

REVIEW: Is the modern church more rooted in pagan customs?

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Pagan Christianity

Frank Viola & George Barna (Tyndale House, 336pgs, \$18h)

For longer than I care to admit, I naively assumed that the way we did church was, well, biblical. I simply took it for granted that were the Apostle Paul to be magically beamed into the present, he would feel right at home in one of our American churches and would not at all be startled by our plush red carpets and pseudo-medieval stained glass, our Sunday neckties and high heels, our pulpits and pews and steeples and vested clergy and ritual sitting-standing-sitting weekend calisthenics and choirs and worship teams and the bizarre way we talk in our erudite **Christianity**-as-a-second-language insider jargon. I wonder what he might think of our vogue institutions - like purpose-driven, seeker-sensitive megachurches, satellite campuses, EFT tithing, cell groups, affinity units, Web sites, big-screen projection systems, stage lighting, et cetera, ad infinitum. Would the apostle be envious or appalled? Are we on track, or has novelty and technology caused us to veer from a set path? I have colleagues on both sides of these issues, and both present sound, even biblical, cases, one for looking back and embracing tradition and the other for implementing technology and, looking avant-garde, to the future.

But I still wonder. And so do church planter Frank Viola and market analyst George Barna in their just-released book "**Pagan Christianity**?" They are less ambivalent than I am and view the modern church as more rooted in ancient **pagan** customs than in being the pure product of the New Testament. What they suggest is the startling, even revolutionary, claim that much of what Christians do in present-day churches has evolved more from non-Christian cultures and rituals developed long after the deaths of the apostles than from scripture. They support their view with compelling historical evidence in what may be a first-ever exploration to document the full story of modern church practices and the way we do church in America.

"**Pagan Christianity**" will probably pry open an unwelcomed can of worms. For Christians committed to a literal reading of scripture, who dogmatically believe in "doing it by the book," the authors will present a dilemma. You will have to ask yourself: If I am to believe that our lives should be ordered by scripture, then why not the way we do church? "**Pagan Christianity**" boldly goes where no man has dared to go and exposes the problems that emerge when churches function more like profane business organizations than the living organism presented in scripture.

Other troubling questions raised are: Why do we modern Christians have such an "edifice complex," an obsession with buildings and property? Where did our idea of the need for architecture and steeples, pulpits and pews, departments and budgets come from? What about our chiseled-in-stones "order of worship?" How biblical is the centerpiece of Protestantism: the sermon? How necessary, really, is a professional clergy and support staff? Does the way we dress up on Sunday merely cover up deeper, more insidious, matters? Does our emphasis on "Christian education" serve more to swell the head than fill the heart? These are questions you have probably already asked yourself. Frank Viola and George Barna dare to offer some thoughtful answers ... whether we like them or not.

- reviewed by Jim Miller, Vineyard Church