

REVISED AND UPDATED

▶ EXPLORING THE
ROOTS OF OUR
CHURCH PRACTICES

FRANK
VIOLA

GEORGE
BARNA

CHRISTIANITY?

Roots



Most contemporary Christians are massively ignorant as to how the church got to where it is today and of how much current church practice is due simply to accumulated tradition, with little or no roots in Scripture. This book provides a useful service in peeling back the layers of tradition, showing the origins of much that we today call “church.” Christians who want to be biblically faithful, regardless of their particular tradition or church form, can learn and benefit from the book.

DR. HOWARD SNYDER

Professor of history and theology of mission, Asbury Theological Seminary;
author of fourteen books including *The Community of the King*

Pagan Christianity? contains a wide variety of interesting and helpful historical information of which most Christians—or non-Christians—will be completely unaware. The book identifies—in part or in whole—the pagan roots of many of our current church practices, as well as indicates some borrowed from earlier Jewish or, occasionally, more recent customs.

DR. ROBERT BANKS

New Testament scholar and theologian;
author of *Paul's Idea of Community* and *Reenvisioning Theological Education*

Why do we “do church” the way we do? Most folks seem to assume that our Christian religious trappings can be traced all the way back to the first century. But they can't. The things we hold dear—sacred buildings to meet in, pulpits, sacramental tables, clergy, liturgies, etc.—were unknown among Paul's assemblies. *Pagan Christianity?* looks at our major church traditions and documents when and how they appeared in the ages long after the apostles. Haven't you ever wondered why people dress up in their best clothes for the Sunday morning service? *Pagan Christianity?* unfolds the answer to this and numerous other questions looming in the back of many folks' minds. Reading *Pagan Christianity?* will open your eyes to the fact that the ecclesiastical emperor really has no clothes on.

DR. JON ZENS

Editor of *Searching Together*

This is an important book that demonstrates that many of the practical aspects of contemporary church life, ministry, and structure have little or no biblical basis and are, in fact, inspired by a wide variety of non-Christian patterns and ideas, most of which are inimical to Christian life and growth. Many readers will find this book challenging in the extreme, but all who are concerned with the future of the church should read it.

DAVE NORRINGTON

Lecturer of religious studies at Blackpool and the Fylde College;
author of *To Preach or Not to Preach?*

Pagan Christianity? documents specific areas where contemporary church life violates biblical principles. Whether you agree with all the conclusions the authors draw or not, you will have no argument with their documentation. It is a scholarly work with an explosive conclusion. Particularly for those of us in the modern cell-church movement, this is a valuable tool to force rethinking the meaning of the word *ecclesia*.

DR. RALPH W. NEIGHBOUR

Author of *Where Do We Go from Here?*

Anyone interested in the worship of the New Testament church and how that was altered through the centuries will find *Pagan Christianity?* very useful. The authors' position is clear and quite well documented.

DR. GRAYDON F. SNYDER

Professor of New Testament (retired), Chicago Theological Seminary;
author of *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life before Constantine*

➤ **pagan CHRISTIANITY?**

**FRANK VIOLA
GEORGE BARNA**

POST- CHRISTIANITY?

▶ EXPLORING THE
ROOTS OF OUR
CHURCH PRACTICES

BARNA 

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Dear Reader,

Perhaps you wonder why a publisher of Christian books would release a book that questions so many common church practices. Please be aware, however, that the authors are not questioning the validity or importance of the church. Instead, they are asking us to thoughtfully consider the source of our churches' traditions and then ask how these practices square with Scripture and the practices of the first-century church. Many in the church hold to tradition, even if it is not grounded in Scripture, and these same people wonder why the church seems to be losing its relevance and impact in the contemporary world.

Tyndale does not necessarily agree with all of the authors' positions and realizes that some readers may not either. At the same time, we stand united with Frank and George in our desire to see the church operate according to biblical principles and be a full expression of God's grace and truth. Furthermore, the authors raise important questions based on their careful research, study, and experiences, and we believe these questions should not be ignored. Our aim is for you to consider their conclusions and then pray seriously about your response.

The Publisher

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SINCE ITS INITIAL RELEASE, the response to *Pagan Christianity?* has been electric. Cataclysmic even. During the first year of its release, debate over the book burned up the blogosphere. It was venerated and vilified. Hailed and hammered. Commended and criticized. Some people made the interesting observation that it was the most reviewed book by those who had never read it.

Most readers, however, responded positively, saying things like, “This book articulated what I’ve been feeling about church for many years. And it gave me biblical and historical merit for those feelings.” Interestingly, George and I received countless letters from pastors saying the same thing. Without a doubt, the book struck a chord. And a few nerves.

Because of the raft of questions and critiques we’ve received about the book, we created a FAQ page where we have responded to each question and objection. You can view that page at www.PaganChristianity.org.

Five important observations before you begin to read this latest edition:

1. Over the last four years, *Pagan Christianity?* has changed the way scores of Christians understand and practice church. Many people have told us that since reading the book, they have found the freedom to question commonly accepted church traditions and test them against the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. In addition, many organic expressions of the church have been planted all over the world. In these communities, believers are discovering the *experience* of the body of Christ and what it means to gather under the headship of Jesus.
2. *Pagan Christianity?* was never meant to be a stand-alone book. It is only part one of a conversation. Part 2 is found in the constructive sequel, *Reimagining Church*. *Pagan* deconstructs, while *Reimagining* constructs. They

are two sides of the same argument. Consequently, reading this book alone is like hanging up after hearing only the first half of a phone conversation. The second part of that discussion (*Reimagining Church*) is the part where viable and biblical solutions are offered.

3. After four years of rigorous critique (and, sometimes, misrepresentation), the arguments in the book still stand. Despite the many objections that have been leveled against it, *Pagan Christianity?* has yet to be credibly refuted or discounted.¹
4. George and I wrote this book out of a profound love for the church. We also wrote out of a vision that burns within our hearts. The style of writing, therefore, is one that is intended to challenge. Some readers who aren't used to this style of writing may misinterpret the tone to be angry. But our challenge was motivated by love and born out of many tears and a broken heart for the restoration of God's house.
5. As you read this book, you will note that some of the common misrepresentations about it are not true. For instance, George and I do not argue for "house church" as the correct model for church. We instead point to the "organic expression of the church" ("organic church" for short), something different from a house church.

We do not argue against preaching or teaching but endorse both. Yet we challenge the *modern sermon* on historical, biblical, and pragmatic grounds.

Also, we do not believe that just because a practice has pagan roots, it is wrong. We instead argue that those practices that contradict the teachings of Jesus and the apostles should be discarded in favor of what they taught.

Pagan Christianity? was not written to divide the body of Christ. Instead, George and I wrote the book to encourage you to rethink

¹ See www.ptmin.org/answers.htm to substantiate this statement.

your church practices in the light of Scripture and to pursue the Lord corporately in fresh and creative ways that are biblically faithful and that magnify Him. I have published other constructive books designed to help you reach those goals.² Our prayer is that this book will begin to free you to experience God's best and highest for His beloved church, just as He intended.

FRANK VIOLA

GAINESVILLE, FLORIDA

JUNE 2011

² Those books are described at www.ReimaginingChurch.org.

WHEN THE LORD JESUS WALKED THIS EARTH, His chief opposition came from the two leading religious parties of the day: the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

The Pharisees added to the sacred Scriptures. They obeyed the law of God as it was interpreted and applied by the scribes, the experts in the Law who lived pious and disciplined lives. As the official interpreters of God's Word, the Pharisees were endowed with the power of creating tradition. They tacked on to the Word of God reams of human laws that were passed on to subsequent generations. This body of time-honored customs, often called "the tradition of the elders," came to be viewed as being on equal par with Holy Writ.¹

The error of the Sadducees moved in the opposite direction. They subtracted whole segments of Scripture—deeming only the law of Moses worthy to be observed.² (The Sadducees denied the existence of spirits, angels, the soul, the afterlife, and the resurrection.)³

No wonder that when the Lord Jesus entered the drama of human history, His authority was arduously challenged (see Mark 11:28). He did not fit into the religious mold of either camp. As a result, Jesus was viewed with suspicion by both the Pharisee and Sadducee parties. It did not take long for this suspicion to turn to hostility. And both the Pharisees and Sadducees took steps to put the Son of God to death.

History is repeating itself today. Contemporary Christianity has fallen into the errors of both the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

First, contemporary Christianity is guilty of the error of the Pharisees. That is, it has added a raft of humanly devised

¹ Herbert Lockyer Sr., ed., *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986), 830–831, 957–958. See also Matthew 23:23–24.

² The law of Moses refers to the first five books of the Old Testament, i.e., Genesis to Deuteronomy. It is also called the Torah (the Law) and the Pentateuch, which is a Greek term meaning "five volumes."

³ I. Howard Marshall, *New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: InterVarsity Fellowship, 1982), 1055.

traditions that have suppressed the living, breathing, functional headship of Jesus Christ in His church.

Second, in the tradition of the Sadducees, the great bulk of New Testament practices have been removed from the Christian landscape. Thankfully, such practices are presently being restored on a small scale by those daring souls who have taken the terrifying step of leaving the safe camp of institutional Christianity.

Even so, the Pharisees and the Sadducees both teach us this often-ignored lesson: It is harmful to dilute the authority of God's Word either by addition or by subtraction. We break the Scripture just as much by burying it under a mountain of human tradition as by ignoring its principles.

God has not been silent when it comes to the principles that govern the practice of His church. Let me explain by posing a question: Where do we find our practices for the Christian life? Where is our model for understanding what a Christian is in the first place? Is it not found in the life of Jesus Christ as portrayed in the New Testament? Or do we borrow it from somewhere else? Perhaps a pagan philosopher?

Few Christians would dispute that Jesus Christ, as He is presented in the New Testament, is the model for the Christian life. Jesus Christ *is* the Christian life. In the same way, when Christ rose from the dead and ascended, He gave birth to His church. That church was Himself in a different form. This is the meaning of the phrase “the body of Christ.”⁴

Consequently, in the New Testament we have the genesis of the church. I believe the first-century church was the church in its purest form, before it was tainted or corrupted. That's not to say the early church didn't have problems—Paul's epistles make clear that it did. However, the conflicts Paul addresses are inevitable when a fallen people seek to be part of a close-knit community.⁵

⁴ In 1 Corinthians 12:12, Paul refers to the church as the body of Christ. According to Pauline teaching, the church is the corporate Christ. The head is in heaven, while the body is on earth (Acts 9:4-5; Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:18, 2:19). Properly conceived, the church is a spiritual organism, not an institutional organization.

⁵ Interestingly, an organic church will have problems identical to those in the first-century church. On the other hand, the institutional church faces a completely different set of problems, which have no biblical antidote since its structure is so distinct from the New Testament church. For instance, in an institutional church the laity may not like their preacher so they fire him. This never would have happened in the first century because there was no such thing as a hired pastor.

The church in the first century was an organic entity. It was a living, breathing organism that expressed itself far differently from the institutional church today. And that expression revealed Jesus Christ on this planet through His every-member functioning body. In this book, we intend to show how that organism was devoid of so many things that we embrace today.

The normative practices of the first-century church were the natural and spontaneous expression of the divine life that indwelt the early Christians. And those practices were solidly grounded in the timeless principles and teachings of the New Testament. By contrast, a great number of the practices in many contemporary churches are in conflict with those biblical principles and teachings. When we dig deeper, we are compelled to ask: Where did the practices of the contemporary church come from? The answer is disturbing: Most of them were borrowed from pagan culture. Such a statement short-circuits the minds of many Christians when they hear it. But it is unmovable, historical fact, as this book will demonstrate. The fact that many of our church practices have pagan roots doesn't make them wrong in themselves. But it does mean they are not sacrosanct.

So we would argue that on theological grounds, historical grounds, and pragmatic grounds, the New Testament vision of church best represents the dream of God . . . the beloved community that He intends to create and re-create in every chapter of the human story. As I establish in *Reimagining Church*, the New Testament church teaches us how the life of God is expressed when a group of people begin to live by it together.

Further, my own experience in working with organic churches confirms this finding. (An organic church is simply a church that is born out of spiritual life instead of constructed by human institutions and held together by religious programs. Organic churches are characterized by Spirit-led, open-participatory meetings and nonhierarchical leadership. This is in stark contrast to a clergy-led, institution-driven church.) My experience in the United States and overseas is that when a group of Christians begin to follow the life of

the Lord who indwells them together, the same outstanding features that marked the New Testament church begin to emerge naturally.

This is because the church really is an organism. As such, it has DNA that will always produce these features if it is allowed to grow naturally. Granted, organic churches will have differences depending on the cultures in which they operate. But if the church is following the life of God who indwells it, it will never produce those nonscriptural practices this book addresses.⁶ Such practices are foreign elements that God's people picked up from their pagan neighbors as far back as the fourth century. They were embraced, baptized, and called "Christian." And that is why the church is in the state it is in today, hampered by endless divisions, power struggles, passivity, and lack of transformation among God's people.

In short, this book is dedicated to exposing the traditions that have been tacked onto God's will for His church—traditions that run contrary to the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. Our reason for writing it is simple: We are seeking to remove a great deal of debris in order to make room for the Lord Jesus Christ to be the fully functioning head of His church.

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. This proposal, of course, is our conviction based upon the historical evidence that we shall present in this book. You must decide if that proposal is valid or not.

This is not a work for scholars, so it is by no means exhaustive.⁷ A thorough treatment of the origins of our contemporary church practices would fill volumes. But it would be read by few people. Although this is a single volume, it includes a great deal of history. Yet this book does not chase every historical sidelight. Rather, it focuses on tracing the central practices that define mainstream Christianity today.⁸

⁶ For a more in-depth discussion on this principle, see my book *Reimagining Church*. See also "What Is an Organic Church?" (<http://www.ptmin.org/organic.htm>).

⁷ While this is not a work for scholars, it has been endorsed by many scholars. See <http://www.PaganChristianity.org>.

⁸ This book focuses on *Protestant* Christian practices. And its main scope is "low church" Protestantism rather than "high church" denominations like Anglican, Episcopalian, Eastern Orthodox, and some stripes of Lutheran. By *high church*, I mean churches that emphasize the sacerdotal, sacramental, and liturgical Catholic elements of orthodox Christianity. The book touches on high-church practices only in passing.

Because the roots of our contemporary church practices are so important to grasp, we wish that every literate Christian would read this work.⁹ Consequently, we have chosen not to employ technical language, but to write in plain English.

At the same time, footnotes containing added details and sources appear throughout each chapter.¹⁰ Reflective Christians who wish to verify our statements and obtain a more in-depth understanding of the subjects covered should read the footnotes. Those who care little for such details may ignore them. The footnotes also occasionally qualify or clarify easily misunderstood statements.

Finally, I am delighted to have worked with George Barna on this project. George's uncommon flair for readable research has made this a stronger work.

In short, this book demonstrates beyond dispute that those who have left the fold of institutional Christianity to become part of an organic church have a historical right to exist—since history demonstrates that many practices of the institutional church are not rooted in Scripture.

GAINESVILLE, FLORIDA

JUNE 2007

⁹ As the English philosopher Francis Bacon once said, "It is not St. Augustine's nor St. Ambrose's works that will make so wise a divine as ecclesiastical history thoroughly read and observed."

¹⁰ Note that when I quote the church fathers, I have elected to cite their original works whenever possible. In those cases when I do not cite their original works, I have cited *Early Christians Speak*, 3rd ed., by Everett Ferguson (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1999), which is a compilation and translation of their original writings.

➤ WHAT HAPPENED TO THE CHURCH?

“There is perhaps nothing worse than reaching the top of the ladder and discovering that you’re on the wrong wall.”

—JOSEPH CAMPBELL, TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN WRITER

WE ARE LIVING IN THE MIDST of a silent revolution of faith. Millions of Christians throughout the world are leaving the old, accepted ways of “doing church” for even older approaches. Those older approaches are rooted in the Holy Scriptures and the eternal principles of the living God. Consequently, the motivation for this transition from the old to the older is not simply to get us in touch with our history or to reclaim our roots. It is borne out of a desire to return to our Lord with authenticity and fullness. It is a thrust to bond with Him through the Word of God, the Kingdom of God, and the Spirit of God.

The heart of the Revolutionaries is not in question. There is ample research to show that they are seeking more of God. They have a passion to be faithful to His Word and to be more in tune with His leading. They ardently want their relationship with the Lord to be their top priority in

life. They are tired of the institutions, denominations, and routines getting in the way of a resonant connection with Him. They are worn out on the endless programs that fail to facilitate transformation. They are weary of being sent off to complete assignments, memorize facts and passages, and engage in simplistic practices that do not draw them into God's presence.

These are people who have experienced the initial realities of a genuine connection with God. They can no longer endure the spiritual teasing offered by churches and other well-intentioned ministries. God is waiting for them. They want Him. No more excuses.

But this revolution of faith is challenged. Those involved know what they are shifting from—lifeless, institutional forms of faith to breakthrough. But what are they shifting to? House churches, marketplace ministries, cyberchurches, independent communitywide worship gatherings, intentional communities. These forms of church are all intriguing, but do they really represent a meaningful step toward God's highest purpose? Or are they just the same stuff presented in a different setting? Are they developing the same roles, but attaching new titles adopted by different role players? Are we living in a culture that is so infatuated with change that we have forgotten that the church is about transformation, not mere change?

As we grapple with such issues, there is much to be learned from the history of God's people. Followers of Christ appreciate the stories God has given us in His Word. We discover much about God, life, culture, and even ourselves by following the journey of God's people in both the Old and New Testaments. Consider how much we learn from Moses and the Israelites' pursuit of the Promised Land. Or the hard-won insights of David's rise from lowly shepherd boy to king of Israel. Or the plight of Jesus' disciples as they left their craft to follow the Lord before meeting with martyrdom. In the same way, much can be gleaned from the efforts of the earliest Christians—our physical and spiritual ancestors—as they sought to be the genuine church that Christ purchased with His blood.

But what do modern and postmodern Christians know about the

history of the church that would help to shape present-day attempts at honoring God and *being* the church? Precious little, it turns out. And therein lies a significant problem. Historians have long held that if we do not remember the past, we are doomed to repeat it. There is ample evidence to support that warning. Yet we often persist in our well-intentioned but ignorant efforts to refine life.

The recent story of the Christian church in America is a great example of this. The major changes in spiritual practice over the past half century have been largely window dressings. Pick a trend—mega-churches, seeker churches, satellite campuses, vacation Bible school, children’s church, affinity group ministries (e.g., ministries for singles, women, men, young marrieds), contemporary worship music, big-screen projection systems, EFT giving, cell groups, downloadable sermons, sermon outlines in bulletins, Alpha groups. All of the above have simply been attempts to rely on marketing strategies to perform the same activities in different ways or places, or with particular segments of the aggregate population. Whatever difficulties were present in the larger institutional setting that spawned these efforts are invariably present in the smaller or divergent efforts as well.

This book will challenge you to consider making more significant changes in the way you practice your faith. Altering the ways in which we worship is no simple task. When people suggest significant changes in some of the hallowed practices, cries of “heretic” can be heard coming from all directions. Such protest is common largely because people have little knowledge of the true foundations of their faith.

That’s where this book comes in. Rather than foster continued resistance to methodological innovations, it’s time that the body of Christ get in touch with both the Word of God and the history of the church to arrive at a better understanding of what we can and should do—as well as what we cannot and should not do.

From personal experience, the authors of this book can tell you that such a journey of discovery is enlightening, to say the least. If you spend time searching God’s Word for most of the common practices

in conventional churches, you will rarely find them. If you go further and spend time tracing the history of those practices, you will soon discover that most of our religious habits are man-made choices. In fact, you're likely to discern a pattern about the way that we "do church" these days: If we do it, it's probably not in the Bible as one of the practices of the early church!

Does it surprise you that most of what we do in religious circles has no precedent in Scripture? This includes many of the activities within church services, the education and ordination of clergy, the routines commonly used in youth ministry, the methods of raising funds for ministry, the ways in which music is used in churches, even the presence and nature of church buildings. There were three historical periods when a bevy of changes were made in common Christian practices: the era of Constantine, the decades surrounding the Protestant Reformation, and the Revivalist period of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But as you are about to find out, those changes were the result of passionate, though often ill-informed, followers of Christ. The believers during those periods simply went along for the ride, which resulted in new perspectives and practices that churches have held on to for many years. So many years, in fact, that you probably think of those routines as biblical in origin.

Not surprisingly, having changed the biblical model of the church, we have become adept at building support for our approaches through proof-texting. Proof-texting is the practice of taking disparate, unrelated verses of Scripture, often out of context, to "prove" that our position squares with the Bible. As you read this book, you may be stunned to discover how many of our esteemed practices are way off the mark biblically.

Does it really matter how we practice our faith, as long as the activities enable people to love God and obey Him? The preponderance of evidence shows that these perspectives, rules, traditions, expectations, assumptions, and practices often hinder the development of our faith. In other instances, they serve as barriers that keep

us from encountering the living God. The way in which we practice our faith can, indeed, affect the faith itself.

Does that mean we must go back to the Bible and do everything exactly as the disciples did between AD 30 and 60? No. Social and cultural shifts over the last two thousand years have made it impossible to imitate some of the lifestyle and religious efforts of the early church. For example, we use cell phones, drive in automobiles, and utilize central heat and air. The first-century Christians had none of these forms of human convenience. Therefore, adhering to the *principles* of the New Testament does not mean reenacting the *events* of the first-century church. If so, we would have to dress like all first-century believers did, in sandals and togas!

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.”¹

It is in our best interest to scour the words of God to determine the core principles and ethos of the early church and to restore those elements to our lives. God has granted us great leeway in the methods we use to honor and connect with Him. But that does not mean we have free rein. Caution is advisable as we strive to be humble and obedient people who seek His central will. Our goal is to be true to His plan so that we may become the people He desires us to be and that the church may be all she is called to be.

So be prepared for a rude awakening as you find out how off track our current religious practices are. You probably know that today’s jets use very sophisticated computer systems to constantly reorient a plane as it travels on its path. During the course of a trip from Los Angeles to New York, literally thousands of course corrections are made

¹ Frank C. Senn, *Christian Worship and Its Cultural Setting* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 51.

to ensure that the plane sets down on the appropriate landing strip. Without those course corrections, even a tiny one percent deviation from the original flight plan would land that airplane in a different county! The contemporary church is like a jet airplane that has no capacity for in-flight course corrections. A little change here, a minor deviation there, a slight alteration of this, a barely perceptible tweaking of that—and before you know it, the whole enterprise has been redefined!

Is this hard for you to believe? Then we encourage you to invest yourself in the process and do some of your own research. My coauthor, Frank Viola, spent many years laboriously tracking down the historical data that identified how the church got onto this crooked path. The references from his journey are supplied for you in each chapter. If you are skeptical—and we encourage healthy skepticism that leads to fact-finding and truth—then commit yourself to identifying exactly what did happen over the course of time. This matters! Your life is a gift from God and is to be lived for God. Furthermore, the church is one of God's deepest passions. He cares about her well-being, as well as how she expresses herself on the earth. So understanding how we got from the early church to the contemporary church, and figuring out what you will do about it, is very important.

Every good author writes in order to bring about positive, meaningful change. This book is no different. We want you to be informed by the Word of God and by church history. We want you to think carefully and biblically about how you practice your faith with other Christians. And we want you to influence others to understand what God leads you to discover. Part of the challenge of living in concert with a biblical view of the world is correlating your spiritual life with God's intentions, as outlined for us in the Bible. We pray that this book will help you to do your part in straightening out the crooked path of the contemporary church.

➤ HAVE WE REALLY BEEN DOING IT BY THE BOOK?

“The unexamined life is not worth living.”

—SOCRATES

“**WE DO EVERYTHING** by the Word of God! The New Testament is our guide for faith and practice! We live . . . and we die . . . by this Book!”

These were the words that thundered forth from the mouth of Pastor Farley as he delivered his Sunday morning sermon. Winchester Spudchecker, a member of Pastor Farley’s church, had heard them dozens of times before. But this time it was different. Dressed in his blue suit, frozen in the back pew with his wife, Trudy, Winchester stared at the ceiling as Pastor Farley continued talking about “doing everything by the sacred Book.”

One hour before Pastor Farley began his sermon, Winchester had had a fuming fight with Trudy. This was a common occurrence as Winchester, Trudy, and their three

daughters, Felicia, Gertrude, and Zanobia, got ready for church on Sunday morning.

His mind began replaying the event. . . .

“Truuudyy! Why aren’t the kids ready? We’re always late! Why can’t you ever get them prepared on time?” Winchester yelled as he anxiously glanced at the clock.

Trudy’s response was typical. “If you ever thought to help me this wouldn’t happen all the time! Why don’t you start giving me a hand in this house?” The argument went back and forth until Winchester turned on the children: “Zanobia Spudchecker! . . . Why can’t you respect us enough to get ready on time? . . . Felicia, how many times do I have to tell you to turn off your PlayStation before 9 a.m.?” Hearing the commotion, Gertrude burst into tears.

Wearing their Sunday best, the Spudchecker family finally drove to church at breakneck speed. (Winchester hated to be late and had received three speeding tickets this past year—all given to him on Sunday mornings!)

As they raced to the church building, the silence in the car was deafening. Winchester was steaming. Trudy was sulking. With heads down, the three Spudchecker daughters were trying to prepare their minds for something they hated . . . another long hour of Sunday school!

As they pulled in to the church parking lot, Winchester and Trudy gracefully exited the car, sporting large smiles. They held each other arm in arm and greeted their fellow church members, chuckling and putting on the pretense that all was well. Felicia, Gertrude, and Zanobia followed their parents with chins pointed upward.

These were the fresh yet painful memories that coursed through Winchester’s mind that Sunday morning as Pastor Farley continued his sermon. Brooding in self-condemnation, Winchester began to ask himself some searching questions: *Why am I dressed up prim and proper looking like a good Christian when I acted like a heathen just an hour ago? . . . I wonder how many other families had this same pitiful experience this morning? Yet we’re all smelling nice and looking pretty for God.*

Winchester was a bit shocked by these thoughts. Such questions had never before entered his consciousness.

As he peeked over to see Pastor Farley's wife and children sitting prim and proper on the front pew, Winchester mused to himself: *I wonder if Pastor Farley screamed at his wife and kids this morning? Hmmm . . .*

Winchester's mind continued to race in this direction as he watched Pastor Farley pound the pulpit for emphasis and raise his Bible with his right hand. "We at First Bible New Testament Community Church do everything by this Book! *Everything!* This is the Word of God, and we cannot stray from it . . . not even one millimeter!"

Suddenly Winchester had another new thought: *I don't remember reading anywhere in the Bible that Christians are supposed to dress up to go to church. Is that by the Book?*

This single thought unleashed a torrent of other barbed questions. As scores of frozen pew sitters filled his horizon, Winchester continued to ponder similar new questions. Questions that no Christian is supposed to ask. Questions like:

Is sitting in this uncushioned pew, staring at the back of twelve rows of heads for forty-five minutes, doing things by the Book? Why do we spend so much money to maintain this building when we're here only twice a week for a few hours? Why is half the congregation barely awake when Pastor Farley preaches? Why do my kids hate Sunday school? Why do we go through this same predictable, yawn-inspiring ritual every Sunday morning? Why am I going to church when it bores me to tears and does nothing for me spiritually? Why do I wear this uncomfortable necktie every Sunday morning when all it seems to do is cut off blood circulation to my brain?

Winchester felt unclean and sacrilegious to ask such things. Yet something was happening inside of him that compelled him to doubt his entire church experience. These thoughts had been lying dormant in Winchester's subconscious for years. Today, they surfaced.

Interestingly, the questions Winchester had that day are questions that never enter the conscious thinking of most Christians. Yet the sober reality is that Winchester's eyes had been opened.

As startling as it may sound, almost everything that is done in our contemporary churches has no basis in the Bible. As pastors preach from their pulpits about being “biblical” and following the “pure Word of God,” their words betray them. The truth is that precious little that is observed today in contemporary Christianity maps to anything found in the New Testament church.

QUESTIONS WE NEVER THINK TO ASK

Socrates (470–399 BC)¹ is considered by some historians to be the father of philosophy. Born and raised in Athens, his custom was to go about the town relentlessly raising questions and analyzing the popular views of his day. Socrates believed that truth is found by dialoguing extensively about an issue and relentlessly questioning it. This method is known as *dialectic* or “the Socratic method.” He thought freely on matters that his fellow Athenians felt were closed for discussion.

Socrates’ habit of pelting people with searching questions and roping them into critical dialogues about their accepted customs eventually got him killed. His incessant questioning of tightly held traditions provoked the leaders of Athens to charge him with “corrupting the youth.” As a result, they put Socrates to death. A clear message was sent to his fellow Athenians: All who question the established customs will meet the same fate!²

Socrates was not the only provocateur to reap severe reprisal for his nonconformity: 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.³

As Christians, we are taught by our leaders to believe certain

¹ Note that on the first mention of historical figures (especially those who had a great impact on the development of the church), we generally include the dates of their births and deaths. You can also consult the appendix “Key Figures in Church History” on page 277 for these dates and a brief summary of these individuals’ influence.

² For a concise treatment of Socrates’ life and teaching, see Samuel Enoch Stumpf’s *Socrates to Sartre* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 29–45.

³ Ken Connolly, *The Indestructible Book* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996); *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* (Old Tappan, NJ: Spire Books, 1968).

ideas and behave in certain ways. We are also encouraged to read our Bibles. But we are conditioned to read the Bible with the lens handed to us by the Christian tradition to which we belong. We are taught to obey our denomination (or movement) and never to challenge what it teaches.

(At this moment, all the rebellious hearts are applauding and are plotting to wield the above paragraphs to wreak havoc in their churches. If that is you, dear rebellious heart, you have missed our point by a considerable distance. We do not stand with you. Our advice: Either leave your church quietly, refusing to cause division, or be at peace with it. There is a vast gulf between rebellion and taking a stand for what is true.)

If the truth be told, we Christians never seem to ask why we do what we do. Instead, we blithely carry out our religious traditions without asking where they came from. Most Christians who claim to uphold the integrity of God's Word have never sought to see if what they do every Sunday has any scriptural backing. How do we know this? Because if they did, it would lead them to some very disturbing conclusions that would compel them by conscience to forever abandon what they are doing.

Strikingly, contemporary church thought and practice have been influenced far more by postbiblical historical events than by New Testament imperatives and examples. Yet most Christians are not conscious of this influence. Nor are they aware that it has created a slew of cherished, calcified, humanly devised traditions⁴—all of which are routinely passed off to us as “Christian.”⁵

A TERRIFYING INVITATION

We now invite you to walk with us on an untrodden path. It is a terrifying journey where you will be forced to ask questions that probably

⁴ Edwin Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages upon the Christian Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1895), 18. Hatch traces the detrimental effects of the church that is influenced by its culture rather than one that influences its culture.

⁵ The Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) said that modern Christianity is essentially a counterfeit. See Søren Kierkegaard, “Attack on Christendom,” in *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, ed. Robert Bretall (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1946), 59ff., 117, 150ff., 209ff.

6 have never entered your conscious thoughts. Tough questions. Nagging questions. Even frightening questions. And you will be faced squarely with the disturbing answers. Yet those answers will lead you face-to-face with some of the richest truths a Christian can discover.

As you read through the following pages, you may be surprised to discover that a great deal of what we Christians do for Sunday morning church did not come from Jesus Christ, the apostles, or the Scriptures. Nor did it come from Judaism. After the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70, Judaic Christianity waned in numbers and power. Gentile Christianity dominated, and the new faith began to absorb Greco-Roman philosophy and ritual. Judaic Christianity survived for five centuries in the little group of Syriac Christians called *Ebionim*, but their influence was not very widespread. According to Shirley J. Case, “Not only was the social environment of the Christian movement largely Gentile well before the end of the first century, but it had severed almost any earlier bonds of social contact with the Jewish Christians of Palestine. . . . By the year 100, Christianity is mainly a Gentile religious movement . . . living together in a common Gentile social environment.”⁶

Strikingly, much of what we do for “church” was lifted directly out of pagan culture in the postapostolic period. (Legend tells us the last surviving apostle, John, died around AD 100.) According to Paul F. Bradshaw, fourth-century Christianity “absorbed and Christianized pagan religious ideas and practices, seeing itself as the fulfillment to which earlier religions had dimly pointed.”⁷ While today we often use the word *pagan* to describe those who claim no religion whatsoever, to the early Christians, pagans were those polytheists who followed the gods of the Roman Empire. Paganism dominated the Roman Empire until the fourth century, and many of its elements were absorbed by Christians in the first half of the first millennium, particularly during

⁶ Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1950), 577. See also Shirley J. Case, *The Social Origins of Christianity* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1975), 27–28. E. Glenn Hinson adds, “From the late first century on through, Gentiles came to outnumber Jews in the Christian assembly. They imported in subtle ways some of the ideas, attitudes, and customs of Greek and Roman culture” (“Worshipping Like Pagans?” *Christian History* 12, no. 1 [1993]: 17).

⁷ Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 65; Durant, *Caesar and Christ*, 575, 599–600, 610–619, 650–651, 671–672.

the Constantinian and early post-Constantinian eras (324 to 600).⁸ Two other significant periods from which many of our current church practices originate were the Reformation era (sixteenth century) and the Revivalist era (eighteenth and nineteenth centuries).

Chapters 2 through 10 each trace an accepted traditional church practice. Each chapter tells the story of where this practice came from. But more importantly, it explains how this practice stifles the practical headship of Jesus Christ and hampers the functioning of His body.

Warning: If you are unwilling to have your Christianity seriously examined, do not read beyond this page. Give this book to Goodwill immediately! Spare yourself the trouble of having your Christian life turned upside down.

However, if you choose to “take the red pill” and be shown “how deep the rabbit hole goes” . . . if you want to learn the true story of where your Christian practices came from . . . if you are willing to have the curtain pulled back on the contemporary church and its traditional presuppositions fiercely challenged . . . then you will find this work to be disturbing, enlightening, and possibly life changing.

Put another way, if you are a Christian in the institutional church who takes the New Testament seriously, what you are about to read may lead to a crisis of conscience. For you will be confronted by unmovable historical fact.

On the other hand, if you happen to be one of those people who gathers with other Christians outside the pale of institutional Christianity, you will discover afresh that not only is Scripture on your side—but history stands with you as well.

⁸ The term *pagan* was used by the early Christian apologists to group non-Christians into a convenient package. At its root, a “pagan” is a country dweller, an inhabitant of the *pagus* or rural district. Because Christianity primarily spread in the cities, the country bumpkins, or pagans, were regarded as those who believed in the old gods. See Joan E. Taylor, *Christians and the Holy Places: The Myth of Jewish-Christian Origins* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 301.

⁹ The idea of the red pill comes from the thought-provoking hit movie *The Matrix*. In the film, Morpheus gives Neo the choice between living in a deceptive dreamworld or understanding reality. His words are applicable to the subject at hand: “After this, there’s no turning back. You take the blue pill, the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill . . . and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.” We hope that all of God’s people would dare to take the red pill!

► delving DEEPER

- 1. I don't see how the Spudcheckers' family squabbles before church had anything to do with church itself—other than frustrating Winchester and making him cynical about everything that went on at his church. Why did you lead off the book with this story?**

You're right—Winchester's Sunday morning troubles were what put him in the frame of mind to question church practices he normally sat through without giving any thought to at all. The story was simply a humorous way to illustrate how scores of Christians go through the motions on Sunday morning without considering why they do what they do.

- 2. While you say that contemporary church practice has been influenced far more by postbiblical historical events than New Testament principles, isn't it true that there aren't many specifics in the Gospels, Acts, or Paul's letters about church practice? What Scriptures would you point to as outlining what Christians should do when gathering for worship?**

The New Testament actually includes many details about how the early Christians gathered. For example, we know that the early church met in homes for their regular church meetings (Acts 20:20; Romans 16:3, 5; 1 Corinthians 16:19). They took the Lord's Supper as a full meal (1 Corinthians 11:21-34). Their church gatherings were open and participatory (1 Corinthians 14:26; Hebrews 10:24-25). Spiritual gifts were employed by each member (1 Corinthians 12-14). They genuinely saw themselves as family and acted accordingly (Galatians 6:10; 1 Timothy 5:1-2; Romans 12:5; Ephesians 4:15; Romans 12:13; 1 Corinthians 12:25-26; 2 Corinthians 8:12-15). They had a plurality of elders to oversee the community (Acts 20:17, 28-29; 1 Timothy 1:5-7). They were established and aided by itinerant apostolic workers (Acts 13-21; all the apostolic letters). They were fully united and did not denominate themselves into separate organizations in the same city (Acts 8:1, 13:1, 18:22; Romans 16:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:1). They did not use honorific titles (Matthew 23:8-12). They did not organize themselves hierarchically (Matthew 20:25-28; Luke 22:25-26).

Offering a complete biblical basis for these practices and explaining why they should be emulated today is beyond the scope of this book. One book that does so is *Paul's Idea of Community* by Robert Banks (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994). I (Frank) also treat this subject comprehensively in the book *Reimagining Church* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook), which will be released in summer 2008.