “required reading” for any person who has a burden to plant churches or be involved in God’s work. Or anyone who is seeking a deeper understanding of the Lord and His ultimate intention. I don’t agree with everything Nee taught; but much of it is right on.

Bro.M. *So you would say the Fort Lauderdale Five misunderstood and misapplied Nee by removing his writing from its immediate context — certainly the effects were devastating, and it underscores the need to understand the context of the writing. I think this is on point with the whole discussion of looking at the origins of various practices in their original contexts. In the book, you use the example of a chair being of pagan origin to say that not everything is evil by origin. If Nee has both good and bad teaching such that we shouldn’t disqualify his work based on its source alone, isn’t it possible that some of the “pagan” origins you describe in the book*

are neutral and not evil as you often imply? How do you know which are evil and which are neutral?

Frank: Certainly, there are extra-biblical practices, some invented by pagans, that are neutral. No question about it. We mention some in the book. Readers should remember that the book seeks to trace the origin of all of our major Protestant church practices. Some of them we believe are neutral. Others, however, we feel suppress the church from functioning as God intended her to function. We make this distinction in the book at the end of each chapter. But there is something deeper that the book addresses that's often missed. The book exposes the "pagan mind" that stands behind many of our contemporary church practices. And that mind is at odds with the mind of God.

For example, as we explore the origins of the church building, we show that there's heavy pagan philosophy involved. The church building did not come into existence to accommodate more Christians for a gathering. It was built upon pagan thinking about "the sacred space" that emerged from the cult of the dead. The chapter on the clergy explores the pagan mind behind the professional religionist (which John H. Yoder waxed eloquent about) and the false dichotomy between the secular and the spiritual. The chapter on Christian education shows the influence of Greek philosophy on the Christian faith in creating systematic theology and equating head-knowledge with spiritual stature. The mind of Christ runs contrary to all of this. And that's a major point that the book makes. Christianity is not a Western religion nor a Greek or Roman philosophy. It's a new life form that emerges out of God Himself.

The pagan mind just didn't seep into some of the periphery and neutral aspects of the Christian faith. It was brought straight into the very fabric of our entire church experience. So much so that "church" itself has been re-defined in terms of Greco-Roman thought and practice. Let's be honest — most Christians have the idea that church means going into a sacred building called a "church" and hearing a sermon from an ordained clergyman once or twice a week. That's church. "I've been to church today," the thinking goes. We are suggesting that this concept has little points of contact with the teachings of Jesus and the apostles.

Just this weekend, one of my co-workers shared a story about his 4 year-old granddaughter. She was attending vacation Bible school for the first time. He asked her what she had learned that day. Her response was, "I learned that when we come into church and sit in the house of God, we have to be very quiet. We need to sit in the puke and not make any noise." So at age 4, our children are taught that the church is a building. It's the house of God. And we need to be very quiet when we sit in the puke. (Puke = pew by the way; I'm quoting her verbatim. Gotta love it!) :-)

That's not Christian thinking. Constantine still lives and breathes in our minds. I believe uncovering the pagan origins behind the church building is important because it shows us why Christians have been treating buildings as "sacred" and have called them "the house of God" for centuries. This influence did not come from the Old Testament, and we demonstrate this in the book.

How do we determine whether or not a pagan practice is neutral (or can be redeemed) from those that are harmful? For me, it's by assessing it against these questions: Does it violate the organic nature of the church? Does it stand in contraction to the nature of God? Does it suppress or rival the headship of Jesus Christ? Is it in conflict with a NT principle, teaching, or doctrine? Is it in conflict with the teachings of Jesus and the apostles? Does it oppress God's people? Does it suppress the Body of Christ from functioning? Does it steal her freedom in Christ?, etc.

Bro.M *Love the "puke" story! Again, it feels like we're just scratching the surface of this whole question of a practice's origins being good, bad, neutral, or redeemable. And as with Watchman Nee, other things can be lifted and twisted in the retelling, to great benefit or detriment. So to the rest of the table(s) around the coffee shop here, what observations would you make about Watchman Nee and pagan/secular origins? What about apostles? There's a subject that can inflict a lot of damage if it's paired with a wrong understanding of authority... We'll pause a bit in case anyone else needs another coffee refill.*

Bro.M. *Where does contextualization of the gospel and the expression of church fit in? You mention in the book that church meetings in the first century embodied their culture, while those from later times drew from their culture and you labeled it as being of pagan origin. What's the difference?*

Frank: Great question — this is a large topic. In short, when we look at the New Testament and we read about the church of Century One, we can draw a distinction between two kinds of practices: Cultural practices and Organic practices.

Cultural practices would be those practices that are tied to first-century culture. For instance, the Gentile believers spoke Greek, they didn't have Bibles, they met early in the morning so that the slaves could gather before work, they used torches to light up the rooms when they met in the evenings or early mornings, etc.

Organic practices are those practices that are tied to the DNA of the church. They embody the theology of the New Testament (e.g., the priesthood of all believers, the church as family, etc.), and they express the visible image of the invisible God (the Trinitarian Community). When we say "first-century practices" we are often using that as a synonym for "the organic expression of the church." These practices are built upon the spiritual principles that transcend time and culture. Some examples are the every-member functioning of the Body, the oneness of the Body, authentic community, the headship of Jesus Christ, every member is a minister and a priest, etc.

We are essentially arguing that many of the practices that make up the modern, institutional church were borrowed from Greco-Roman culture. We argue that they not only have no root in New Testament principles, but in many cases, they actually violate the DNA of the church. They run contrary to the organic expression of the Body of Christ. Not to mention that they are outdated for our time — since many of them date back to the third, fourth, and fifth centuries.

A perfect example is the clergy/laity class distinction, and its cousin, the secular/spiritual dichotomy. In the book we trace these disconnects historically and show that they have pagan roots. But we go further. We show how and when these dichotomies infiltrated the church. Finally, we show how they do not square with the organic nature of the church, violate New Testament teaching, and in the end, prove harmful to the Body of Christ.

In short, those practices of the first-century church that are reflections of the DNA of the church, express its organic nature, embody New Testament theology, and spring out of the life of the Triune God ought not to be ignored or over-contextualized to the point that they disappear. It's interesting to me that some people wave the "contextualization" flag when it is convenient for them to ignore a NT teaching or principle; yet these same people will wave the "we're not being faithful to Jesus" flag when something doesn't line up with their doctrines or practices. This often happens at an unconscious level; we're not always in touch with it until someone points it out to us.

Richard Halverson waxed eloquent on the tendency to over-contextualize saying, "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." F.F. Bruce did the same when he wrote,

"The restatement of the gospel in a new idiom is necessary in every generation — as necessary as its translation into new languages. [But] In too much that passes for restatement of the gospel, the gospel itself disappears, and the resultant product is what Paul would have called 'another gospel which in fact is no gospel at all' (Gal. 1:6f.). When the Christian message is so thoroughly accommodated to the prevalent climate of opinion that it becomes one more expression of that climate of opinion, it is no longer the Christian message."

The following can be said using Bruce's penetrating observation: "When the church is so thoroughly accommodated to the prevalent climate of opinion that it becomes one more expression of that climate of opinion, it is no longer the church as God envisioned her to be."

In George's introduction on page xxix, I added the following words to distinguish between organic practices and cultural practices: "Therefore, adhering to the principles of the New Testament does not mean reenacting the events of the first-century church. If so, we would have to dress like all first-century believers did, in sandals and togas!" In the next volume, [Reimagining Church](#), I plan to discuss the whole issue of contextualization in more detail.

Incidentally, when we speak of the early church in reference to its organic expression, we're not talking about the various problems that some Christians had in the early churches (as in the church in Corinth). We are not saying, "let's get drunk at the Lord's Supper." We are rather speaking of the leadership structure of the church and the way the Christians gathered. They were face-to-face, organic, non-authoritarian, non-hierarchical, non-institutional, Christ-centered communities that purposed to express the Lord Jesus in their locales. Such churches

will always have problems... then and now. But those problems don't have to change the design of the church.

Bro.M. *I think that's an important distinction... we don't want to romanticize the first-century church too much and miss its faults. If it weren't for some of those faults, we'd be missing out on some valuable parts of the New Testament! So shifting gears a bit and picking up on the earlier mention of apostles, there was another point that might not have been clear in the book. Do only apostles preach? And then only gospel-invitational messages? "Apostles" are becoming a current topic again — can you comment more on how you see the role of the apostle?*

Frank: I believe that the apostolic ministry is essentially a community-founding ministry. Apostles are called, trained and sent to plant the *ekklesia*. They lay the foundation of Jesus Christ among a group of people. They equip, train, and then leave the church on its own under the headship of Jesus. This principle is best seen in the ministry of Paul. But it's also seen in the ministry of the other apostles as well, including Barnabas, Timothy, Titus, etc. (all of whom are called "apostles" in the NT).

I believe the principle of apostolic ministry can be traced back to the Triune God. At bottom, God purposed to expand the fellowship of Father, Son and Spirit to human beings. That's apostolic ministry at its root. Its goal is to establish visible communities on earth that reflect the Trinitarian Community in the heavens. I believe this ministry is part of the church's DNA — her organic nature. All the gifts and ministries mentioned in the New Testament are like the natural features on a human body. They organically emerge just as eyebrows and fingernails organically develop on a baby — just as long as the child is cared for properly.

No, apostles aren't the only ones who preach. Evangelists and prophets also preach. I've also seen new Christians preach who were fired up for Jesus Christ. "All can prophesy," as Paul writes. But that doesn't make all prophets. Apostles preach; but preaching doesn't make one an apostle. "Pagan Christianity" uncovers the modern sermon, tracing its roots and challenging its effectiveness. As we state in the book, the sermon is not the equivalent of preaching and teaching. The sermon, as we define it, is basically a particular form of speaking that's given by the same person (who is usually paid) to the same passive audience week after week, year after year, without end. That's what we're challenging in the book on biblical grounds, historical grounds, and spiritual/pragmatic grounds.

Bro.M. *Makes sense. Now, you mention in chapter 11 that the Great Commission is actually a prophecy, not a command. What does this mean for how we have viewed those passages in the past and how we should deal with them now?*

Frank: There are a number of scholars who point this out from the Greek. If you read Wuest, for example, in his translation of the Bible, in all three places where "the commission" appears, it's not a command but a prophecy.

That simply tells me that the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the making of disciples is an organic thing. It's not a legal duty or religious obligation. You will never find any apostle in the NT telling God's people to go out and witness or evangelize. It's what she, the church, does when she's given Christ to be her life, her food, her drink, her air, and her light — all the things that Jesus said He was in the book of John. When the church lives by Christ, she makes disciples. I'm of the opinion that many Christians have never been taught how to live by an indwelling Lord. We are so often taught "follow Jesus", "do what He did," but we somehow neglect to ask the question: "How did Jesus live the Christian life?" "What was the engine that drove His life; what was the energy and force behind His behavior?"

I believe that's a critical question. If we read the Gospels with an eye to discovering an answer, we will be amazed to find how often He speaks of an internal relationship with an indwelling God. Jesus lived by an indwelling Father. He made it clear that He could do nothing without His Father (John 5). He then turned around and said to us that we can do nothing without Him (John 15). Since Pentecost, the passage has moved from Jesus to the church. What God the Father was to Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ is to us. He's our indwelling Lord. We live by Him. That's not an individual pursuit (as Protestantism has emphasized); it's a corporate journey and a corporate experience. "Christ our life" is a major theme of the New Testament. Yet so many of us have seemed to miss this. I know I did for a long time.

Bro.M. *I understand you've got another book coming out later this year. What can you tell me about that one? Is it an extension of the themes you've introduced in Pagan Christianity, or are you moving on to other topics?*

Frank: Yes, I do. Three more books will follow "Pagan Christianity." They will attempt to answer the major questions that readers have been asking after reading "Pagan," such as:

- Is the church really a spiritual organism or is it a human institution?
- If it's an organism, what does that mean practically? Is that just a theory, a doctrine, a theology or does it have practical implications?
- What can we learn from the first century church, if anything?
- What is normative vs. descriptive in the NT church? And how do we determine the difference?
- Does the NT give us any clear guidance on church life and practice? If so, what and how can we discover it?
- What is organic church life and how does it express itself today?
- How are organic churches planted?
- Where can I find an organic expression of the church?
- Can the institutional church be renovated? If so, how? If not, why not?
- If I'm a leader in a traditional church and I agree with your main points, what are my alternatives?
- And many more...

Note that “Pagan Christianity” was never meant to be an isolated book that answers all questions. It is meant to be a polemic, a deconstructive work that leaves readers time and space to absorb and grapple with a simple question: *Is it possible that many of our staple church practices do not reflect God’s original intention for His church?* There’s a lot of language among the OT prophets about “breaking up, tearing down, rooting out” before there can be a “building new, planting new, and starting new.” “Pagan Christianity” can be viewed as a sledge hammer to help break up, tear down, and root out, while the other books in the series can be viewed as a stab at planting new seed and laying a new foundation. By the way, Tyndale has just released a helpful discussion guide that goes along with “Pagan Christianity.” It can be downloaded freely at paganchristianity.org.

I really appreciate this opportunity, Brother Maynard. I’m honored by it. Can I ask a question of you now... *what’s your real name??*

Bro.M. **cough* Oh, my, look at the time! Thanks again for the interview, Frank — sorry, gotta run! ;^)*

Really, I was just kidding on that last part — Frank has my real name, but he’s been sworn to secrecy! So this wraps up the interview and the end of “Pagan Week”—held over.

See also [Answers to Questions on Pagan Christianity & Reimagining Church](#)

--

Frank Viola is the author of several books on radical church restoration including *From Eternity to Here*, *Finding Organic Church*, *Reimagining Church*, *Jesus Manifesto* (co-authored with Leonard Sweet) along with *Pagan Christianity?* (co-authored with George Barna) and *The Untold Story of the New Testament Church*. You can find him at his website <http://www.ptmin.org>.