

How Can God Be Christianity

by Dr. Andrew Corbett

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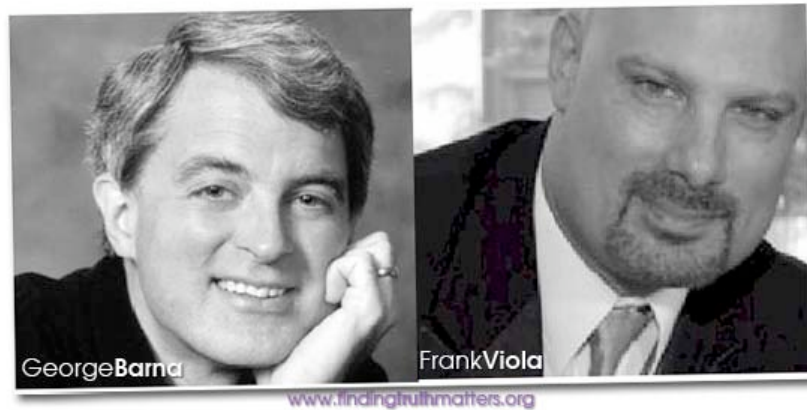


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“We are also making an outrageous proposal: that the church in its contemporary, institutional form has neither a biblical nor a historical right to function as it does.”

“PAGAN CHRISTIANITY”, Frank Viola & George Barna,
Tyndale 2007:xx

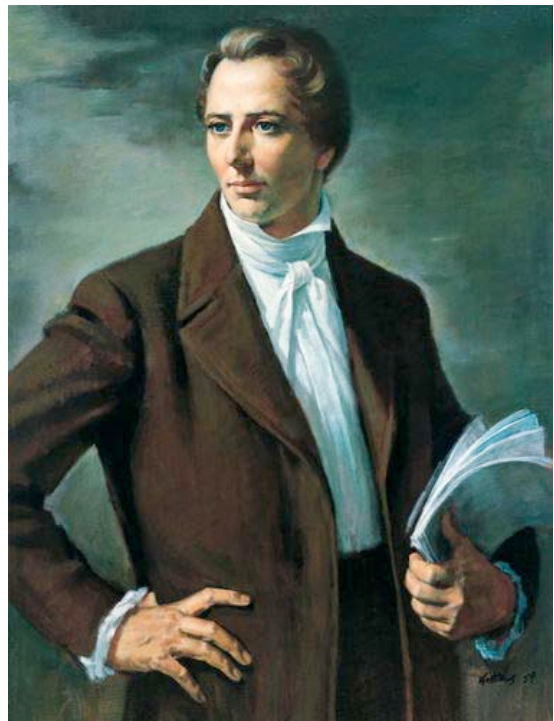
So begins the recently released highly controversial book by Frank Viola and George Barna. These authors then live up to these opening words in their Preface- that is, their assessment of the contemporary church is indeed: *outrageous!*



It's rare that a Publisher commences book with a disclaimer by virtually saying we are publishing this even though we don't agree with it. This type of disclaimer is especially rare for a publisher such as Tyndale. After reading this book I understood why Tyndale were so apprehensive in publishing it. While this was puzzling, what I found most puzzling was that George Barna put his name to it! One can only wonder at the damage this book has done to his reputation.

"I found [by searching the scriptures] that mankind did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatized from the true and living faith and there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament."

Joseph Smith, (depicted right) Founder of Mormonism, 1832



In 1832 Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, made some very similar criticisms to those I will be addressing. He claimed-

I kneeled down and began to offer up the desires of my heart to God....I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head.... When the light rested upon me I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description....One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other 'This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!'....I asked the Personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right, (for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong) and which I should join. I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong....

Pearl of Great Price, Joseph Smith - History 1:5-8, 14-19, 22

History has at least taught us to be very sceptical of anyone (who usually ends up being a cult leader) who claims that the entire church is not teaching the 'real' truth of God's Word, and that they have a special revelation from God which corrects these "errors". History also testifies that God raises up prophetic voices that keep His Church pressing forward in the right direction in the right way.

THE CLAIMS OF CHRISTIAN Paganism

The authors of *PAGAN CHRISTIANITY* address some critical issues that many churches will benefit from - if they can humbly accept the authors' criticisms. I'm not sure how aware the authors are that most of their criticisms particularly relate to the American church landscape. The Australian Church landscape is not generally beset with the problems that Viola and Barna focus on. Australian churches are generally fairly egalitarian (everybody is treated and regarded as equal), Australian Christian worshipers do not generally get dressed up to attend church, and meeting in homes to study, share, pray, and worship is normal for most contemporary Australian Christians. Similarly, contemporary Australian worship centres do not generally feature steeples, pews, stained glass windows, or even choirs – all of which are criticised by the book *PAGAN CRISTIANITY*.

A “Pagan” is someone who is either ignorant or has wilfully rejected the truth and as a result is an idolater (worships idols). This is the word that the authors have chosen to use to describe modern Christianity. It is, as they admit, an outrageous claim. Here's a summary of their charges against modern Christianity-

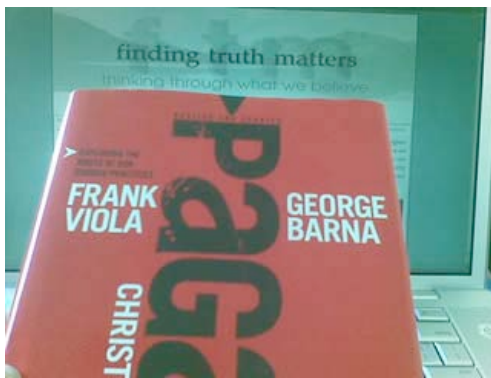
1. The modern church is not abiding by the Scriptures despite its ardent claims to the contrary
2. Church buildings are essentially idols

3. The Order of Worship in churches today suffocates the spiritual life of believers
4. The Sermon is the most stifling instrument to Christian maturity
5. The concept of Pastor is the greatest hindrance there is to Christian ministry
6. Getting dressed up for church is hypocritical and ungodly
7. Contemporary church music is stupefying for genuine worship
8. Tithing is nothing more than a continuation of the Old Covenant's sacrificial Laws and is therefore now obsolete
9. Paying Pastors a salary denies the Priesthood of all believers
10. Baptism classes are a man-made invention that breaches the command of Christ to be baptised immediately
11. Christian ministers over-emphasise the need for education to be a Christian minister

I will not deal with each of these in this order, rather, I will address them by grouping some issues together and examining the underlying premises of the authors.

The New Testament is not meant to be used for proof-texting, but in its overall message, which should be understood within the context of the relationship of the author and the audience.

A FAULTY FOUNDATIONAL **Premise**



The authors build their case on a few premises. One of these premises is that the New Testament does not prescribe an order of service for how a church should worship. But then they weave through the entire book reasons why they believe the Church is worshiping in an ungodly way.

The other premise is that the earliest church was “the purest form” of Church “before it was tainted and corrupted” (page xviii). But within one chapter of this statement they acknowledge that when the church is planted cross-culturally it legitimately adopts structures and worship patterns that relate to its culture-

Also, just because a practice is picked up from culture does not make it wrong in and of itself, though we must be discerning. As author Frank Senn notes, “We cannot avoid bringing our culture to church with us; it is a part of our very being. But in the light of tradition we need to sort out those cultural influences that contribute to the integrity of Christian worship from those that detract from it.”

(Page xxiv)

Whenever I hear somebody make the thoughtless appeal for the modern Church to return to the church model of the Book of Acts, I always wonder which chapter of the Book of Acts are they referring to? In every chapter of Acts we see the Church growing, developing, changing, and confronting new problems that require doctrinal refinement and structural adjustment. This development and structural change of how the church was led and how it worshiped needed to change as the Church continued to adjust and respond to cultural changes and challenges through the centuries. But what if the Church does commence erroneous practices? Is it reasonable to assume that Christ's warnings to the Seven Churches demonstrates some principle of how He corrects His Church? I think history reveals the answer to this question in the affirmative. But, the authors more than suggest that not even God can correct His Church when it deviates into error-

The contemporary church is like a jet airplane that has no capacity for in-flight course corrections.

PAGAN CHRISTIANITY, (Page xxx)

The other main premise of the book is that all traditional leadership models of church government are evil (pagan). This premise is based on the authors' narrow understanding of what the priesthood of all believers means.

Based on these premises, which we will scrutinise soon, the authors make some outrageous assertions about the modern Church. These assertions are supposedly supported by their appeal to Scripture and history. But these appeals to Scripture are generally based on very poor exegesis (interpretation of the Scripture) and the authors' use of Church History, to justify their criticisms, which is at times, appalling.

With such glaringly bad argumentation and extremely shallow support for such arguments, you would think that those who are supposed to be Biblically-literate would be able to discern this straight away. But amazingly, it has bowled over many believers and brought great confusion to many good-hearted pastors who have not known how to respond to this attack.

THE GOOD POINTS

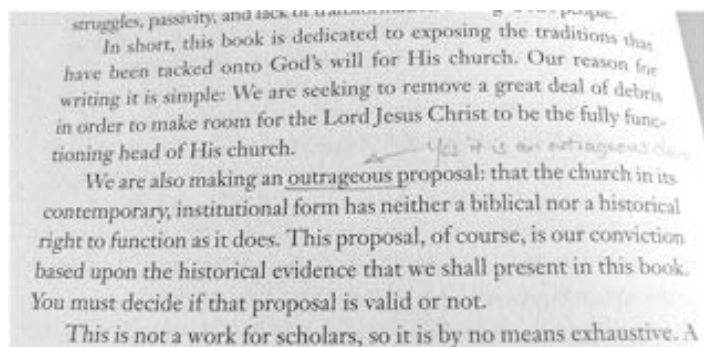
Viola and Barna criticise superficial Christianity and its resultant forms of corporate worship. They give an example of a family getting dressed up to go to church after the Dad yelling at his kids to get ready and abusing his wife for not organising their children early enough. In his rush to get his family to church on time he gets a speeding ticket. Arriving late and flustered and angry he commands his family to smile as soon as they get out of the car and to walk into the church happy. When they get into their church they are joined by the other smiling, happy, families and are then preached at by the pastor who tells his flock- we do everything by the Book- the Bible is our ultimate guide! Viola and Barna present this as the stereotypical, church-going, American family. And if they are right, their criticisms of it are more than justified.



The second major positive about this book is its critique of the modern role of “pastor”. The authors rightly identify that the New Testament does not prescribe for churches to be led by a pastor much less for one man to wear the over 30 “hats” that pastors are expected to wear (the various responsibilities that pastors are expected to fulfil). They

attribute the high rate of ministry burn-out among pastors as the inevitable result of such unBiblical expectations by congregations who expect their pastor to essentially do the entire ministry of their church, especially when it comes to making everyone in the church “happy”.

The insistence that the authors place on the priesthood of all believers is commendable although I think they have confused the original understanding of this concept with egalitarian ministry authority.

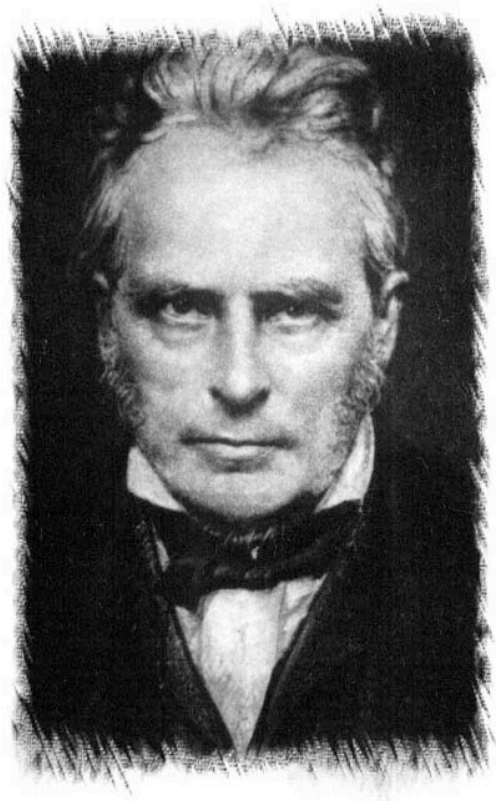


WHERE

THE BOOK IS NEARLY **RiGht**

The authors claim that the modern Church has strayed too far from the path laid down by the original Church. This path, they claim, is where every believer has equal opportunity to contribute to the direction and ministry of the fellowship. Any member of the fellowship can bring a teaching, lead a song, share a Scripture or a thought. This type of fellowship is not “controlled” by a leader, but rather every believer has an equal say in how the fellowship should be led.

Viola and Barna are not the first to extol this model of Church. John Nelson Darby (pictured right) more-or-less promoted it back in the late 1800s and more recently James Rutz in 1992 published a book called: *“The Open Church: How to Bring Back the Exciting Life of the 1st Century Church”* where he advocated similar ideas. What Darby and Rutz reacted against was a stale, authoritarian, spiritually-stifling, model of Church. Darby rejected the idea of a priestly class of believer and Rutz rejects the idea of a passive “laity”. But Viola and Barna go further than both.



Someone starts a song and everyone joins in. Then someone else begins another song, and so worship continues without long pauses and with no visible leader present. This is exactly how the first-century Christians worshipped, by the way.

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What they argue against is any form of planned worship led by any authority within a fellowship. How on earth they know that “*This is exactly how the first-century Christians worshipped*” when the New Testament doesn’t assert this and there is no possible historic document which reports any such thing, is beyond me. This type of comment is typical of the authors’ bias against “institutional”, “traditional” or “contemporary” churches in favour of their bias toward their understanding of house-churches.

While the truth that these 4 authors are promoting (that God gives every believer the opportunity to approach Him and minister in some way on His behalf) is Scriptural, they each confuse God-given ministry with God-given authority. Secondly, they assume that when it comes to how a church fellowship worships, spontaneity is *spiritual* and planning is *unspiritual*. I doubt though that Viola and Barna are consistent with this method of distinguishing what constitutes “spiritual” (God pleasing) or “unspiritual” in other areas of their lives.

In support of their premise that the New Testament Church of the first century encouraged every believer to participate in a worship service, they cite First Corinthians 14:26.

The meetings of the early church were marked by every-member functioning, spontaneity, freedom, vibrancy, and open participation (see, for example, 1 Corinthians 14:1-33 and Hebrews 10:25).

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But they amazingly seem to completely miss the real point of that verse! Paul is not commending the Corinthians for their disorganised, disorderly, worship - he is rebuking them! Note the last part of the verse they cite-

What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.

First Corinthians 14:26

Read on in First Corinthians 14 and you'll hear Paul talking about God not being “the God of confusion” (verse 33). This is because the “open” type of church service that the Corinthians had developed (which was vastly different to the way the other churches of the first century worshiped) had become a free-for-all and was therefore confusing to most of those attending.

Rather than this being “The Model” for how a church fellowship should worship together, the New Testament prescribes exactly what Viola and Barna reject: *planned order under the authority of a leader*. By the way, the earliest form of Christian worship was not a house-church model. The house-church fellowship of the earliest believers developed as a result of the persecution of the first Christians where they simply could not meet openly in public venues.

On the day the New Testament Church was birthed, the Day of Pentecost, the believers were no longer in the Upper Room but were now in the Temple precinct seeking God. Thus, when the Holy Spirit fell upon them it was a very public event! Therefore, the early Church most naturally saw that its worship of Jesus was a public event to be conducted in a public venue. For the ensuing weeks the believers continued this practise of worshiping Christ in the public venue of the Temple *and* meeting in one another's

homes (Acts 2:42-44). During these public meetings in a public venue, they prayed, probably sang, and one of them would preach. Acts 2 records the main points of Peter's sermon and Acts 7 records the main points of Stephen's sermon. Viola and Barna deny that the early Church did this and then label modern churches that continue this original model of Church worship as: "pagan"!



As the church spread, the default format for Christians to gather was to do so in a public setting. This most naturally involved Synagogues, Public Squares, and riversides (which was where Jews would meet in towns where their numbers were insufficient to form a Synagogue, Acts 16:13; Psalm 137:1). Yet despite this historic fact, and the legacy of the Mosaic Tabernacle and its magnificence, the authors make the astounding claim that it is Christian architecture (not sin, disobedience, or lack of devotion to Christ?) that has the cause of *stalemating* the functioning of God's people-

In short, Christian architecture has stalemated the functioning of God's people since it was born in the fourth century.

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But only as a fall back position did the church meet in homes. When the State sanctioned persecution of the Church ended in the fourth century, the Church immediately established public venues for worship. This was not a "paganising" of the Church, but a consistent strategy of outreach and witness established from the Day of Pentecost.

If Viola and Barna are attacking the over-emphasis on church buildings where congregations focus too much of their time and resources on merely maintaining their buildings rather than their priorities being on the

commission and commands of Christ, then all Christians should take note of their criticisms. But if, as it seems, that they are condemning churches from owning any buildings at all - and appealing to the first century church as the basis for their criticisms - they are sadly very wrong. There is nothing pagan with a congregation of believers owning a public building to be used as a witness, for worship, and the proclamation of the Word!

It is also true that as the Church grew and developed through its history, it began and perpetuated certain traditions. As the authors point out, not all of these traditions are supported by Scripture- but while this may be true, it is a non-sequitur that therefore *all* Christian traditions are “pagan”. Among these so-called pagan traditions the authors list such things as: pews for worshipers to sit on, a pulpit for the preacher to preach from; and eventually stain-glass windows. The authors’ premise is that since these things are not prescribed in the New Testament that they are wrong or “pagan” (*not Christian*). Modern church-going believers will be shocked to also discover that-

The use of chairs and pile carpets in Christian gatherings has no biblical support either.

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SOME CONFUSION BETWEEN MINISTRY & Authority

The authors of *PAGAN CHRISTIANITY* commit a fundamental error: *they confuse the priesthood of believers* (which is about our equal access to God through the finished work and ministry of Christ) *with the distinctive roles of responsibilities that Christ gifts to various members of His Church*. While we are all equal in our standing before God because of Christ, we are not equal in our God-given responsibilities.

Viola and Barna make emphatic statements about the New Testament's leadership structure being completely egalitarian - that is, no one is a leader over other believers. This type of leadership they call "hierarchical" and they claim that it is condemned in the New Testament. But they are very wrong. God does call certain believers into leadership roles that at times involves the God ordained establishment of hierarchy. But unlike the corporate world's version of hierarchy, God's version is based on responsibilities and the servanthood of the leader. In this way, the New Testament can use hierarchical language to describe the varying scope of responsibilities that distinguishes leaders-

And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.

First Corinthians 12:28

Viola and Barna build on their faulty premise of leadership egalitarianism and go so far as to say that the role of a pastor as a leader in a congregation is “pagan”. Yet when we read First and Second Timothy it is clear that the apostle Paul was writing to his protégé as the leader of that assembly in Ephesus (despite there being a plurality of elders already there). He tells Timothy to set apart (ordain) additional elders (congregational leaders) and some others as deacons (assistant leaders). He tells Timothy to continue to teach, preach, read aloud publicly, the Scriptures.

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.

First Timothy 4:13

Timothy was charged to read, expound and teach the Scriptures to the Ephesians. In this way he was pastoring the church. This would have required all of Timothy’s time to organise, prepare and deliver his ministry to the Ephesian church. So despite Viola and Barna claiming that paying pastors a salary is unbiblical and even “pagan”, Paul actually said-

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer deserves his wages.’

First Timothy 5:17-18

Paying people for “spiritual” service is not *pagan*! It is thoroughly Biblical!

The sermon actually detracts from the very purpose for which God designed the church gathering. And it has very little to do with genuine spiritual growth.

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Viola and Barna object to the modern sermon. They attempt to show that the central place that the sermon has in most Christian worship services is a fairly recent development inspired by pagans and unnecessarily adopted by the Church Fathers. But as the instruction to Timothy in First Timothy 4:13 reinforces, preaching and teaching in a church service by a pastor dates back to the foundation of the Church. There is nothing *pagan* about a New Testament scholar sharing insights from God's Word in an inspirational manner- which we generally call: *a sermon*. Yet none of this negates the opportunity that every believer has to share insights from God's Word with other believers in an appropriate context.

The authors condemn modern liturgies (orders of service) as having pagan roots. They claim that the early church worshiped on the basis of spontaneity. But the public assembly of believers was to be orderly and well led - not disorderly or disorganised. This is one of the main points of correction that the apostle Paul deals with throughout First Corinthians.

The authors condemn the over-emphasis of professional ministry training for pastors. While we join with Viola and Barna and reject outright the idea of a priestly class of believers, we cannot join with them in condemning ministry training for those who have the responsibility to care and lead for other souls and their spiritual welfare. In fact, Hebrews tells us that while the Mosaic Priesthood is fulfilled in Christ, God still calls and equips certain believers to be shepherds within the flock of believers and to lead them. As such, these leaders are to be "obeyed" (Hebrews 13:7, 17). This is something the authors of *PAGAN CHRISTIANITY* would seemingly find repulsive.

Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.

Hebrews 13:7

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Hebrews 13:17

These verses do not undermine the idea of the priesthood of all believers, but they do highlight that the New Testament makes a distinction between those called to live out their witness in the marketplace and those called by God to devote their lives to leading and watching over souls by ministering God's Word. I have written extensively on this issue in my eBook: *AUTHENTIC APOSTOLIC LEADERSHIP- STRUCTURE FOR THE CHURCH TODAY* (available from www.andrewcorbett.net/shop.htm).

OUR WORSHIP REALLY Pagan?

Interestingly, there is no evidence of musical instruments in the Christian church service until the Middle Ages. Before then, all singing during the service was unaccompanied by musical instruments.

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Based on their premise that the modern Church should only do what the first century Church did, make the unsupported sweeping statement that the early Church never used musical instruments in their worship. Viola and Barna go on to assert that song leaders, choirs, and worship directors are pagan in origin and are therefore wrong. They base this assertion on their premise that worship services in the New Testament were only conducted in homes where everybody had the opportunity to lead a part of it. They even imply that musical instruments were not used and therefore they infer are out of New Testament order for today even though they concede-

We also appreciate those who are musically gifted and who can us their musical talents to bless others.

PAGAN CHRISTIANITY, page 168

The New Testament certainly does not condemn those who are gifted musically to be used as the worship leader of an assembly. On the contrary, the New Testament seems to encourage people to focus their ministry in the area of the spiritual gifting (First Corinthians 12). Secondly, it is likely that when Paul tells the Ephesians and Colossians to worship God by singing hymns, Psalms and spiritual songs (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16) with all their heart, that this could have and probably did include musical accompaniment. The New Testament Church honoured the Psalms. In the Psalms we read over and over that worshipful melody unto the Lord can be made with musical instruments.

*Praise him with trumpet sound;
praise him with lute and harp!
Praise him with tambourine and dance;
praise him with strings and pipe!
Praise him with sounding cymbals;
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!*

Psalm 150:3-5

If Viola and Barna are criticising some expressions of modern church worship because it is more akin to entertainment than praise for God, then their criticisms are valid. But from anecdotal evidence and personal observation, by far the majority of worship leaders genuinely do what they do to bring glory to God and inspire believers to worship God. Setting yourself up as a judge of another believer's expression of worship is a very dangerous (and presumptuous) thing to do.

Dressing up for church violates the reality that the church is made up of real people with messy problems- real people who may have gotten into a major-league bickering match with their spouses just before they drove into the parking lot and put on colossal smiles to cover it up!

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PAGAN CHRISTIANITY's criticisms of modern Christian worship extends to clothing fashion and living room décor-

The first-century Christians did not “dress up” to attend church meetings. They met in the simplicity of living rooms.

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I'm not sure if the authors of *PAGAN CHRISTIANITY* have adequately considered just how big a “householder” house of the first century was. In many cases, several hundred people could have easily been accommodated for a meeting. These householder houses

generally housed several generations of the family and a host of servants.

Even though open sharing in a church meeting is completely scriptural, you would be breaking the liturgy if you dared try something so outrageous!

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The authors of *PAGAN CHRISTIANITY* don't actually give the reasons why they believe “*open sharing in a church meeting is completely scriptural*” except to appeal to First Corinthians 14 which actually emphasises the opposite point to that which the authors are asserting.

But all things should be done decently and in order.

1Corinthians 14:40

However, churches should give opportunity for its church family to share their hearts, contribute their gifts, minister

one to another, and exercise their Spirit-led, Spirit-empowered ministries. But, we must recognise what the New Testament means when it says we are to “assemble”.

¶ And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

Acts 15:12

When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus,

1Corinthians 5:4

HOW

SHOULD WE READ OUR Bible?

When it comes to using the Bible, Viola and Barna advocate a similar error to that of the Emerging Church leaders. The Bible is not meant to be used for “proof texting” they argue, but to establish and build a relationship with God. On first reading this statement seems tame - if not even true. Consider another Emerging Church proponent, Rob Bell-

This is part of the problem with continually insisting that one of the absolutes of the Christian faith must be a belief that “Scripture alone” is our guide. It sounds nice but it is not true... When people say that all we need is the Bible, it is simply not true.

“Velvet Elvis”, Rob Bell, *Zondervan* 2005, pages 67-68

But when we consider what these authors are really advocating, there are a lot reasons to be very concerned.

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

2Timothy 3:16-17 NKJV

Despite what Viola and Barna assert, the Bible cannot only be used to establish doctrine (right belief), it should be! Other Emerging Church leaders such as Rob Bell have rejected traditional, orthodox Christianity in favour of “neo-liberalism” (also referred to as “Post-Liberalism”) where such foundational doctrines to Christianity such as: the virgin birth of Christ, the physical resurrection of Jesus, the exclusive nature of salvation through Christ, the authority of Scripture, have been relegated or even abandoned.

“What if tomorrow someone digs up definitive proof that Jesus had a real, earthly, biological father named Larry, and archaeologists find Larry's tomb and do DNA samples and prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the virgin birth was really just a bit of mythologizing the Gospel writers threw in to appeal to the followers of the Mithra and Dionysian religious cults that were hugely popular at the time of Jesus, whose gods had virgin births?” ... “But what if as you study the origin of the word virgin, you discover that the word virgin in the gospel of Matthew actually comes from the book of Isaiah, and then you find out that in the Hebrew language at that time, the word virgin could mean several things. And what if you discover that in the first century being ‘born of a virgin’ also referred to a child whose mother became pregnant the first time she had intercourse?”

“Velvet Elvis”, Rob Bell, Zondervan 2005

Christians should not be caught off guard by the crafty language used by those advocating for the “Emerging Church” as they seek to undermine the unique authority of Scripture.

The Bible should never be used out of context in a way that an obscure verse is made to mean something that the overall tenor of Scripture does not advocate. In this sense, being “doctrinaire” is against the tenor of Scripture, but being *doctrinally precise* by accepting what Scripture advocates is not.

WHAT

ABOUT TITHING FOR **r'oday?**

The vast majority of Evangelical churches encourage the practise of “tithing” and claim to do so because the New Testament teaches it. But does it? What are the believer’s obligations when it comes to endorsing or challenging tithing? What are the local church’s obligations when it comes to teaching, receiving, or addressing tithing for today? How we answer these questions has a huge impact on how believers and churches function as stewards of both finance and God’s Word!

There seems to be a growing challenge to the teaching of “the New Testament tithing”. There are entire internet sites dedicated to the issue. There are chat-rooms where believers can discuss it. There are new books being written about it. In our local regional newspaper someone obviously feels so strongly about it that they have taken out provocative advertisements in the Church Notices section condemning any church that endorses tithing as being “a part of the Harlot church of Babylon”. Viola and Barna have joined the throng of denouncers.

And perhaps it has become a justifiably heated issue when tithers begin to see the abuse of their tithes and offerings by those they are supposedly “supporting”. This has led to an American Senator, Sen. Chuck Grassley of Iowa, the top Republican on the Senate Finance Committee, writing to six of the highest earning American preachers asking for

their accounts to be disclosed to the giving public. The Senator asked one of those preachers whether it was true that he had used church funds to purchase two Rolls Royce motorcars. This was soundly denied by the American pastor who answered, “*We only have one Rolls Royce which was paid for by donors.*” Many of these high-flying preachers are literally high-flying preachers- they each own private jets! For one of these travelling pastors, his jet costs \$1.5 million dollars a year just to service and maintain it (it costs many times more than that throughout the year to actually fly it)! Little wonder so many people are questioning whether it is right to “tithe” to such ministries.

WHAT IS TITHING?

Tithing is the giving of 10% of income. It was integral to the Old Covenant system of worship where income was nearly always produce or livestock (Lev. 27:30). It was given by Israelites to the Levites who in turn tithed to the Priests (Num. 18:26). Even a casual reading of the Old Testament will reveal that the requirements for giving extended far beyond tithing. In fact, the whole Old Covenant system of worship was founded upon sacrificial giving. Some scholars have estimated that the average Israelite was required to give at least 30% [note-Deuteronomy 12:6 and there you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution that you present, your vow offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herd and of your flock] of his farming income to the Levites (Num. 18:21) to fulfil his obligations to the Law of Moses (the Mosaic Law). But the Hebrew still gave freely knowing that God promised to bless them since obedience to these requirements was conditional for God's promised blessing-

And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God.

Deuteronomy 28:2

The liberal giving of tithes and offerings is described in several places in the Old Testament where the Priests had received more than enough from the people who freely gave to the various appeals that had been made-

and said to Moses, 'The people bring much more than enough for doing the work that the LORD has commanded us to do.'

Exodus 36:5

Tithes were never intended to be the only form of giving under the Old Covenant. They were, in fact, associated with additional giving referred to as “offerings”. These offerings could be produce, livestock, or currency (The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Volume 4, page 861, Eerdmans). Thus, tithes and offerings were not exclusively agricultural- in fact, there was specific provision within the Law to convert the agricultural tithe into currency (Deuteronomy 14:25). Throughout the Old Testament there were also occasional appeals made for additional funds by the priests for the construction of the Tabernacle, then the Temple. Once the Temple was constructed, an additional appeal was made by the priests referred to as the “Temple Tax” which was used to maintain the Temple. Thus, by the time of Christ, the giving of tithes and offerings clearly included the giving of currency (which counters the idea that it was only ever produce or livestock and never currency).



In some instances, part of the tithe, consisting of food, was to be eaten by the giver in celebration before the Lord where those less fortunate were invited to share in this meal.

And you shall not neglect...the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do.

Deuteronomy 14:27a, 29

WASN'T TITHING JUST THE TAXATION SYSTEM OF ISRAEL'S THEOCRACY?

Many people argue that tithing was exclusively a part of Israel's theocracy ("government by God") and was never required of any other nationality. As such, they argue, tithing was equivalent to the taxation system of other nations. Since in modern times we no longer live in a theocracy, but in a democracy, we pay taxes not tithes, they assert.

But Israel didn't live in a theocracy for very long (and it's arguable if they *ever* did). After they ceased the wilderness wandering and entered into the Promised Land they were governed by judges, then kings. Allowing for the possibility that some of these judges may have raised some taxation, the Kings of Israel and Judah clearly taxed their people from the outset.

So the men of Israel said, "Have you seen this man who has come up? Surely he has come up to defy Israel; and it shall be that the man who kills him the king will enrich with great riches,

will give him his daughter, and give his father's house exemption from taxes in Israel."

1Samuel 17:25

But along with civil taxes raised by kings, the Israelites were still expected to tithe.

So the king summoned Jehoiada the chief and said to him, "Why have you not required the Levites to bring in from Judah and Jerusalem the tax levied by Moses, the servant of the LORD, and the congregation of Israel for the tent of testimony?" And proclamation was made throughout Judah and Jerusalem to bring in for the LORD the tax that Moses the servant of God laid on Israel in the wilderness.

2Chronicles 24:6-7

Therefore, the assertion that Israel tithed to the priests *instead* of paying taxes is not correct. While Jews continued to be taxed even after their return from the exile, the prophet Malachi asked them why had ceased tithing (Malachi 3:8-10). Those who protest that the tithing he is referring is not a perpetual principle for all of God's people at any time claim that Malachi was reminding *Israel* of their national covenant with God and this covenant never extended to any other nation. Hence, they argue, no Old Testament prophet ever scolded a Gentile nation for not tithing. But again, this assumption is not correct. The Old Covenant was not based on *race* but on *relationship*. There were Gentiles who voluntarily entered into covenant with God along with Jews since the Old Testament God says that even Gentiles could enter into covenant with Him if they "*know Me.*"

"I will make mention of Rahab and Babylon to those who know Me;

Behold, O Philistia and Tyre, with Ethiopia:

‘This one was born there.’”

Psalm 87:4

During the time of Christ, Jews still paid taxes and Jesus was asked whether this was right (the implication being that since they tithed it was unreasonable to *also* pay taxes). There are some today who object to tithing for this same reason. But Jesus went on to say-

“How terrible it will be for you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest part of your income, but you ignore the important things of the law—justice, mercy, and faith. You should tithe, yes, but you should not leave undone the more important things.

Matthew 23:23 NLT

Again there are some who claim that Jesus was only speaking to Jews under the Old Covenant about keeping their Law. This imperative of Christ, they claim, has no implications for those under the New Covenant- especially Gentiles – and especially Gentiles not living under a Theocracy. But Christ’s answer to their question seems to state a *principle* not a Law-

Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”

But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They said, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Matthew 22:17-21

THE PRINCIPLE OF THE TITHE

*Honor the LORD with your wealth
and with the firstfruits of all your produce;*

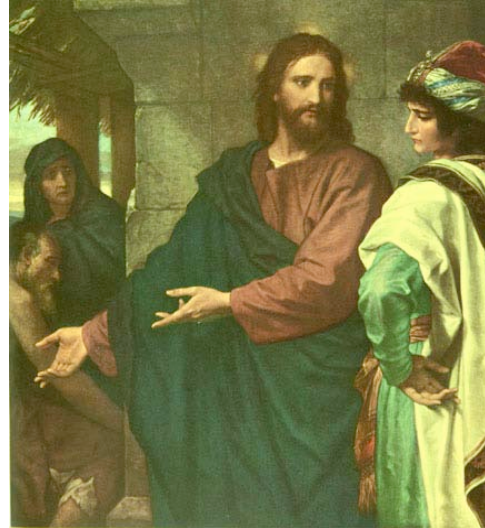
Proverbs 3:9



Principles are different to Laws. They aren't bound to culture or time. A principle is only a principle if it is universally applicable. Principles usually under gird laws. For example, "Do the right thing" or, "Be considerate of others" are principles that don't need laws in order to be right, but yet many laws are written which try to enforce these principles. *Tithing seems to be a principle.* It seems that the giving to God of the first tenth was a principle of worship, honour, and respect that was well-known before it was ever a law. Sacrificial giving is evidenced in the episode of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:3-4) where they both present their offerings. While many scholars see the sin of Cain as being a bloodless sacrifice, there is textual support for seeing that it was Abel who brought the first of his flock (the essence and principle of the tithe as the first part) while Cain only brought an offering (not the first of his harvest). We then see Abram tithing to Melchizedek in Genesis 14 where he gives this enigmatic priest a tithe. The

writer to the Hebrews reinforces the concept of tithing as a principle by referring to this story in Hebrew 7:8 as proof that the giving of tithes was a way of honouring God not the human recipient of the tithe.

Because principles are universal they are usually evidenced in non-Biblical cultures. Don Richardson, one of the world's leading Missiologists, has written extensively about this in many of books where notes how missionaries have arrived in unreached cultural groups only to find them worshipping and magistrating in very Biblical ways, because, Richardson



essentially argues, they all trace back to God's original instructions and revelations to mankind. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia notes-

“Many ancient cultures practiced tithing in some form. Israel was merely one among many ancient Near Eastern peoples who tithed their property, produce, or currency. Egyptians practiced tithing, as did Syrians (1Macc. 10:31; 11:35), Lydians (Herodotus i.89), Babylonians (Oppenheim, pp. 183-198; Milgrom pp. 55-62), and Assyrians. The tithe was known in Ugarit (14th century B.C.) and among the Carthaginians (Diodorus xx.14). Seutonius and Tacitus used Latin - decumo - as a technical military term meaning “take every tenth man for punishment [i.e., decimate]” (cf. Lev. 27:32f.).”

ISBE, Vol. 4, page 861

It seems that tithing was a universal principle before it was ever a law. As a principle it acknowledges that all things come from God and that ultimately all things are His anyway. Jacob obviously understood this tithing principle.

“...And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you.”

(Genesis 28:22)

THE REASON FOR THE TITHE

While the practice of tithing provided for the Levites and Priests, its purpose was never to benefit those in the ministry. Tithing was about honouring God. It acknowledged that God was our Source and that everything we have we have received ultimately from Him (James 1:17 - Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.). It therefore taught the tither that God was the Supplier of his needs and that he should therefore fear Him-

You shall tithe all the yield of your seed that comes from the field year by year. And before the LORD your God, in the place that he will choose, to make his name dwell there, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, of your wine, and of your oil, and the firstborn of your herd and flock, that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always.

Deuteronomy 14:22-23

Tithing was a reflection of what was to be in the heart of the worshiper: *trust in God*. Jesus said, *“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”* (Matt. 6:21).

It seems that the tithing of produce to the Levites meant that they were able to store then retrieve that food for later

distribution (among their own community and possibly those in need). This seems to have become an important responsibility of the Levites and Priests. Hence, in Malachi 3, God appeals to Israel to honour their commitment to tithing so that there will be enough food in “My House”-

Bring the full tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.

Malachi 3:10

In the New Testament the Church appears to have continued many of the established Jewish practices, which presumably also included tithing. This is reasonably presumed because those characteristics of tithing under the Old Covenant system of worship are observed in the New Testament. This includes-

- The Church had the resources to make distribution to those in need (note the implication of 1Timothy 5 where Paul implies that the Church was regularly redistributing resources to those in need). This was a function of the Old Covenant tithe.
- The Church had a regular component to its worship service where it received offerings (1Cor. 16:1-2, “Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come.”) This was clearly integral to the Old Covenant practice of tithing.
- The Church was able to financially support its ministers (1Cor. 9:7-10, “*Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk? Do I say these*

things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? For it is written in the Law of Moses, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.' Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not speak entirely for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop." 1Tim. 5:17-18, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain' and, 'The laborer deserves his wages.'" This was also an aspect of the Old Covenant tithe.

THE BLESSING AND CURSE OF THE TITHE

One criticism about the validity of tithing or today is that it cannot apply to Gentiles today since it was only ever applicable to Israel under the Old Covenant. Tithing, these critics claim, was integral to the Old Covenant that Israel had with God. Therefore, like any other aspects of the Covenant between Israel and God, obedience brought blessing and disobedience brought curse (Deut. 11:26-27 "See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you today").



But tithing was being practiced as an act of worship by other nations and people prior to it being prescribed in the Mosaic Law. It therefore appears that the argument that tithing was only an Israelite practice is not historically or Biblically correct.

The additional argument that Jesus never endorsed tithing for the Christian is based on the assumption that what Jesus taught prior to the Cross was only for Jews. For example-

“How terrible it will be for you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest part of your income, but you ignore the important things of the law- justice, mercy, and faith. You should tithe, yes, but you should not leave undone the more important things.”

Matthew 23:23

But this assumption (that Jesus was only talking to Jews under the Old Covenant) is grounded in “Dispensationalism” which teaches that the ministry of Christ was not during a time of transition between Covenants, but rather was entirely a continuation of the Old Covenant. Which, therefore (in their reasoning), *anything* Christ taught was actually only meant for Jews. But this is totally illogical. If that is true then we have no teachings of Christ that are applicable for today since we are under the New Covenant! This then makes the Great Commission absurd since Christ commanded that His followers teach everything He had commanded. When we read in Matthew 23:23 that Jesus endorsed tithing we cannot simply dismiss this as inadmissible evidence. In fact, based on the charge in the Great Commission we need to take it very seriously.

Since tithing is a principle which honours God and causes our hearts to trust and fear Him it seems reasonable to consider that since God says He would bless those who tithe that this blessing is available today. But it raises the issue of how we understand “blessing”. Based on the principle of Deuteronomy 8:18, tithing is done because we *are* blessed not *to be* blessed.

You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers, as it is this day.

Deuteronomy 8:18

“Blessing” is God’s provision. Blessing does not mean opulence. Blessing does not mean excess. You might however be experiencing both of these conditions. To you the Scriptures have some dire warnings about what you trust and where your heart is (1Tim. 6:17, “*As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.*”). But it would be wrong to think that unless you are living in opulence and excess you are not being blessed by God. The great G.K. Chesterton once walked past an obviously extremely wealthy man and was then heard to remark, “*There but for the grace of God go I.*” We should not equate being wealthy as necessarily being *blessed*. Neither should we think that if we only have enough to get by and just a little to be generous that we are not prospering. Prosperity is a blessing that looks like God meeting our needs and using us as a channel of blessing toward others.

We therefore don’t tithe to prosper, but because we *are* prospering.

THE NEW COVENANT EXCEEDS THE OLD

Some Christians object to tithing because they appeal to the New Covenant being about grace and not Law. This assumes that the standards of grace are lower than the standards of the Law, or worse still, that grace-received has no obligations. This assumption completely misses the direction of the New Covenant- it is not a move away from

Law, but the fulfilment of the Law and move toward the essence of the Law- loving God and therefore loving others.

For example, the Law said *Do not murder*, but the New Covenant says, *Don't be angry in your heart toward another person* (Matt. 5:21-22, “*You have heard that the law of Moses says, ‘Do not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment.’ But I say, if you are angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the high council. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell.*”). Jesus made it clear that the demands of the Law were not to be “relaxed” (Matt. 5:19), and that His followers were to “exceed” the standards of the Old Covenant. This doesn’t mean that we should sacrifice (more) animals for our sin under the New Covenant because Christ has fulfilled the demands for blood sacrifice that the Law demanded. But it should mean that what was “right” under the Old Covenant (and was done out of a sense of duty) is still “right” under the New Covenant and should now be done out of sense of heartfelt worship. For a brief treatment of “Grace-Giving” I recommend watching Randy Alcorn’s YouTube video on the subject.

Randy Alcorn says that tithing is the “training wheels” of giving. In other words, because 10% was what the Law prescribed as the minimum tithe (and we have seen that the overall figure was perhaps at least 30%), it would be a backward step to consider that Grace has a far lower standard than the Law. For the person who rejects the idea of New Testament tithing and yet espouses “grace-giving” we should assume that they are giving at least 11%.

WHERE SHOULD THE TITHE GO?

Every believer should belong to a local expression of the Church. Since the local church is where the believer is pooling their time, talent and treasure to help fulfil the Great Commission and to build a community of Christ-followers, it is here that the believer should tithe. The fact that Paul could write to local churches and instruct them on the use of their funds implies that these New Testament local churches were the recipients of their congregational members' giving. Many churches also seek additional funds to fulfil their foreign missions program, their building construction/maintenance programs, special projects and relief programs. Church members should support these initiatives. Other churches encourage their members to tithe the minimum into the local church and then find missional organisations to financially support directly. If you are uncomfortable tithing into your local church then why are you going there?

In our own church I have always strived to be the most generous giver in the church. As the pastor, I feel it is my leadership responsibility to set the right example by being a generous giver. In addition to this giving, my family gives to several other missions and relief organisations including World Vision and Compassion. I do not live in opulence. I live in a modest home and drive a modest car. I receive a modest wage. But I am blessed and prospering. I am no worse off for giving my tithes and offerings, in fact, I am fairly convinced (based on the evidence so far) that I am actually better off.

WHAT

IS "THE" MODEL FOR r'oday?

The authors argue for an "organic" model of Church. They claim that this is *the* model presented in the New Testament. This model looks like House Churches. While there is nothing wrong with House Churches, there is something seriously wrong with claiming that this is *the* model for every church congregation. Healthy churches know how to assemble publicly (Hebrews 10:24-25) and meet in small groups semi-privately (Acts 2:42-44). The New Testament prescribes that congregations be led by qualified leaders - and as important as this was in the first century, it is absolutely imperative now due to the increased complexity of life.

It also prescribes a God-ordained order of authority within and over congregations which in no way negates the equal access to God that every believer enjoys.

It also broadly tells us to worship God together by prayer, singing, teaching, giving and sharing.

A local congregation of believers is a group that meets under the headship of Christ, submitted to His appointed leaders, guided by the Holy Spirit through the teaching of God's Word, where believers are supported and equipped to glorify God with their gifts.

Andrew Corbett

This statement could be said like this- being part of a church is a *witness* together where the believer can *worship* together and proclaim the *Word* of God together.

History tells us that God has a way of shutting down congregations. In the opening chapters of the Book of Revelation Christ instructs His apostle John to write to the “angels” of the 7 churches of Asia Minor. These “angels” were God’s appointed messenger to each congregation. That is quite literally what the word angel means (messenger). Today we generally use the word “pastor” (based on Hebrews 13:17, 1Peter 5:1ff) to describe the person fulfilling this role. To each of the churches Christ warned them that if they abandoned Him He would remove their candle-stick (shut them down). Perhaps there are church congregations that need to die because they have ceased to seek and represent Christ to a needy world. But for those churches that have culturally adapted to sincerely reach their societies for Christ as a Word-based, worshipful witness, they don’t need the kind of scurrilous allegation that would seek to label them as “pagan” simply because they sincerely seek to honour Christ and His Word.

WHAT IS “THE” RIGHT WAY TO **BAPTISE?**

The authors of Pagan Christianity object to the way most modern churches baptise people today. They say that since the first Church baptised people immediately, so should we today. But this is not quite accurate. Those who were baptised were thoroughly familiar with the Gospel they were accepting. On the Day of Pentecost the 3,000 who were baptised were devout Jews who were thoroughly familiar with the Scriptures. Could the same be said of new Christians today?



Water Baptism is not a trivial thing. It should not be undertaken lightly. It should be the most considered decision anyone makes for it is the declaration that an old way of living has ceased and that Christ will now be the Supreme reason for everything a person does. Viola and Barna are right to criticise the supposed “decisions for Christ” as the public witness of conversion. It is not. In fact, since conversion to Christ is the greatest, the most momentous decision a person can make, it is perhaps better to invite people to turn to Christ in a very considered fashion that requires them to have weighed the cost of such a decision (Luke 14:28).

At Legana we do not generally place a lot of pressure on a person to “make a decision” to follow Christ and then publicly demonstrate that decision immediately by coming forward in an “altar call”. Rather, we place nearly all our focus on the public demonstration of faith in Christ at Water Baptism.

WHY WATER BAPTISM IS SO IMPORTANT

A believer does not have to be baptised to be saved from sin but a true believer will be baptised *because* they are saved from sin. We are saved entirely upon the basis of the finished work of Christ on the Cross.

“Regeneration” is another word for “born-again”.

He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit,

Titus 3:5

Regeneration is what must happen in order for us to be saved from our sin and made fit for a relationship with God. Without spiritual regeneration we are “dead in sin”.

¶ *And you were dead in the trespasses and sins*

Ephesians 2:1

We are saved from sin because of the *grace of God*. “Grace” is undeserved, unearned, and unwarranted. God initiates His grace to save us. We didn’t reach to Him- He reached out to us. This is the foundational truth of salvation: *that God saves us by His grace and gives us the necessary faith to receive it.*



For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Ephesians 2:8-9

We are not saved because we “make a decision” to follow Christ. This idea is called *Decisional Regeneration*. And neither are we saved because we are baptised. This idea is called *Baptismal Regeneration*. We are baptised *because* we are saved.

Water Baptism is a picture of dying to an identity (that we are sinners) by being submerged under water, and it is a picture of being “resurrected” to a new identity (a Christian) when we are raised up from the water. In this way, water baptism is identifying with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. This is the picture that the apostle Paul paints in Romans 6.

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

¶ *For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.*

We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.

Romans 6:3-6

John the Baptist was baptising people before Jesus began His ministry. He was doing this as an act of people’s

repentance from sin. When Jesus, the only sinless person, came to John to be baptised, John The Baptist was reluctant. But Jesus more or less said to John that He was doing the right thing - this was an *example* for His followers-

John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.

Matthew 3:14-15

And the last thing that Christ commanded His apostles was to go *preach* the Gospel, *baptise* those who receive it, and *teach* His commands.

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Matthew 28:19-20

Jesus reinforced the picture presented by John The Baptist that water baptism was a form of outward display of a person's inner change- repentance from sin.

But Christian baptism is more than just a display of a convert's repentance – it is a sealing of the covenant they now have with God. Under the Old Covenant men "sealed the covenant" by being circumcised-

You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.

Genesis 17:11

But the New Covenant teaches that it is no longer circumcision that is the sign of a covenant with God, but water baptism-

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

Colossians 2:11-12

In this sense, water baptism is like a marriage covenant. When we accept and receive Christ it is *like* becoming *engaged* to Christ. Just as the wedding ceremony is the sealing of the covenant that a couple have entered into, so water baptism is the sealing of the covenant that a believer has made with Christ. It has the same elements of a wedding- *an oath, witnesses, publicly ending a way of life, binding of two people together, entering into a new community, taking on a new identity.*

The ramifications of being water baptised are therefore great.



But does all of this need to be understood before a believer is baptised? Not necessarily. But it is unfair to claim that since first century, Biblically-literate, covenant-familiar, Jews were baptised immediately upon receiving the Gospel, so should present-day, Biblically-illiterate, new converts who are not familiar with covenants. When Philip evangelised the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8 it was after he had *taught* this man that the man realised what water baptism involved, why it was important and that it was an imperative of Christ.

Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?” And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him.

Acts 8:35-38

At Legana we place almost no emphasis on a public decision of conversion to Christ – but we place enormous emphasis - of Biblical proportions - on water baptism. While there is no excuse for a believer delaying this act of obedience unnecessarily, it is necessary that they understand what they are doing. This doesn't need to take months. It can happen in a mere matter of hours.

HOW SHOULD WE DO THE LORD'S TABLE?

It is appropriate to discuss the “Lord’s supper” (1Cor. 11:20) after having discussed water baptism. This is because, the Lord’s Table is the covenant meal for believers who have sealed their covenant with God through water baptism. The Old Testament sequence is that the Passover Meal (the precedent or “shadow” of the Lord’s Supper) was only for those who had sealed the covenant with God.

The authors of *PAGAN CHRISTIANITY* lightly mock the method of keeping the Lord’s Table by most contemporary churches today. They claim that the First Church celebrated the Lord’s Supper by keeping a feast and liberally drinking wine and eating bread to remember with thanks what Christ had done for them.

While the authors are probably right that this sacrament was originally celebrated with joy rather than mourning, their assumptions about *how* this was celebrated are questionable. They base their assumption on how the Early Church did the Lord’s Table almost entirely on some obscure statements in First Corinthians 11. There is no evidence elsewhere in the New Testament that the early believers practised the Lord’s Supper in the same way as the Corinthians. In fact, based on Paul’s rebuke of the Corinthians for how they celebrated it, chances are that the other first century congregations did not practice the Lord’s Table in the same way.

The Corinthians certainly did incorporate a “love feast” into their celebration of the Lord’s Table. But Paul rebukes them for this! He tells them that they were *not* really celebrating the Lord’s Supper-

When you come together, it is not the Lord’s supper that you eat.

1Corinthians 11:20

Paul goes on to condemn them for turning the Lord’s Table into a mere feast. He further condemns them for their gluttony and inconsideration of others.

For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.

1Corinthians 11:21-22



Therefore, when Viola and Barna deride those contemporary churches who practice the Lord’s Table in an *emblematic* way because they are not “feasting”, they have perhaps completely missed the point of what Paul

actually wrote to the Corinthians. Secondly, the point of the Lord’s Supper is surely not the quantity of the bread and the wine consumed. Thus, when most contemporary churches provide an “emblem” of unleavened bread and wine, they are not being “pagan”.



Is it necessarily wrong for a believer to be moved emotionally when partaking of the Lord's Table because they ponder the *broken body of our Lord Jesus* and His *shed blood*?

WHAT

IS THE CHURCH'S MISSION?

PAGAN CHRISTIANITY criticises and then dismisses the idea that the Church exists to preach the Gospel and save sinners. At Legana Christian Church we do not regard this as our sole purpose since we also exist to glorify God by living as a Christ-centred, witnessing, worshiping, and caring community. But to dismiss the redemptive role of the Church altogether in light of the tenor of the New Testament is bewildering - and if this redefining of the Church's role is uncritically accepted by Christian readers, it is very concerning.

Readers should be aware that Viola and Barna promote the typical neo-liberalism of the Emerging Church as they seek to redefine the mission of the Church by first redefining the mission of Christ and the reason He was crucified.

...Isaiah was sawn in half, John the Baptist was beheaded, and Jesus was crucified. Not to mention the thousands of Christians who have been tortured and martyred through the centuries by the institutional church because they dared to challenge its teachings.

PAGAN CHRISTIANITY, page 4

Were these godly witnesses executed for asking questions and challenging the teachings of existing religious

authorities? No. Isaiah was killed because he condemned King Manasseh's sin. John the Baptist was executed because he called Herod to repentance regarding his adultery with Herodias. Jesus was crucified because He claimed to be God in the flesh – not because He asked questions – and not merely as an example of selflessness - but as the Lamb of God who alone could redeem mankind from the curse of sin!

The Neo-liberal Emerging church proponents, like Viola, Barna, and Bell, want to make the mission of the church entirely about anything other than “saving the lost” and it seems they do this partly because they have presented a reinvented Jesus to be a mere agitator against religious authority rather than a Saviour.

WHAT THE NEW TESTAMENT TEACHES ABOUT THE LOCAL CHURCH

GATHERING AS AN ASSEMBLY

The New Testament prescribes that believers should gather together as an *assembly*.

not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

Hebrews 10:25

When a group gathers together to *assemble* it is because there is clear purpose in their meeting that is structured with order. This requires leadership from someone. And this leadership is generally provided by the God-appointed shepherd/elder within the assembly of God's people.

At Legana we are blessed with some excellent leaders who are skilled at helping us to assemble for the purpose of being a collective witness to our community, to worship with praise and offerings, and to proclaim and heed God's Word.

Our assembling together serves to strengthen our devotion to the Lord and to each other. It is commanded in Hebrews 10:25. It also helps us to fulfil the “one another” instructions of the New Testament.

that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.

1Corinthians 12:25

THE ROLE OF SINGING & MUSIC IN CHURCH

The early believers heeded the Psalms as a major guide in how they worshiped. The Psalms tell God’s people to enter into our assembly with singing and praise.

¶ *Praise the LORD!
Sing to the LORD a new song,
And His praise in the assembly of saints.*

Psalms 149:1

Biblical, healthy, well-balanced, contemporary churches generally do just this: *their assembling opens with bright praise*. While there is nothing Biblically wrong about the type of venue where there is to happen (a house, a school, a park, a worship centre) it is not correct to claim that this should only take place in houses. The Psalms again declare that worship of God can be in a “great assembly” of worshipers-

*I will give you thanks in the great assembly;
among throngs of people I will praise you.*

Psalms 35:18

Therefore, there is nothing unbiblical with large congregations or even “mega” churches. Indeed, it is probable that some of the First Century churches could have been described as such.

The Psalms command that God be worshiped with a variety of musical instruments as God’s people sing His praises.

Use guitars to reinforce your Hallelujahs!

Play his praise on a grand piano!

Psalm 33:2, THE MESSAGE

While every believer has the opportunity to be active rather than passive in their worship, the Psalms are frequently addressed to the “Choir Master”.

¶ *TO THE CHOIRMASTER: WITH STRINGED INSTRUMENTS. A PSALM OF DAVID.*

Psalm 4:0

¶ *TO THE CHOIRMASTER: WITH STRINGED INSTRUMENTS; ACCORDING TO THE SHEMINITH. A PSALM OF DAVID.*

Psalm 6:0

This at least implies that God is not against skilled worship leaders leading God’s people in praise.

THE ROLE OF THE PASTOR & HIS SUPPORT BY THE CHURCH

The New Testament teaches that the shepherd (pastor) of a congregation is an “overseer” who tends to the flock of God by-

- (i) His example of a godly, sincere devoted life to Christ
- (ii) His attention to the Word of God in his own life

- (iii) His ministry of the Word of God to the congregation he is entrusted with
- (iv) His constant prayers for his church family
- (v) His wise counsel
- (vi) His rebuking, admonishing, correcting, and encouraging of the assembly

shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

1Peter 5:2-3

A shepherd must have two eyes and two ears. With one eye he looks to the Lord and with the other he watches over his flock.

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

Acts 20:28

This is not a job, but a ministry. Therefore, the pastor is not *paid* but *supported* financially. When a congregation reaches a certain size, the demands of fulfilling the role of a shepherd become a heavier burden that requires time and effort. If it is at all possible a shepherd should be bi-vocational – but where it is possible and agreeable, a local church’s pastor/shepherd can be supported in such a way that they focus entirely on their ministry.

*Who serves as a soldier at his own expense?
Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its
fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting
some of the milk?*

1Corinthians 9:7

The pastor is not “paid to do a job”. For those unfamiliar with the teaching of the New Testament to every believer to care for one another (1Cor. 12:25) there is often the false expectation that the pastor is the Visitor of the church who must provide *most* of the care within the church. This unbiblical expectation has crushed many pastors and dashed the expectations of many congregations. The pastor is simply not fulfilling the clear instructions of the New Testament if he takes it upon himself to be the primary or even sole care-giver within an assembly. The New Testament instructs him to *equip the saints* for caring for *one another* with their various gifts and ministries.

to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,

Ephesians 4:12

It is a beautiful thing when a pastor loves his church and his church loves him. It is a delight to see a pastor settled on who he isn't, accepting of what he's not called to do, and at peace with what he isn't doing. It is a lovely thing to see a healthy church caring one for another, loving God through their obvious devotion to Him, exploring the use of their spiritual gifts, and unashamed to invite their friends or family to attend their church's assembly.

The pastor serves as a leader within, of, and on behalf of the assembly. One of my most important leadership roles is *representing* our church. This type of leadership is needed when our assembly works cooperatively with other church assemblies, takes on community projects, lobbies, produces evangelistic/apologetic/teaching media, or speaks in the public arena. I am thankful to God that I am supported by church that believes in this vital aspect of pastoral ministry.

DISCIPLESHIP WITHIN A LOCAL CHURCH

Every local church, no matter what its size, should have an intentional discipleship plan. This discipleship plan needs to be furthered every time the church assembles *and* when it gathers in homes. The goal of discipleship is Christian maturity. This is achieved by learning, implementing teaching, practising spiritual disciplines and helping others to be better disciples of Christ. The most effective way this happens is when the church assembles on a Sunday to witness, worship and proclaim the Word - *and* when it meets in small groups.

¶ *And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

Acts 2:42

And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Acts 2:46-46

The public assembly of the church combined with (the more) private meetings in homes is the pattern observed by the early Church and one that has still stood the test of time as the most effective way for the Church to fulfil the Great Commission of Christ.

PRAYER

It is my prayer that churches will continue to strive to make the necessary adjustments in practice, teaching, and structure to best conform with the intention of Christ as

revealed in the Scriptures, and therefore becoming pagan. As we, and future generations, do this, we can adjust our methods without compromising our message of salvation through none other but Jesus of Nazareth. Trends, fads and new ideas about how all this can be done will come and go. The current “Emerging” church push by some is one such fad.

I have supreme confidence in the God of all power who guards His Church jealously to preserve, protect, and provide for it. To Him be all glory.

Amen.

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