

“—SO YOU’RE SAYING THAT IN THE EARLY CHURCH THERE WERE NO ELDERS OR PASTORS TO MAKE DECISIONS, OR TO SAY WHERE THE MONEY WAS GOING?” “THAT’S RIGHT”....

Will The Real Pagan Please Stand Up?

by Dean Taylor

When I walked up to the display booth, I noticed amongst the line of onlookers that a news reporter from Trinity Broadcasting was interviewing the author. Trinity broadcasting, a large international charismatic television network, was asking James Rutz, “—So you’re saying that in the early church there were no elders or pastors to make decisions, or to say where the money was going?” “That’s right,” answered James Rutz, the writer of the new book *The Open Church*. As they kept talking, I mulled around the display racks looking at their latest books. It was the 1992 Christian Book Sellers’ Convention, and I was there representing new books for Scroll Publishing Co. The first day of the convention I received a booklet by James Rutz that had rendered the first few chapters of his new book. I had appreciated Seedsowers Press, and, being a fellow house-church man, I was naturally interested in what they had to say. However, that night back in my hotel room I was shocked over what I read. The book made the common radical claim—that modern Christianity had completely messed up original Christianity—a point I agreed with. Going on with this theme the book was claiming to be an attempt to set the record straight, basing its methods on biblical literalism supposedly backed up by the witness and writings of the early church.



I happened to have been reading the early Christian writers heavily at the time. As a matter of fact, I had brought Tertullian’s Volume 3 of the Ante-Nicene Fathers along with me to the convention. But that night in the hotel I read an entirely different early church in the pages

of Rutz’s book than I had been reading. Right from the start of the book, Rutz described the communion service of the early Christians as an “often-boisterous affair” where everyone was the “star of the show.” He went on to say that “the *whoopee* part” of the meeting, which he called the love feast, “resembled a cross between a Super Bowl victory celebration and a frat party (with a few cups of wine instead of the keg of suds).”

Going further, he explained that the church lost this free-for-all style of worship in the advent of church buildings, pastoral ministry, church structure, etc., etc. Then after making several appeals to the early church, Rutz offers his one-and-only actual quote from the early church (well...kind of an actual quote). Claiming to be quoting Tertullian he says,

“In our Christian meetings we have plenty of songs, verses, sentences, and proverbs. [obviously individual] After hand-washing and bringing in the lights, each Christian is asked to stand forth and sing, as best he can, a hymn to God, either of his own composing, or one from the Holy Scriptures.”

I thought the quote sounded familiar; so there in the hotel room I reached for my Tertullian book and found the quote. However, I saw that the first line of the quote was made up, and the whole context of Tertullian’s passage showed something quite different than what Rutz described.

After waiting my time in line I finally found my way to James Rutz. I mentioned to him some of my concerns with the way that he was representing the early Chris-

tians. I showed him that his reference from Tertullian was misquoted, and that the sentences right before his quote describe a completely opposite picture of early Christian worship than what he was portraying. I took him to the very passage he had quoted and showed him how Tertullian explains the love feast with these sobering words, “great rebukes and censures are made by the brethren” and “great gravity is the work of judging carried on by them.” I showed him how Tertullian goes on recording what great concern is made to maintain a strict sense of sobriety in both food and drink. After showing Mr. Rutz all the quotes I said, “This doesn’t sound too much like a frat party to me.”

He looked at me blankly for what seemed a peculiarly long time; and then told me that I needed to go speak with his publisher, Gene Edwards, and led me to him. I tried to share my same concerns with him as well but he quickly changed the subject. I asked him to explain why he represented the early Church in such an irreverent posture. He picked up a new book that his publishing company was reprinting called *Ante Pacem* and turned to a catacomb picture of a love feast and said, “Look—they’re *smiling!*” His reasoning took me by surprise. After a little discussion, and with genuine curiosity, I asked him to further explain his approach with the entire early church in general. I asked, “I have been reading a lot of the early church lately; and I’m confused with why I am getting something so completely different from the *actual* writings of the early Church than what I have been reading from your books *about* the early church.” He again picked up the book and held it up to my face and said, “They’re smiling...” Probing a bit, I asked him, “Well, what do you do with the actual writings of the early Christians before Constantine... You know, the ten volume set of the



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eternal, he chided me for believing in water baptism, telling me that water baptism was no longer necessary. He then informed me that he was not even intending to baptize his own daughter.

An older—and wiser—brother that was there with me suggested, “Why don’t we just agree to disagree.” However, not being too long converted, I had a lot of things to sort out. I really was trying to understand the claims that he was making. My answer was simply, “I am just looking for truth.”

At that Gene Edwards quickly looked my way, came very close to my face (a bit in my personal space) and said, “You’re looking for truth?”

Startled again, I replied, “Yes, sir.”

“That’s probably the worst thing—no, wait a minute, that *is* the worst thing you could do.”

“What...look for truth?” I asked.

“Precisely! Paul wasn’t looking for truth! Paul wasn’t looking for understanding...Paul was looking for a—*a revelation.*”

Needing clarification, I asked, “So... if I get a revelation, would I still agree with the Apostle Paul?”

Moving his arm and fingers in a circular motion Gene Edwards said, “It is the same revelation...it just circles through time...you must tap into that *revelation.*”

Ante-Nicene fathers?” I’ll never forget his response. He said, “Oh, I haven’t read those things since seminary!”

I was staggered. I thought, “Wait a minute... You are *the* early Church guru—you’ve written all these books on what you *claim* the early church is like, but you mean to tell me you haven’t actually read the early church since what little of it you read in seminary many years ago?!” Looking for a practical application, we somehow started talking about baptism. To my surprise, while giving me some kind of reasoning that salvation is

Now pressing the point, I asked, “Okay... so if I do get this ‘revelation’ ...will I at least agree with the Bible???”

Gene Edwards looked over to Jim Rutz—they smirked at each other—then looked back at me and Gene Edwards said, “Throw away your Bible and get a revelation.” Immediately after that he dismissed himself, saying that his voice was sore and he needed to get a glass of water. They both walked off while I struggled to scrape my jaw back up off the floor.

In his defense, allow me to say that I think Gene Edwards probably enjoys saying shocking things to young Bible thumpers just to elicit a response. That said, I still feel that the incident revealed some pretty significant problems. And the biggest problem being namely this—



a fuzzy view of truth. I’m all for seeking God’s still, small voice in my heart. He often reveals hidden sin in my heart. However, I also know too well that my heart can easily lead me astray if it isn’t scrutinized under the subjection of God’s written Word. Over and over again through the years, it has been God’s written Word that has kept me. When I hear of the various “revelations” that many people claim these days, I find that the “sure word of prophecy” found in the written Word of God a great strength and stability. There have been many people through the ages who have claimed some sort of divine “revelation.” That list is as diverse as the Mormons’ founder, Joseph Smith, down to that strange-but-nice lady at the Laundromat! They each claim their own “revelation.” This is significant, especially considering that Paul said, “But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed” (Gal 1:8).

The House Church Movement

The house church movement has gained a lot of steam in the last fifty years—especially if you consider the tremendous success of the Chinese house churches. This movement has provided a refreshing alternative to worldly, nominal church life. All across the country, little cells of awakened pilgrims are meeting together to encourage, challenge, and worship—many seeking a return to the old paths. Likewise, right along with these house churches, scores of little radical groups are springing up meeting in rented hotels, storefronts, and borrowed buildings—all challenging the status quo. I believe this is the future of committed Christians at large. Since my

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conversion in Germany almost twenty years ago, I have fellowshipped in, or closely with, one of these types of gatherings. I spent years in living room churches; and even now my current “church” meets in a rented community-type building. As “Christianity” continues to dive further into modernity and compromise, I believe the true, awakened Christians will more and more feel the need to look for more meaningful gatherings of believers. That said, as it is with so many of God’s blessings, Satan is quick to distract and counterfeit the truth with a lie. As much as I am blessed with these radical communities, I am not always happy with the voices that claim to be speaking for all of us at large.

One of the most alarming of these voices has come on the scene in the disturbing trend of the ultra-critical, iconoclastic, everybody-is-wrong books. Much like the books of the 1990s by Gene Edwards, or those of his friend James Rutz, new books have recently emerged on the scene that are a great disappointment. In particular,

a recent best seller, *Pagan Christianity*, by Frank Viola and George Barna does a grave disservice to the house church movement.

The Small Stuff

There are many things worth mentioning about these books that are claiming to speak for the “house church” and “radical” Christian movement. However, I have found that many of the issues are so unfounded that they actually take care of themselves in time. For instance, Frank Viola’s new book *Pagan Christianity* says preaching is pagan, order of worship is pagan, and even chairs—according to Viola—are pagan. Many of these things sound radical. However, I have noticed that most house church brethren see through issues like these. Most Christians embrace the freedom in Christ to use—for example—a *sermon* if they need to. These are not the kinds of things that concern me the most with these new books.

Buildings

I also used to think that the big issue was over church buildings. Maybe it’s just the circles I have been in, but oddly enough, I rarely run into a house church man who feels that a group absolutely *has* to meet in a house. Many enjoy meeting in small borrowed places equally as well as houses. And if the Lord adds to their numbers, they don’t seem to feel constrained to keep the fellowship from growing. It would seem that in the past the “building” was a bigger issue when house church ideas were new. It is true that discovering the historical and biblical facts that many of the early Christians met in homes can help prevent a small group from ever needing to feel intimidated or insignificant. However, most agree that facts *about* the early Christians meeting in homes is a lot different than a direct command of Christ that we *must* meet in homes. As a matter of fact, archaeological remains of the oldest pre-Constantine house churches, such as the Dura-Europos, show evidences that groups originally met in their homes, but then over time made significant changes to accommodate for larger crowds.

Dissent and Rebellion

Indeed, the church building is no longer the main target of these newer books. Without a doubt, the biggest

amount of space and passion is devoted to the undermining and disparaging of church leadership. The roles of pastor, elder, deacon, and bishop are where the crosshairs of these new attacks are aimed. It seems that an angry spirit permeates a lot of these writings. After reading some of these books, it makes me wonder who offended these guys. Derogatory remarks are common. In preparing this article I grabbed up an armful of these newer books from around the house. Simply paging through I found numerous negative “buzz” expressions such as: “desire to rule over you,” “mentally abusive,” “large salaries,” “sit in offices,” “honorific titles,” and of course—“conspiracy.” One writer even compared church leadership to an explicit child predator. This type of spirit really concerns me.

Their Argument

The common line of argument from these books usually starts by showing that the terms that we use for leaders: bishops, elders, deacons, and apostles actually come from very common, generic Greek terms:

Bishop = overseer

Elder = older person

Deacon = servant

Apostle = sent one

From this discovery, they usually presume that since these terms are simple generic Greek terms, then they must have no specific (particularly set apart or ordained) role. For example, Viola, writing about the word “pastor” said that it simply is “a metaphor... not an office or a title.” These writers (rightly so) are quick to quote the Scriptures concerning equality—equality between male and female, equality between Greek and Jew, and most especially, equality between brethren and leadership.

In essence I agree, we must be careful here...because it is true, and vitally important, that Jesus taught that Christian leadership should be very different than that of the Gentiles. Jesus said,

“Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them. But so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all” (Mark 10:42).



...TO TAKE THESE POINTS OF EQUALITY, PRIESTHOOD, AND TITLES, AND THEN TO ASSUME THAT THERE WAS NO CONCEPT OF A CLEARLY SET APART AUTHORITY IN THE EARLY CHURCH IS GOING WAY TOO FAR. WE HAVE TO BE CAREFUL LEST WE "THROW OUT THE BABY WITH THE BATH WATER!"

It is also true that in the New Testament the Bible teaches a "priesthood of all believers." This simply means that as Christians we do not need an intercessor or a "go-between" other than Christ to stand between us and God. These are all true points. However, to take these points of equality, priesthood, and titles, and then to assume that there was no concept of a clearly set apart authority in the Early Church is going way too far. It is jumping to false conclusions in a way that is either blindly erroneous or regrettably dishonest. We have to be careful lest we "throw out the baby with the bath water!"

Once we get past the fact that the titles for early Christian leadership were indeed taken from common Greek terms, and that Christian leadership should not be abusive, then we can stop and honestly consider what the Bible actually says about leadership in the church. When we do this we can see that the Scriptures actually give some very specific instruction concerning authority in the church. I have listed a few examples from Scripture. It might be a good exercise to ask yourself after each question, "Is there an idea of authority being mentioned here?"

- ◆ "And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; And to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. And be at peace among yourselves (1 Thess 5:12-13). Notice the words "over you in the Lord." It would seem that this represents at least some kind of authority.
- ◆ At another place the apostle Paul gives qualifications for ordinations to the specific place of "bishops" and "deacons" in the local assembly. Paul said that a bishop must be, "one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity". Then he went on to say, "For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God" (1 Tim 3:4-5)? I think that the

analogy that Paul gave between "ruling" their house and "ruling" the church of God should not be overlooked.

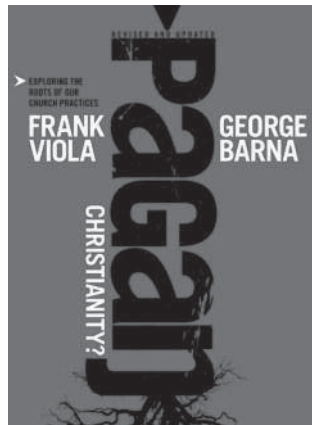
- ◆ Peter tells the elders to "feed the flock," giving the analogy of a shepherd to his sheep. "Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:2-3). An interesting note about this passage is that the word "feed" there is the verb form of the Greek word pastor. It is also worth mentioning that in this passage Peter tells the elders to "take oversight."
- ◆ Paul tells Titus "that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee" (Titus 1:5).
- ◆ Interestingly, when Judas' position was replaced by Matthias in the book of Acts, the apostles quoted the Psalms saying, "For it is written in the book of Psalms, Let his habitation be desolate, and let no man dwell therein: and his bishoprick let another take" (Acts 1:20).
- ◆ Also note in the book of Acts that Luke preserved Paul's admonition to the elders of Ephesus saying, "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood" (Acts 20:28).

Another few revealing passages come from the writer of Hebrews. He chose to use a very strong word for his description of Christian leadership. He used the word—*rule*. I heard someone once challenged an elder by asking him if he would ever use the word "rule" to describe his

ministry. “Absolutely not,” he answered. He then added, “—but the writer of Hebrews did.” Look at these passages.

- ◆ “Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation” (Hebrews 13:7).
- ◆ “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you” (Hebrews 13:17).
- ◆ “Salute all them that have the rule over you, and all the saints. They of Italy salute you” (Hebrews 13:24).

Many of today’s new writers try to play a lot of Greek gymnastics in order to get away from this strong word “rule.” However, if we really want to look at the Greek, the original word there is actually *hegeomai*. This is where we get the English word for “hegemony.” I’ll be honest, I don’t like the word...but it is there and it must be reckoned with. There is simply no way to take the meaning of authority out of this word. Seriously, even if you could... trying to plug in just about any other softer word there in its place really doesn’t change the meaning all that much. No matter how much you might soften up the word, we are still instructed in this passage to “obey them,” and “submit to them,” because they “watch our souls,” and must “render an account” for how they led us. Yes, the titles may have been very non-specific in the early church, but the positions were very exact.



History—by Revelation

When twisting scriptures is not enough, I have seen—without exception—that *all* of these modern writers have turned to the writings of the early church for a defense of their position. This is perhaps the most dis-

honest part of their argument. It seems that no matter what historical evidence these people find, *nothing* will change their mind from what they *believe* the early church looked like. Like the incident I mentioned earlier involving James Rutz and Gene Edwards, these people simply won’t let *truth* get in their way.

The newest book sensation *Pagan Christianity* is a prime example of history by “revelation.” In this book, after the premise was made that the Christians of the Bible had no organized leadership, Viola heads straight for the early pre-Constantine church. The problem here for Viola and others like him, is that they find no witness—no, not one—in the early, pre-Constantine church that holds to their view.

So what do they do?

- ◆ Do they admit that their view is quite a stretch and at least acknowledge that all around the world, separated by geography, language, and culture, everyone in the first century uniformly held to an opposite view?
- ◆ Do they then recognize that the apostles might have never held to anything even remotely close to their view?
- ◆ Do they admit that this view would make the apostles the worst teachers of any world religion in history?
- ◆ Do they admit that considering all these historical findings they could actually be wrong? —Hardly.

Instead, they come up with reasoning like—“They’re *smiling!*”

For example, finding no pre-Constantine witness to his view of church leadership, Viola begins his discussion about the early Christians by indicting them in his long litany of people who he claims messed everything up. He starts with the letters of Ignatius. This early bishop wrote these letters to his surrounding churches on the way to his martyrdom around the year 90 AD. It is clear that Ignatius had a completely opposite view of church leadership than Viola. But instead of admitting that it is a little embarrassing that such an early witness was so completely contrary to his view, Viola instead claims that Ignatius made it all up. In fact, Viola actually says that Ignatius “spawned” this early view of church leadership. The only problem with this however, is that Viola fails to mention that every other witness [includ-

ing much earlier witnesses] also agreed with Ignatius. For instance....

Looking At the *Actual* History

Perhaps the earliest Christian document outside of the New Testament is the Didache. This was written around the year 90 AD. Fortunately for us, they actually recorded how they felt about church leadership in this very early document.

“Appoint, therefore, for yourselves, bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, men meek, and not lovers of money, and truthful and proved; for they also render to you the service of prophets and teachers. Therefore do not despise them, for they are your honored ones, together with the prophets and teachers”(Ch 15).

Clement of Rome

Another very early writer was Clement of Rome. It appears that he was actually a friend of the apostle Paul. When Paul was sending greetings to the Philippians, he said, “With Clement also, and with other my fellowlabourers, whose names are in the book of life.” (Phil 4:3). There are not a lot of writers that we could read that the Bible actually tells us that their name is written “in the book of life.” But Clement is one of them! Listen to what he said about ministry around the year 100 AD.

◆ “The apostles have preached the Gospel to us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ has done so from God. Christ therefore was sent forth by God, and the apostles by Christ. Both these appointments, then, were made in an orderly way, according to the will of God. Having therefore re-

ceived their orders, and being fully assured by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and established in the word of God, with full assurance of the Holy Ghost, they went forth proclaiming that the kingdom of God was at hand. And thus preaching through countries and cities, they appointed the firstfruits of their labors, having first proved them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons of those who should afterwards believe. Nor was this any new thing, since indeed many ages before it was written concerning bishops and deacons. For thus says the Scripture in a certain place, “I will appoint their bishops in righteousness, and their deacons in faith.”

◆ Our apostles also knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that there would be strife on account of the office of the episcopate (overseer). For this reason, therefore, inasmuch as they had obtained a perfect foreknowledge of this, they appointed those ministers already mentioned, and afterwards gave instructions, that when these should fall asleep, other approved men

should succeed them in their ministry. We are of opinion, therefore, that those appointed by them, or afterwards by other eminent men, with the consent of the whole Church, and who have blamelessly served the flock of Christ in a humble, peaceable, and disinterested spirit, and have for a long time possessed the good opinion of all, cannot be justly dismissed from the ministry.



I ASKED HIM IF HE WAS AT ALL INTERESTED IN ACTUALLY READING WHAT THE EARLY CHRISTIANS SAID...AND OF COURSE, HE DECLINED. TO HIM, LIKE SO MANY OTHERS, FANTASY WAS A LOT MORE FUN TO BELIEVE THAN FACT.

I once had a man challenge me that since our assembly had ordained ministry, that we were in essence following a pattern started by Constantine. I asked him if he was at all interested in *actually* reading what the early Christians said about church ministry 200 years before Constantine was even born...and of course, he declined. To him,



...WHILE IT IS ALSO TRUE THAT THE ANABAPTISTS BELIEVED STRONGLY IN A CHURCH IN WHICH EVERYONE WAS PASSIONATELY INVOLVED; THEY DID NOT HOWEVER REJECT THE PLACE OF ORDAINED MINISTRY IN THE CHURCH...THERE ARE NUMEROUS TOUCHING TESTIMONIES OF THESE CARING PASTORS THAT GAVE THEIR LIVES FOR THEIR FLOCKS....

like so many others, fantasy was a lot more fun to believe than fact.

Reformation Fantasy

The reformation history coming from these books is also full of more fantasy than fact. Interestingly, Frank Viola holds the Anabaptists up as the shining example of the Reformation. Speaking of the idea of eliminating the role of ordained ministry, Viola says,

“It was the Anabaptists who recovered this practice. Regrettably, this recovery was one of the reasons why Protestant and Catholic swords were red with Anabaptist blood.... Tragically, Luther and the other Reformers violently denounced the Anabaptists for practicing every-member functioning in the church” (pp. 128-129).

While it is true that both Protestant and Catholic swords were red with Anabaptist blood; and while it is also true that the Anabaptists believed strongly in a church in which everyone was passionately involved; they did *not* however reject the place of ordained ministry in the church. As a matter of fact, there are numerous touching testimonies of these caring pastors that gave their lives for their flocks under severe persecution. From their earliest confession in Schleithem in 1527, it was obvious how the Anabaptists felt about church leadership. I have quoted it here. Keep in mind as you read it

that the “pastor” that penned this document, Michael Sattler, was tortured and burned at the stake just three months later!

- ◆ “The pastor in the church of God shall, as Paul has prescribed, be one who out-and-out has a good report of those who are outside the faith. This office shall be to read, to admonish and teach, to warn, to discipline, to ban in the church, to lead out in prayer for the advancement of all the brethren and sisters, to lift up the bread when it is to be broken, and in all things to see to the care of the body of Christ, in order that it may be built up and developed, and the mouth of the slanderer be stopped.
- ◆ This one moreover shall be supported of the church which has chosen him, wherein he may be in need, so that he who serves the Gospel may live of the Gospel as the Lord has ordained. But if a pastor should do something requiring discipline, he shall not be dealt with except on the testimony of two or three witnesses. And when they sin they shall be disciplined before all in order that the others may fear.
- ◆ But should it happen that through the cross this pastor should be banished or led to the Lord (through martyrdom) another shall be ordained in his place in the same hour so that God’s little flock and people may not be destroyed.”

Chinese House Church

As it was in the days of China about a century ago, our society is rapidly declining spiritually; and it doesn't seem long that persecution could be coming to the church in this country as it did for China. We now know from history that this persecution was actually a time of great strength for the Christian church in China. It could be a time of strength for us as well. However, Satan also watched the success of the Chinese house churches, and he will stop at nothing to destroy these little assemblies in other parts of the world right from their beginning. Ironically, a lot of newer house church writers lift up the example of the Chinese house churches. Because of their success, and the fact that they often met in homes, many writers read back into these house churches their own ideas and agendas. Once again, fact is more powerful than fantasy.

We would all do well to read from one of the early founders of Chinese house church movement, Watchman Nee. Reading his book, *Spiritual Authority*, you will quickly see that he would have seen this kind of talk against delegated spiritual authority as nothing less than the work of the devil. While I have to admit that I think Nee goes way too far, nevertheless after reading through the first few pages, no one could assume that the Chinese house churches embraced this negative kind of attitude toward church leadership, at least not those that started under Watchman Nee. As Nee put it—and admittedly a bit too strongly—“To overthrow God's authority is to overthrow God.”

“Throw Away Your Bibles”

So what's all the hype about? Isn't it all just big fuss about outward things like church buildings and church leadership? No, not anymore—I'm afraid that lately it's

going much deeper than that. The objective of these new books is no longer content to simply speak against steeples and offering plates—they now aim at the entire Word of God. Nothing is sacred anymore. The maxim, “Throw away your Bible and get a revelation” is actually gaining a following! Viola and Barna in *Pagan Christianity* now actually claim that they've discovered a whole new way to interpret Scripture. They say that by putting the books of the Bible in a series of different sequences, added by—believe it or not—“recent biblical scholarship”, Viola now claims this approach to scriptural interpretation will solve almost all of our theological problems.

Viola says that in order to understand the letters of Paul, we need to *know* what the other people were asking him. Well, thanks to Viola's new revelation, he claims we can do just that. Co-writer George Barna, speaking of this new method says, “We can now reconstruct the entire saga of the early church. In other words, we can hear the other side of the conversation!” (pg. 239). [*By the way, the explanation point was in the original.*]

Frank Viola introduced his new method in a book he entitled *The Untold Story of the New Testament Church*. The likeness of this kind of talk to that of the Gnostics of the New Testament age is dangerously similar. Armed with their understanding of the “*untold story*” Viola and Barna conclude this section with this appalling resolve—“*When we learn the story, our verses must bow and bend to it*”—now that's scary! Added to that, the next chapter suggests that we should be willing to allow them (Viola and Barna) as well as other “church planter-apostles” to come into our churches and teach us!

Fact or Fantasy

Keeping track of all the new ideas can be both challenging and frustrating: Gene Edwards has a whole book entitled *Going to Church in the First Century* that portrays



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a collection of made-up scenes and ideas of what early Christianity was like. James Rutz portrayed the early Christian worship service like a frat party. And Frank Viola condemns church order and ordained ministry as pagan in origin. So just how *did* the early Christians really worship?

For one last quote, allow me to provide you one from Tertullian. You remember him; he was the one who Rutz claimed was advocating the Super Bowl party. Please note, this is not a made-up document *about* the early Church, this actually *was* a document written by an early Christian. The little work was called *A Prescription Against the Heretic*—still a fitting name for today. In this document Tertullian discusses what the *pagan* or rather, heretical groups were doing for worship. Listen carefully...

“I must not omit an account of the conduct also of the heretics—how frivolous it is, how worldly, how merely human, without seriousness, without authority, without discipline, as suits their creed. To begin with, it is doubtful who is a catechumen, and who a believer; they have all access alike, they hear alike, they pray alike— even heathens, if any such happen to come among them. That which is holy they will cast to the dogs, and their pearls, although (to be sure) they are not real ones, they will fling to the swine. Simplicity they will have to consist in the overthrow of discipline, attention to which on our part they call brotherly. Peace also they huddle up anyhow with all comers; for it matters not to them, however different be their treatment of subjects, provided only they can conspire together to storm the citadel of the one only Truth. All are puffed up, all offer you knowledge. Their catechumens are perfect before they are full-taught. The very women of these heretics, how wanton they are! For they are bold enough to teach, to dispute, to enact exorcisms, to undertake cures—it may be even to baptize. Their ordinations are carelessly administered, capricious, changeable. At one time they put

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novices in office; at another time, men who are bound to some secular employment; at another, persons who have apostatized from us, to bind them by vainglory, since they cannot buy the truth. Nowhere is promotion easier than in the camp of rebels, where the mere fact of being there is a foremost service. And so it comes to pass that today one man is their bishop, tomorrow another; today he is a deacon who tomor-

row is a reader; today he is a presbyter who tomorrow is a layman. For even on laymen do they impose the functions of presbyter” (Tertullian’s *Prescription Against the Heretic*—Chapter 41).

Very interesting... from what Tertullian was describing, it sounds to me like the worship of these pagans and heretics “resembled a cross between a Super Bowl victory celebration and a frat party.” It makes me ask the question—“Will the real *pagan* please stand up!”

Wake Up

I’m not going to give up on house churches and other radical gatherings of saints. Those who refuse to compromise with modern Christianity and therefore gather themselves into committed assemblies of “called out” believers are friends to me. However, as these types of assemblies increase, we must beware that counterfeits will increase as well. John warned us, “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1). These new writers do not speak for me, nor for the churches that I fellowship with. Brethren—let’s wake up and be on guard against these subtle attacks of the enemy. I don’t want to throw away my Bible, and I frankly don’t want any of their revelations! I’m with Peter—“For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2 Peter 1:16). □