

The Thin Edge hosts joint interview with Barna & Viola

Several weeks ago, I announced that [The Thin Edge](#) would be hosting the very first blog interview of George Barna and Frank Viola, co-authors of the new book, [Pagan Christianity: Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices](#). Their eye-opening book has been printed under the Barna imprint of Tyndale House Publishing and officially launched earlier this month (2008).



If someone had predicted five or six years ago that these two men would collaborate on any type of book, I might have questioned your sanity and I would almost certainly have been willing to dismiss such a proposal as total nonsense. I had read books by both authors and at least from my perspective they seemed miles apart. In my mind, Frank Viola was the stereotypical, iconoclastic, “house church” advocate whose writings were relatively unknown in mainstream evangelicalism; however, nearly every American evangelical had the words “George Barna” etched in their minds through repeated quotations from [The Barna Group](#) in sermons, seminars, denominational training sessions, seminary classrooms, as well as print media. Well, all that has now changed!

Before we get started with the interview, I want to express my appreciation to George and Frank for their willingness to answer my questions. Each brother brings a unique perspective to [Pagan Christianity](#), yet they have found common ground and a common voice within the pages of this project. One thing is certain: you will not be able to read this book and simply walk away unchanged by its message. Well, let’s get started, shall we?



Bill Lollar: In the introductory pages of [Pagan Christianity](#), I sense different agendas being set forth by each of you. Frank, you seem more focused on identifying and removing the unbiblical church practices, stating that these things are preventing Jesus Christ from being the head of the church. George, you seem more focused on the individual’s journey into a vital relationship with God. Would each of you be willing to discuss what you bring to the discussion in [Pagan Christianity](#)?

George Barna: When you have a book with more than one author, you ideally want each author to bring something different to the process. Our vision is fully compatible: that people would honor God by being the Church and through their church-group experiences. That entails both one’s relationship with God and one’s experiences and practices as part of the body of Christ. If our introductions said the same thing, there would be no reason to publish two of them; and if each of us brought the same material to the book, there would be no reason for two authors. We are different people, with

divergent backgrounds and ministry experiences, but I don't see that as suggesting different agendas.

Frank Viola: George and I worked on the entire book together, including the introduction and preface. So I don't think there are two different agendas. Perhaps a different emphasis; but not agendas. The book is written with one voice. I guess I would say that my main emphasis behind the book is on challenging those things that prevent the church from functioning the way God intended her to function. Much of that relates to authentic community, the headship, centrality, and supremacy of Jesus Christ, the freedom of God's people, etc.



Bill: In the chapter on church buildings, Martin Luther is cited as an example of a Reformer who taught “that the church was not a building or an institution. Yet it would have been impossible for him to overturn more than a millennium of confusion on the subject.” What makes you think we're in a better position today, five hundred years later, to take on such an institutional mindset?

George: The fundamental question is not whether we're in a better position today to address this matter, but whether it is still a matter that needs to be addressed. Obviously, it is! The challenge remains: what has man created as a felt need that stands in the way of our ever-deepening relationship with God? Whatever it may be needs to be confronted at any period of history during which we become aware of such an issue.

Frank: The Anabaptists functioned quite well without buildings, a clergy, and rituals that is until they were slaughtered all over Europe. Unfortunately, Luther and his followers had a hand in persecuting them mercilessly. You can read the tragic story in the book, The Secret of the Strength. Be that as it may, we are living in a time where there is monumental spiritual dissatisfaction with the traditional form of church. The fact that millions of Christians no longer attend the institutional church is clear evidence of this. Reggie McNeal 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.” Despite the criticisms that have been launched against Pagan Christianity from some quarters, the overwhelming response has been incredibly positive. The most frequent response we've gotten sounds like this: “I've always known something was wrong with the modern church, but your book has given me language to understand and communicate what that something was. I feel set free!”



Bill: It seems difficult to find examples of successful deconstruction and/or reformation today; and some people advocate leaving all forms of church structure behind, including the house church or even the organic church model. Can you guys point to specific examples where existing congregations have begun moving toward a more first-century model?

Frank: One of the misconceptions regarding the book is that we are suggesting that people return to a primitivistic “model” of church. That’s not true. I personally believe that there is no perfect “model” of church, and I don’t think the NT contains any ironclad model. Instead, I believe the church is organic. And as an organism, she will express herself in certain ways. Namely, she will be a face-to-face community, she will make Christ her head, she will center herself on Jesus, all her members will function, she will not erect a clergy nor many of the other traditions we trace and challenge in Pagan Christianity. Our book doesn’t offer solutions nor does it give any specific prescriptions. Other upcoming books will do that. We want people to first absorb the startling message of Pagan Christianity, which is quite simple: That which we’ve believed to be Biblical for so long is in fact unbiblical. In answer to your other question, I know of many groups of Christians throughout the world that are seeking to be church in an organic way.

George: There are many house church or simple church groups that are very much spirited, loving communities of faith and which will always remain below the radar of the media because they are not institutional or market-driven. I am also impressed by some of the intentional communities I have encountered in recent years, in which people have abandoned their comfortable suburban lifestyle to move to areas, in the company of other like-minded believers, to be the Church in a location lacking the physical presence of Christ. The biggest challenge, of course, is to resist the temptation to become a new institution, but rather to remain structurally simple and sensitive to the leadership of the Holy Spirit.



Bill: Frank, a number of your critics have taken exception to your opening statement in the acknowledgments: “Not long after I left the institutional church to begin gathering with Christians in New Testament fashion.” What may sound to you as a simple statement of your personal journey communicates something akin to arrogant elitism to others. What do you and George make of the charge that you have become something akin to terrorists who are bent on destroying the contemporary church as she exists today?

Frank: I don’t know anyone who interpreted that statement the way you’re suggesting except for one clergyman who quoted it in a way that isn’t reflected in the book. (He added a word or two to it.) I’m very much against pride and elitism. In fact, my humility prevents me from telling you just how humble I am <grin>. I tend to think that we’re on very dangerous ground to impute motives to someone’s heart because of the way they may phrase a sentence. Jesus had some strong words to say about judging people’s hearts. I’ll admit that I have to check myself against doing the same thing when I read other people’s material. It’s a very human, though fallen, thing to do.

Second, I would not refer to the contemporary church structure as a “she.” In the book, we are not using the terms “contemporary church” or “institutional church” to refer to God’s people. We are using those terms to refer to a “structure” a particular “system.” That’s where some of the confusion lies, I think. People equate a service, a building, an

institution, a system, and a denomination with the ekklesia. But such thinking is at odds with the New Testament usage of the word “church.”

In the book, we are simply challenging this system and structure on biblical and historical grounds. Our arguments aren’t really new at all. In fact, we quote a plethora of scholars and theologians along with the leaders of the Radical Reformation who said the same things. And while George and I have been called “anti-Christ” since the book came out, I don’t recall anyone calling us “terrorists.” But I suppose I’ll take that title over “anti-Christ” ... just don’t call me lukewarm! <smile>. In short, I fell in love with the church after I saw and experienced a living, breathing expression of the Bride of Christ without the religious trappings that so often veils her beauty. To borrow a phrase from Charlie Rich, the ekklesia is the most beautiful girl in the world. And setting her free is one of the main motivations behind the book.

George: The entire book is written out of a sense of compassion for the body of Christ not out of a desire to destroy anything other than that which stands between us and Christ. Theologically, of course, it is ridiculous to believe that we could destroy the contemporary church as it exists today. God’s Church will prevail against all manner of confrontation. But realize that what Frank and I are opposing is not God’s Church but man’s practices and habits that have replaced the true Church. I don’t think wanting to restore purity to our relationship with God and to our faith practices, and doing so through open and honest conversation and confrontation of the facts, makes us terrorists. Except, perhaps, to those whose own kingdoms feel threatened.



Bill: The main targets of your books identified by nine specific chapters represent virtually everything that happens on a typical Sunday morning in congregations around the world: church buildings, the order of worship, the sermon, the pastor, Sunday morning costumes, ministers of music, tithing and clergy salaries, baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and Christian education. If these things were immediately jettisoned in response to your book, what do you think would happen?

Frank: Just one word of clarification for those who fell out of their chair when they read your list 😊. We believe in baptism and the Lord’s Supper (please read that sentence again 😊). We simply point out in the book that the way they are practiced today has few points of contact with New Testament teaching and example. My only answer to your question is that many people have left these practices behind who have read the book, and they are now exploring fresh and creative ways to be the church with others in ways that (they believe) are more faithful to the teachings of Jesus and the apostles.

I receive many emails from people who have testified to the above. I also receive emails every week from pastors who are having a major crisis of conscience as a result of reading the book. Perhaps someday I’ll post those letters (with their permission of course), because they are fascinating. If nothing else, they demonstrate that the book is

striking a chord in the hearts and minds of many Christians, including leaders in the institutional church. My hope is that the Lord will gain much for Himself through it.

George: If your scenario occurred, one of the healthiest things imaginable would happen: we would have to go back to the original documents provided by God to discover what He intended in the first place! In my own experience, that was the starting place for our house church: assuming that we had to begin at square one and rediscover what church means, in its various manifestations. We spent several months studying the scriptures together, praying for guidance, wisdom and courage, and emerged with many insights that drew us to a completely different approach to our relationship with God, each other and society than we had entered the process possessing. When you become scared to examine yourself whether in relation to practices or beliefs you're probably in danger of losing sight of your real purpose.



Bill: There are many wonderfully gifted believers who with utmost sincerity and great sacrifice have invested their entire lives in the institutional church system. I'm talking primarily about pastors, church staff, denominational staff, and missionaries around the world. What will happen to these brothers and sisters if your book brings the impact you have both expressed a desire for? Do we have any obligation toward these servants of the Lord?

George: The danger inherent in your question is the assumption that because good people have engaged in bad practices, we have to grandfather in their errant practices, as a means of protecting them. If these are, as you suggest, gifted, sincere, godly people, who are truly committed to doing what is right for God, then achieving a better understanding of their situation is in their best interests. And, as gifted people who understand faith and want to serve people well, they will find abundant opportunities to continue to serve with impact. Our society is very needy; those who love God and His people will have ample chances to utilize their skills and experiences in ways that bless others.

Frank: Yes, in order to help pastors and leaders who are struggling with the question the book raises, namely, the unbiblical nature of the clergy/laity system and the paid professional minister, some of my friends and I have created an ["Ex-Pastors" web page](#). That page includes an [Ex-Pastors Survival Guide](#) along with personal testimonies from pastors who left the pastor system. Some of the letters that pastors have written us in response have brought some of us to tears.



Bill: You equate "organic church life" as the model set forth within the New Testament and you define that model as "a grassroots experience that is marked by face-to-face community, every-member functioning, open participatory meetings, nonhierarchical leadership, and the centrality and supremacy of Jesus Christ as the functional leader and head of the group." Your definition puts nearly every existing church in the unenviable position of not qualifying as a true ecclesia (or church) of Jesus Christ. Is this your intention?

Could you speak to the alienation that Pagan Christianity must be creating in the hearts and minds of those who read it?

Frank: If I may quote from the book, we say, “There is no blueprint or model that we can tease out of the New Testament by extracting verses and trying to imitate them mechanically. The church of Jesus Christ is a biological, living entity! It is organic; therefore, it must be born.”

If there is “alienation” going on, I’ve not seen it. What my co-workers and I are seeing is that hundreds of people are sending emails and letters saying that they are so thankful for the book because it’s setting them free from things that they have been in bondage to for years. Some of these people have left the institutional church years ago to gather with other Christians in a simple way, and the book has given them “Scriptural permission,” as it were, to do what they are doing now.

As to your other question, I’ll let the great theologian Emil Brunner answer it. This, of course, is his opinion. He writes, “The New Testament ‘Ecclesia,’ the fellowship of Jesus Christ, is a pure communion of persons and has nothing to do with the character of an institution about it; it is therefore misleading to identify any single one of the historically developed churches with the true Christian communion.” For me the real question is, what does the Word of God say about the practice of the church and how can we be more faithful to it? That’s the one I’d like to explore. And I plan on doing so in my next book.

George: For a lot of readers, the greatest value of the book may be in causing them to re-evaluate what authentic ecclesia is. That will be an uncomfortable journey for some; it certainly has been for me. But when it comes to the things of God, many of us prefer confronting the unvarnished truth to accepting historically or culturally filtered truth.



Bill: What do you think about Christians living totally outside the box of organized religion, including the organic model that the book promotes? I’m referring to the Revolutionaries, because if your [George’s] research proves accurate, that’s where a lot of believers could be in the next twenty years. Can’t meeting weekly with the same group of believers become boring, ritualistic, and unfulfilling?

George: Absolutely, which is why it’s so important to have the spirit of the living God at the heart of the group. When God is truly present and is given the opportunity to orchestrate our times together, it is unimaginable that things will become boring, ritualistic and unfulfilling. Keeping God at the center of things has always been a critical issue for the Church, regardless of the approach people have taken to facilitating communal faith. Make no mistake about it; we’re not saying that it is necessarily easy for a group of believers to remain in a proper and dynamic relationship with God. But that is certainly the expectation God has of us that if we truly love Him and want to grow in our

relationship with Him, we will respect Him enough to allow Him to lead us to places we could never hope to reach on our own.

Frank: I've been meeting and working with organic churches for the last twenty years. And this is what I've discovered during that time. If a church is operating according to her organic nature, and she's being encouraged from time to time to remain true to it, she won't get stuck in dead rituals. Instead, she will be very flexible, she will be seasonal, she will be elastic, and she will adjust herself according to the need and the season. It's when her members pull away from the life of God, which is ever fresh and new, that the church will then move into the rote, and the rote can turn into bondage.

Be sure to check out the constructive sequel, [Reimagining Church](#)

[Return to Present Testimony Ministry](#)