

## **J. R. Miller Interviews George Barna and Frank Viola** **About their Book [Pagan Christianity](#)**

Hello Frank and George, first let me say thank you for agreeing to do this interview. Frank, I have appreciated our conversations on the phone and our email exchanges, I am glad you asked me to do this interview and am excited to present your thoughts to everyone. Pastors, like myself, all across the world are facing some tough questions based on the influence of your book, so I appreciate your willingness to model humility and demonstrate to everyone how to answer tough questions.

After reading your hard-hitting book and all the Q&A from your website, I hope to dive into some new territory by asking questions that address the topic of "Pagan Christianity" in a unique manner. I appreciate your encouragement of the Socratic Method. I use this often in my own teaching and writing and so with your kind permission I will "pelt" you with some "searching questions" about how Pagan Christianity applies to some of the "accepted customs" in your own lives (4)." My hope is that this interview will give my readers a deeper understanding of how you, George and Frank, as men of God are seeking to apply the principles established in your book.

**George, let me start by asking you, what first drew you to Frank's original book?**

**George Barna:** When I was doing the research for my book *Revolution*, I was trying to find a source that described how the different practices that define the local church experience came about. It was clear from my study of the Bible that most of those practices were neither commanded by God nor initiated in the early churches. I never found such a resource. After *Revolution* was published, a reader said I should read a book called *Pagan Christianity* by Frank Viola. I got a copy and realized it was the content I'd been searching for. Frank and I then discussed publishing an updated version, which is what was recently released through Tyndale.

**Joe: At some point, George, you began conversations with Frank about republishing the book, and in some way you must have felt your participation would make it a better product. What was the biggest contribution you brought to the updated version?**

**George:** I think the way some of the information has been positioned has perhaps framed things in a more accessible manner. I was able to add a few insights from current research, to add strength to the power of the historical research. But the core content is from Frank's exhaustive historical research. He did an amazing job of bringing together a very diverse body of facts and perspectives.

**Joe: Frank, what compelled you to let George to come on-board and put his name to your original work? What do you see now as the biggest benefit in rewriting this book with George?**

**Frank Viola:** The short answer is that I saw the hand of God behind it. Ever since I wrote the original edition in 2002, I wanted it to get into the hands of every Christian who was disaffected with the traditional church, but was unsure why. Because no Christian publisher would dare touch such a controversial book, I self published it. It sold 15,000 copies. I suppose this isn't bad for a self published book, but it's not great. So it largely flew under the radar.

When George contacted me and presented the idea of giving the book a wider audience, I went into shock for three days. I kept pinching myself to see if I was dreaming or hallucinating ☺ George's desire to give the book a wider audience and his willingness to help make the book stronger by adding to it was both an honor and a blessing. George is a much better writer than I am, and his writing contribution, plus the research he added, made the book more compelling. And Tyndale gave it a far wider audience. For example, since its publication in January, it's been given over 500 reviews and I've received over 9,600 emails, most of which have been extremely positive regarding the book's impact on readers.

**Joe: Frank, some people have described Pagan Christianity as “prophetic.” Many different Christian traditions use the word “prophetic” to mean different things. What is your understanding of that word and how does it apply to this book?**

**Frank:** Yes, “prophetic” seems to be quite a clay word these days. Many people mold it the way they wish.

Here's a short summary of the way I've come to shape it ☺ In the Old Testament, that which was “prophetic” always seemed to carry the idea of bringing God's mind back into view when it had been lost. The writings of the prophets were statements that sought to bring God's people back to the Lord's original thought when they had departed from it. In the New Testament, the word “prophetic” includes this thought, but it has a deeper meaning, I think. Since the New Testament teaches that Jesus Christ is God's full thought and will, a New Testament “prophetic” word seeks to bring Christ into view. John says, “the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” Sometimes this is done by “tearing down” those things that stand in the way of Jesus. Often it's done by presenting Him in a fresh way.

As we state in the beginning and at the end of the book, our aim in writing is to remove some of the clutter that has hindered Jesus Christ from being central and supreme in His church. To use an analogy from history, someone once asked Michelangelo how he sculpted “The David.” His answer: “I looked at the slab of raw marble for awhile, and then I chipped away everything that wasn't David.”

To me, this is a great analogy of prophetic ministry. It's the stripping away of everything that isn't Jesus Christ so as to bring Him into view.

**Joe: Now the questions get a little harder guys, so let me first say I share many of the concerns you write about. I do not ask any of the following questions to dismiss**

**the validity of your concerns, but rather as a way of exploring their practicality and application. (Besides, my wife said it was okay to ask you these questions... so they must be good.)**

**I would agree with both of you that "...most of what we do in religious circles has no precedent in Scripture (xxvii)." I am also thankful that you make clear to everyone that "...just because a practice is picked up from culture does not make it wrong in and of itself, though we must be discerning (xxix)." Your book goes into great detail about specific practices you believe are rooted in traditions outside of Scripture.**

**You then give examples of how these traditions have led to a shrinking spiritual maturity within the church. There is a lot we could cover, but for the sake of simplicity, let's explore the "church" building.**

**Frank and George, do you think a church can own a common property and use it for the common good? In other words, can the church owned building be redeemed with better practices, or does owning a building always corrupt the church's ability to worship?**

**George:** I think it is possible for a body of believers to own a building and use it for effective ministry. If we are honest, though, that seems to be the exception to the rule. In reality, there is an assumption that to be a "church," you need to have a building; it is a sign of your legitimacy. Of course, that is not scriptural, so we have to be very careful about why we allocate resources and energy to the acquisition and maintenance of a building. People like safety and security, and we have embraced the idea that having a building fosters belonging, another basic need. That has radically impaired our capacity to understand that the church is a community, not a place that houses events and professionals. But with appropriate leadership and teaching, a building can become a useful resource in the transformation process.

**Frank:** I don't believe there's anything inherently wrong with owning a building. So long as the Holy Spirit is in fact leading a group of Christians to purchase one. Also, in my opinion, the kind of building purchased and how it's used shouldn't betray the teachings of Jesus and the apostles.

Consequently, such questions as: "Are we buying a building just to be like every other traditional church?" "Will we view the building as sacred in any way?" "Do we really need a building?" "Will we call the building a "church"?" "Will God's people have to go into debt to maintain this building or will we have to borrow money to own it?" "Has this decision been reached by a consensus of the whole church?" "Does the architecture of the building hinder mutual ministry, community, and every-member functioning in any way?" "Is this building going to be used for the Kingdom (ex. feeding the poor, clothing the homeless, training workers, etc.) or will it be used to hold traditional church services?" "Does Jesus Christ really want us to own a building? And if so, why?" . . . and other such questions should be prayerfully and honestly faced. So it seems to me anyway.

**Joe:** George and Frank, you both raise some legitimate concern about clergy receiving a salary because in your view it, "elevates them above the rest of God's people (180). In some circles, the same concern has been raised over Christians who copyright, publish and sell their books. We are all aware, based on the same principles you write about in your book, that people who get published are given greater authority on spiritual matters. You also both express concern that getting a salary makes pastors into a "man pleaser (181)." And you are critical of practices that draw upon "marketing techniques" that still find deeper roots in pagan practices (xxvii). In light of that, what would you say to the critic who asks:

- "The writers of the New Testament made their writings free of charge. How do you square this with authors, especially those in an apostolic church planting role, who copyright books and put out audio CDs which are sold?"
- What do you see as the biggest difference between someone who makes a living selling Christian books and Cd's and a pastor who receives financial support to minister in a local church?
- Do either of you have any concern that you will fall into the trap of writing to "please men" so you can sell more books?"

**Frank:** Good questions. First, I don't believe in charging for letters. I've written hundreds of letters and have never charged for any of them ☺ To me, writing a letter and publishing a book are two completely different things. One doesn't cost anything; the other has huge costs attached to it. (This is why the Bible is sold.)

I have no problem with authors (whether Christian or non-Christian) being compensated for their labor in producing a product (like a book) or musicians producing a product (like a music CD) or a speaker charging for an audio CD, all of which demand a good bit of money to create as they are "products." To my mind, all of these things are worlds apart from a paid professional "clergy" that's being salaried to be "the minister" to a local group of non-professional Christians called the "laity." On that point, I resonate what John Howard Yoder said about the subject:

*There are few more reliable constants running through all human society than the special place every human community makes for the professional religionist . . . But if we were to ask whether any of the N.T. literature makes the assumptions listed -- Is there one particular office in which there should be only one or a few individuals for whom it provides a livelihood, unique in character due to ordination, central to the definition of the church and the key to her functioning? Then the answer from the biblical material is a resounding negation [no].*

I'd also recommend Roland Allen's "Missionary Methods," Chapter 6 (Finance); Watchman Nee's "The Normal Christian Church Life," Chapter 18 (The Question of Finance); and Christian Smith's, "Going to the Root", Chapter 2 (Do Church Without

Clergy), as these are very insightful writings on this particular question. I believe every person who feels called to the Lord's work should read them.

Interestingly, I get letters every week from modern pastors who tell me that they have concluded that their profession isn't God's will. Here's a small clip from one pastor's reaction to the book that he made public. Many of the letters I receive from pastors say essentially the same thing:

*I often told my friends after services "There just has to be more to it than this. I can't stand seeing all of these people pour into here in search of connecting with God and leaving with just a little buzz of energy, some information about a topic, and less money in their pocket." I don't want to preach anymore if this is all there is to ministry. There has to be MORE TO IT!!! ... I always felt guilty for receiving a ministry salary and couldn't explain why until now. In ministry - my salary and benefits were way above the average household income of our community but still less than many other Sr. Pastors. Pastors in churches of 500 or more make a really great living. I always felt guilty living off of the tithes of people who didn't even make half of what I made. WAAAAAY less than 10% of the budgets of the churches that I have been a part of went to help relieve the oppressed, feed the hungry, take care of the poor, and make life possible for the sick and dying. I typically felt that Sunday mornings and most programs were a waste of time.*

- *So much time, money, and energy went into one event where so very few lives were really transformed*
- *So much emphasis was put on one man's performance*
- *So much emphasis was put on one hour a week*
- *So much money was poured into the facility and salaries that facilitate that one hour a week*
- *So many people didn't know any better but to go along with the cultural "worship flow"*

*I say all of this to say: There's More! There's so much more that can happen in the name and power of Christ - but it's not going to happen until the Western Church breaks free from its mode of operations.*

Finally, I can understand how a person who depends on selling books for their livelihood could be tempted to please men in their writing. However, that thought never crossed my mind until you asked it. I'm used to being asked if I'm a masochist for writing the books I've written! ☺ Thus if an author wishes to please men with their books, I strongly suggest that they *do not* write books like *Pagan Christianity* and *Revolution* ☺ These books score pretty low in the "man-pleasing" category.

**George:** I have never calculated the actual cost of the research we conduct that appears in the books I write, but since every book I compose is based on national research studies, let me just say that if I were not able to charge anything for the books, I would never have been able to write any of the books that I have produced. Without meaning to be arrogant,

I think there has been some value in what we have published over the years, so I am hoping that the provision of those resources has been a positive addition to the community of faith over the years. The only way we could possibly get the contents of a typical national study, which costs in the \$40,000 to \$80,000 range, is by having many people contribute small amounts (for instance, \$15 each for a book) to help defray those expenses. (And, by the way, most of my books utilize multiple studies, which increases the cost we incur.) Sometimes we make back the money we have invested, sometimes we don't, but we believe strongly that each resource we release will help advance the cause of Christ.

**Joe: George, some of your older books like, "How to Increase Giving In Your Church" were written to help pastors. In this case the book was intended to help boost tithes and offerings based on the techniques of other financially lucrative churches. Readers will note a definitive change between this older book and Chapter 8 of Pagan Christianity where you describe the practice of tithing as a corruption of the church. Can you please share with my readers how these two very different books exemplify your own journey and understanding of the church?**

**George:** I'm learning new things about Christianity all the time, just as I would hope other Christians and leaders would. I've written a few other books that I would not publish today, given the other insights I've gleaned in my journey. Everything we believe and model and teach in life is seen through a particular lens – our worldview – and mine is continuing to mature. What I write and research reflects that growth. Hopefully it is the result of following the guidance of the Holy Spirit on that journey. I think it is not dissimilar to the journey you see among many other Christian authors who do not keep rewriting the same but are honestly seeking to add value to the Church and are willing to say things that challenge people.

**Joe: In terms of leadership you both assert that "[e]very Christian possessed different gifts and different functions, but only Jesus Christ had the exclusive right to exercise authority over His people. No man had that right." You go on to say that, decision making in the New Testament church fell upon the shoulders of the whole assembly... It was the church's responsibility to find the Lord's mind together and act accordingly (248)." What would you say to the critic who asks: "So if every church has the right and authority to decide for themselves how they should worship, or if they should pay an Elder/Pastor, on what authority do you conclude that churches who decide to follow the traditions that you challenge in your book are doing something pagan?" (p. 246-240)**

**Frank:** First, the issue for me is not if they're doing something "pagan." We mention many things in the book that are pagan in origin, yet they don't violate New Testament teaching. The issue is: Is what we're doing pleasing to God or does it violate His will?

Second, there is only one authority in the church. It is Jesus Christ. All authority in heaven and earth has been given to Him (Matt. 28:18). In the church, decision-making by consensus is a process where decisions are made corporately under the direct leadership

of Jesus Christ. I do not believe nor have I ever believed that a group of Christians has any authority to make their own decisions independent of the Head of the church or in violation to the will of the Head. Thus if a group of believers decides on their own to do something that contradicts the will of Jesus Christ, I'd say that their decision is wrong. The authority for that conclusion would be the New Testament.

This brings us back to the central question of the book. Are our modern-day church practices a reflection of God's will as envisioned in Scripture, or are they at odds with it? We hope that every reader will prayerfully and honestly ponder that question.

**George:** Please note that we are not saying there should not be the exercise of leadership. We are indicating that God has gifted some to be leaders, and that every group or community needs some form of leadership, but not necessarily the forms that past generations of the Church created. We don't believe that chaos and dysfunction are marks of the authentic Church, but neither are many of the forms of leadership evident in conventional churches these days.

For me, it goes back to the research we have conducted about leadership and organization in churches. The sad reality is that the model of the "church" men created and have been defending for centuries is a broken model. Look at the research. The vast majority of pastors, by their own admission, are neither called nor gifted to lead. Most of them, by their own admission, are called and gifted to preach and teach. Sadly, the model prevents them from doing that because 1) they believe and have been taught that you have to draw a fulltime salary and benefits to do it and 2) you must ascend to the primary position in the body, which is a leadership position (e.g., Senior Pastor) in order to get regular access to the platform. So, in a nutshell, what we wind up with are good people, called by God to ministry, pretending to be leaders in order to have the chance to do what God actually called and created them to do. In the process, everyone suffers because they have to spend a lot of their time and energy operating outside their areas of giftedness in order to have a chance to spend some time doing the things they are gifted and called to do. The entire conventional church system is based on a number of bad assumptions that lead to the problems we have today.

**Joe: George and Frank, what do you see as the best possible outcome for individuals who read your book? For those who are compelled to take actions, what should they do to ensure they are worshipping in a more biblical, or in your words, "organic," way?**

**George:** It is important for every follower of Christ to continue to grow. The alternative, of course, is not to grow, which is the equivalent of death. Frank and I have prayed long and hard that this book would only offend those who God needs to offend in order to get their attention and heart; that it would challenge the minds and hearts of those who are seeking to be part of the authentic Church of Christ; and that those who stand apart from the body of Christ because they cannot relate to the traditional practices will be encouraged that there are alternatives open to them.

As I mentioned in *Revolution*, there is a growing cadre of people in the U.S. who simply want more of God in their life and will do whatever it takes to get that. For some people, the conventional church is the way to achieve that, and I am perfectly fine with that. For others, though, the conventional church route does not work, so they need an alternative approach to connecting with God and His people, and becoming a fully committed lover, worshiper and servant of God. We pray that this book might add one more bit of help in their quest to be all that God made them to be.

**Frank:** As we state in the opening pages, the book is not for everyone. It's primarily written for the millions of Christians who love the Lord, but who can't abide "church" in its institutional form any longer. And/or who know that there has to be something more. We wrote the book to generate prayerful and open discussion with fellow Christians and with God. For this reason, George and I have created a discussion guide that helps navigate readers toward profitable discussion on the issues the book raises. It can be freely downloaded at [www.paganchristianity.org](http://www.paganchristianity.org).

To my mind, the best possible outcome is for readers to have a head-on collision with Jesus Christ. To begin a journey of knowing Him in reality with other believers in close-knit community, the way the New Testament envisions. To make Him not only Lord of their individual lives, but to make Him Head of a local body of believers in a very practical way. To give the New Testament a fresh look, and to seek to find God's perfect will concerning what the body of Christ really is and how it's to express itself in the earth. And to pay any price to be involved in that. Add to that: to touch the hearts of some young men who are called by God to His work, but who will be stirred and challenged to do things very differently from the way they've been done for the past 500 years. (If there's a young man reading this whose heart has been stirred by the book, I hope he will contact me.)

Thanks for this opportunity, Joe. I hope that what we've said here will help God's people to better understand our heart in writing this book. I think it's important for readers to understand that *Pagan Christianity* is only one statement in a fuller argument. George, as well as myself, will be coming out with other books that will build on what we've written in *Pagan*. Consequently, readers can think of *Pagan Christianity*, and in some ways *Revolution*, as the stripping-away phase of the argument, while the books that follow them will be the constructive phase of the argument. Our hope is that God's people will discuss these issues soberly and prayerfully, and that the Lord will gain something for Himself out of it all.

**Joe:** My questions were tough, but like we talked about on the phone Frank, you know I would not want to write about this book without giving you and George a fair chance to address directly some important concerns. I hope everyone will learn from this interview. Even if my readers disagree with your answers, or with parts of your book, I hope everyone will learn, not just from the Q&A, but also from the grace you have demonstrated in dealing with critical questions.



**I hope we can all recognize that there is not one standard for the “pastor class” and a different one for the “lay class.” I am confident that my readers will appreciate your candor in not just discussing the pastors you write about, but in exposing your own lives to the same standards.**

**Frank and George, thank you for your time and willingness to explore your book and your lives.**

**God bless,  
Joe**

Note: this interview was originally posted at [www.morethancake.org](http://www.morethancake.org)

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For more interviews with Barna and Viola, including audio interviews, go to [www.ptmin.org/answers.htm](http://www.ptmin.org/answers.htm)

To order the sequel to *Pagan Christianity*, go to [www.ReimaginingChurch.org](http://www.ReimaginingChurch.org)