



## Q&A

# CAN WE REDEEM CHURCH?

INTERVIEW BY JEFF GOINS

Frank Viola, the author of *Pagan Christianity* and *Reimagining Church*, discusses how a return to organic church life could fix the Church but admits there are some parts of modern “church” that need to be left behind.

## WHAT GOT YOU STARTED ON THIS JOURNEY TO “REDEEM CHURCH”?

Twenty-one years ago, I stepped outside of the institutional Church. And I discovered organic church life, and it wrecked me for anything else. Once you taste the organic, you never want to return to “fast food.”

My thirst for the Church finds its roots there 21 years ago. When you touch the freedom of authentic body life, you’ve touched something of heaven. It’s organic to divine nature. Some people reading this interview may have touched it before. And they remember Zion. But they probably also saw it prostituted. Yet for one bright shining moment, they knew Camelot. They’ve known body life. And it changed their lives and made them seekers.

As a result of that experience, I started asking a simple question. Historically, where did we get our church traditions from? Two things quickly became clear. One: Hardly anyone writes on this subject. Two: Hardly anyone speaks on this subject.

As far as I know, *Pagan Christianity* is the only book that documents the story of Protestant church practices. I wrote the book in 2002. George Barna got a hold of it, called me and we talked about making it available to a wider audience. Tyndale got involved, George and I worked on a rewrite of the book together and the new version is much better than the original edition.

The book is an attempt to clear space so God’s people may see and know their Lord more deeply. In the book, we’re headed straight for the headship of Jesus Christ and the full functioning of His body. This is where my heart beats. Every drop of blood in my body knows it. Every cell in my brain knows it. The marrow in my bones knows it. The centrality, supremacy and headship of Jesus Christ has been the unction of my life, and it’s the provocation of *Pagan Christianity* and the sequel, *Reimagining Church*. In short, I believe that Jesus Christ has gotten shortchanged in the body of Christ today. I’d like to see that trend reversed. Hence these two books.

In short, I believe that Jesus Christ has gotten shortchanged in the body of Christ today. I’d like to see that trend reversed.

## IN BOTH *PAGAN CHRISTIANITY* AND *REIMAGINING CHURCH*, YOU ENCOURAGE CHRISTIANS TO APPROACH THE BIBLE WITH AN OPEN MIND, NOT READING INTO THE SCRIPTURES THEIR OWN EXPERIENCES AND WHAT THEY’VE BEEN TAUGHT, BUT TO OBJECTIVELY SEEK A BIBLICAL MODEL OF CHURCH. HOW DID YOU DO THAT?

None of us reads Scripture in a vacuum. The problem is we’re conditioned to read back into the New Testament our church traditions. A Baptist sees a Baptist church in the book of Acts. A Catholic sees a Catholic church, and on and on.

Part of the problem is that we approach the New Testament with scissors and glue. We use a cut-and-paste approach to interpret the Bible. The fact that the New Testament is not written in chronological order and is divided up into chapters and verses makes this an easy rut to fall into. George and I address how we approach the

New Testament in Chapter 11 of *Pagan Christianity*.

I get tons of letters from readers testifying how it opened their eyes on how they approach the Bible. That chapter also offers a new way to approach the Scriptures, one that takes the historical context and chronological order into account.

In short, the New Testament is a narrative—a story. As long as we approach it in its present order and read it in its fragmented form (chapters and verses), we'll continue to miss the narrative and any interpretation can be justified by the text.

Before I left the traditional Church, I was fairly adept at “proof-texting.” That is, taking isolated verses from various books of the New Testament and pasting them together to understand God's thought on a particular subject. (This is, by far, the most popular form of Bible study in Christianity today.) Living in body life, however, gave me an entirely new context by which to interpret the New Testament.

The great majority of the New Testament was written to organic churches that were experiencing body life. That was the context in which the vast bulk of New Testament statements were made. The vast majority wasn't written to individuals.

Consequently, the many verses that we Christians like to quote don't belong to us as individuals. They were addressed to local Christian communities. They have very little individual application to you or me. They instead find application in Christian community. Therefore, when one lives in that same context (organic church life), many of the statements in the New Testament take on new meaning. The New Testament becomes a brand new book, and most all of what it says applies like never before. The reason: The context is now understood in a fresh way.

**A LOT OF PEOPLE NOW ARE CALLING FOR A “NEW REVOLUTION” IN THE CHRISTIAN WORLD. HOWEVER, HOW IS THE MESSAGE OF REIMAGINING CHURCH NOT NEW? HAVE THERE BEEN RADICALS MAINTAINING THE ORGANIC ROOTS OF CHURCH LIFE, OR IS THIS SOMETHING UNSEEN SINCE THE FIRST CENTURY?**

There's always been a testimony outside the institutional Church. You can trace it as far back as the fourth century. The Radical Reformers are an example of this testimony during the days of the Protestant Reformation. Even in the United States, there have been three currents of Christians who began finding Jesus Christ in community outside the institutional Church.

Others who've reviewed *Reimagining Church* have noted that it's unique in three ways: 1) It blends together the high church view of Christian community and the Trinity with the low church view of church life without a professional clergy and an institutional structure.

2) It takes the historic teaching of the Triune God and takes it to its logical and practical conclusion on its practical outworking in the life of a church. It does the same for the notion that the Church is an organism and answers the question: what does that mean practically?

3) It reshapes the mission of the Church and the mission of God in terms of God's eternal purpose (Ephesians 3:11), something we rarely hear about today, despite the fact that it's the central thought of the entire Bible.

**DOES THE NEW TESTAMENT GIVE US A LIST OF REGULATIONS BY WHICH TO ADHERE TO BE “BIBLICAL,” OR ARE WE GIVEN SOME FREEDOM TO RE-INVENT THE THEMES OF SCRIPTURE?**

I make it clear in the first chapters that it's a mistake to see the New Testament as a manual for church practice. I call it “biblical blueprintism.” It's created sectarian movements throughout Church history that were legalistic and full of death.

The New Testament is a record of Emmanuel, Jesus Christ, and how His indwelling life expresses itself in His people when they gather together organically.

The Church has an organic expression. That expression will look different depending on the time and culture it's planted in. But it will share the same basic traits, because those traits are rooted in the DNA of the triune God (which changes not).

While contextualization needs to occur, the problem is, we've over-contextualized the New Testament so that we've created the Church in our image.

**IN REIMAGINING CHURCH, YOU MAKE A CASE FOR A PASTOR-LESS CHURCH WHERE THE LAYPEOPLE LEAD A FELLOWSHIP. HOW IS THIS DONE? CAN “INSTITUTIONAL CHURCHES” BE SAVED?**

The Church of Jesus Christ organically produces all the gifts and functions found in the New Testament, including shepherds. But first-century shepherds were a far cry from the pastoral office invented during the Reformation and the norm today.

I was talking to one of the major leaders of the charismatic movement in the 1970s the other day. He was on the forefront of the first move of God in the U.S. that was mostly outside the institutional Church (I'm speaking of the Jesus Revolution). He said, “Our fundamental mistake was that we believed the system could be saved. We were wrong. You can't change the system. You must leave it.”

We need to create bumper stickers that say, “It's the system, stupid!” As long as we embrace the clergy system and settle for Band-Aids and patchwork jobs, we'll never see the headship of Jesus Christ and the organic nature of body life fully restored in a given church.

Part of the problem is that we approach the New Testament with scissors and glue.

**HOW CAN CONFLICTED LEADERS IN MINISTRY WHO KNOW GOD HAS CALLED THEM TO SERVE THE CHURCH RESPOND TO YOUR CALL FOR ORGANIC CHRISTIANITY?**

Fifteen hundred pastors leave the pastorate each month in the U.S. That's 18,000 per year.

I receive letters from conflicted pastors on a regular basis. My friends, some of whom are ex-pastors themselves, created a website for pastors who are conflicted and want out of the system: [housechurchresource.org/expastors](http://housechurchresource.org/expastors). It has testimonies of ex-pastors and a survival guide to help them find work outside the system. Hundreds of pastors visit this site each month—many consider it a lifeline. 🙏