

December 26 2008: Church Funerals

A woman who attends our church lost her daughter, who used to attend our church. Today, her funeral was held at the church house. Well, not "funeral" exactly, since that implies the body was there on its way to the cemetery, so it was really a memorial service. Now, in honour to our friend (the mother), we attended the service, even dressed up for the service, and a few other Centralites did as well, but mostly it was for the family and friends of the deceased. Afterwards, the church ladies provided a buffet dinner (variation on "potluck") for the family and friends.



If it had been a wedding, it would have been the same: attend, dress up, formal service with speaking and music and ceremony (sparse, in a Baptist church), and food - although weddings are usually catered.

If the mom or daughter had not been believers, I suppose a funeral home could have provided the same trappings as a church, just with secular commentary. Weddings are the same; for the irreligious, there are wedding chapels or justice of the peace legal ceremonies (even more sparse). So it is with the background of religious belief that funerals (and weddings) are held in churches.

In itself, there's nothing wrong with dignifying important life events in a faith setting. However, in keeping with my recent thoughts about "what is the church, really?", I have to ask, "Why does it work *this* way?"

Why the formality? Why the canned order of service, and the stage/audience arrangement? It's because that's our cultural expectation of funerals and weddings.

I think this is significant because people will go to a funeral at a church out of cultural conditioning. They go to the church for the ceremony because that's what the church is for. And the church performs its part of the cultural ceremony, and fulfills and perpetuates the expectation. People will go to a funeral at a church even though they will never go at any other time (not even Christmas or Easter).

Preachers know this, and often (as was the case today) "salt" the eulogy with the Gospel message and a plea to make a decision (not with an altar call, however). As far as I know, these target people rarely if ever are affected by this message, because along with the formality and the ceremony, they expect to hear religious words, and are therefore hardened against them. Even the kindness of the church people in providing a sympathy meal is overlooked, because that, too, is part of the cultural expectation, and the target people further expect to have no further contact with those expectation-fulfilling nice church people who are performing a "love" service out of tradition.

So here again, the institutional church performs a formalized, expected, and ineffective function.

What would I want? Well, I've been to weddings in backyards or natural parks, usually alternatives to church weddings with religious overtones, so I'm sure a house church or alternative church arrangement could have a wedding in the park. A funeral? Well, I suppose in the old days, grandma's coffin was set up in the family's living room, and people came to pay their respects, so funerals don't *have* to be in a functional setting, unless there is legal code governing the matter.

(Wouldn't it be odd, for the family to be having their dinner at the table, and grandma in her coffin is lying right over *there*?)

So maybe part of it is to break the cultural expectations and traditions, to the extent the law would permit. Just that would overthrow most of the cultural defenses such temporary churchgoers erect. But the larger part would be, how should the *Body of Christ* present itself to unbelieving family and friends - for **REAL**, beyond the formalism and short-lived sympathy? What more could we do for the bereaved church members (fellow believers, other parts of the Body) such that the unbelievers would "know we are His disciples, by our love for one another"?

December 25 2008: The Fight for Christmas



Here's another year, and it seems like the battle over public mention of a Christian holiday rages hotter than ever. The ACLU litigates to have creches removed from courthouse lawns. Atheist organizations take out anti-Christmas ads on buses, or set up their own insulting courthouse lawn displays. The American

Family Association mounts another series of letter-writing campaigns and threats of boycotts on retailers that refuse to acknowledge Christmas. As I did my shopping this year, it seems that *every single* shop clerk was under orders to not say "Merry Christmas", but rather to use the bland "Happy Holidays" phrase (even though it seemed to me that some were pleased when the customer (me) replied with "Merry Christmas"). And it seems there's a rash of thefts of Baby Jesus from creche displays - a church near us has a creche, and Baby Jesus is in a wire cage to discourage vandals. (The picture here is the creche on the National Mall in D.C., not yet banned, and not yet burglar-proofed.)

But I'm starting to wonder... Is it worth the fight?

A few years ago, the Southern Baptists mounted an AFA-style campaign against Disneyland over "Gay Day". Disney revenues *may* have slipped, Eisner *may* have stepped down, they *may* have toned down their prominent support for homosexual

"rights" *somewhat*, but overall, the only thing that came of it was a black eye for the SBC. As the book ["unChristian"](#) points out, our political activism is often viewed negatively by others (particularly younger ones) in our community.

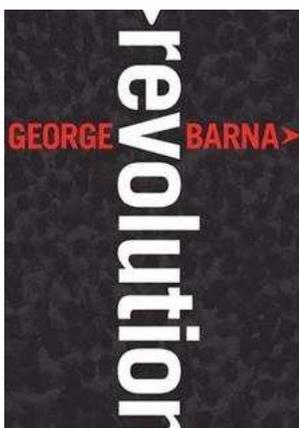
Are Nativity Scenes such an effective reinforcement of Christian values and our nation's Christian heritage that they must be defended at the cost of American Christianity developing a reputation of being nothing more than reactionary political activism?

Indeed, rather, was that Christian heritage not an expression or result of a Christian-influenced culture? That culture is vanishing away, being replaced by a secular culture that does not value religious symbols; if it were otherwise, the ACLU and the atheists would not be so successful as they seem to be. The new culture will have its own symbols and values to promote in the public square.

If the symbols popularly supported by the public are an expression of the dominant culture, and those symbols are no longer Christian, does it not follow, then, that the dominant culture is no longer Christian? The correct response to a cultural problem is not primarily political, but cultural. Even if the political battle could be won, and the veneer of Christianity were retained in the public square, the square would be as empty as it would be without those symbols at all, unless there were actually some vital cultural reality behind them. The fact that we even *have* a battle over Christmas merely emphasizes the internal weakness of Christianity and our answers to the Big Questions - at least, as provided by the most visible representative of Christianity: the member of the institutional church.

So while I appreciate the efforts of the American Family Association and other public advocacy groups, I can't look to them to lead any ultimately successful charge on the question of Christmas in the culture. That has to come from the churches figuring out (or, better, divinely guided) how to engage the culture.

December 23 2008: [Barna's Revolution](#)



If you've looked through my site, you know I'm more of a "trailing edge" person, so it should be no surprise that my spiritual journey brings me to places everyone else has already been. That is the case with George Barna's book [Revolution](#), so I can assess the book partially in the light of what others have written about it. But for all that, this is a timely book for where I am now vis-a-vis the local church and my most recent experience of it.

The basic premise for the book is to explore the trends [The Barna Group](#) has been measuring for many years now, the extent to which the institutional church has become shallow, stale, unspiritual, and

all-around unhelpful for believers and unattractive to unbelievers. Barna merely describes the current phenomenon of believers who want to be Real with Jesus but find the churches in their area don't share this passion. What is someone in this position to do? Obvious - they hang up on the institutional church and "roll their own", perhaps with a house church or on the Internet, or getting involved in a parachurch ministry.

Probably if Barna had left it at that, this would have been just another troubling but uncontroversial statistics book, but Barna then moves to a point of advocacy:

**If the institutional church cannot help you grow
in Christ, then you *SHOULD* leave the
institutional church and "roll your own".**

Barna labels these souls who leave the church in search of a more authentic Christianity "Revolutionaries", and has nothing but good words to say of them. He describes the seven "passions" of a Revolutionary: Intimate Worship, Faith-Based Conversations, Intentional Spiritual Growth, Servanthood, Resource Investment, Spiritual Friendships, and Family Faith, and how these passions will affect the seven "principles" of a New Testament Christian: spiritual practices, personal faith, perspective on life, attitude, character, relationships, and behaviour. He goes on to state, in true prophetic style, that the local church must decide how to react to the phenomenon *that is already underway*: it can recognize and assist this satellite movement, or it can condemn it and attempt to recapture these unchurched believers.

Barna predicts in his book that it is this point that will attract the lightning, and so it has. Most of the reviewers I read react negatively to Barna's book, and most of them accuse him of encouraging defection from the institutional church. Some voices even cry "heresy"! Yet, few find fault with the logic of the syllogism:

1. The institutional church is largely incapable of fostering spiritual growth.
2. If the institutional church is incapable of fostering spiritual growth, then those who are interested in growing spiritually should leave the institutional church.
3. Therefore, those who are interested in growing spiritually should leave the institutional church.

It seems to me there are two understated approaches in the objections to Barna's position. One is to deny the first premise, that there is anything wrong with the institutional church. I find this approach untenable, in light of all the smoke in recent years: Books I have read, addressing the exodus of believers from churches, which twenty or thirty years ago would never have been written. Statistics in

attendance and baptisms and giving, not only for the decaying mainline denominations but also for the Southern Baptist Convention, the most evangelical of the lot. The rise of "Seeker Sensitive" and "Purpose Driven" and "Emerging" churches, exactly in response to societal changes in the image of the institutional church. One might argue the magnitude of the movement, but it is mere denial to argue the direction.

The other approach is to deny the second premise, that even if it is imperfect and ineffective, the institutional church is still the format ordained by God, and those who leave it, or malign it, as they claim Barna does, do so at their peril. But the Catholic Church at the outbreak of the Reformation was claiming the same. Institutions seem remarkably blind to God changing the dominant paradigm.

So in spite of much experience and learning of those who disagree with Barna, logically, I believe he wins the point. But ultimately, he's unquestionably right: the phenomenon is *already* under way, and churches *do* have to come to terms with it. The neglect of effective Christian discipleship must end - one way or another.

.....

To expand a bit on Barna, I'd say a Revolutionary is one who wants to grow in Christ, and realizes that their church (or any they've visited) is incapable of helping them. A "mature" Revolutionary might have the seven passions Barna describes full-blown, but "mature" Revolutionaries must come from "baby" ones. There's another spectrum here.

With that in mind, given the books I've been reading lately that put a new light on the disappointing experiences I've consistently had with churches, I would say I may join the Revolution myself at some strategic point. I can't claim to be a "mature" Revolutionary - but I *DO* want to grow in Christ, and be around others who do as well. If it can't happen within the structure of an institutional church... perhaps I'm better off without the albatross.

[December 14 2008: Jewish Reactions](#)

I came across two threads on the Internet recently that reflect on contemporary Jewish reactions to religious groups.

One came up while obtaining the link to Teen Challenge for yesterday's post. Rick Ross is an expert on cults, and as such has researched such religious groups as Scientology, the Branch Davidians, and the Mormon polygamist groups that have recently made the news in Arizona. He is also a professional deprogrammer; when people's children get involved in these religious cults, he "kidnaps" the children and "unbrainwashes" them. On occasion, he gets in trouble for these activities. So he is hardly a neutral voice on the subject of recovery groups like Teen Challenge, and it

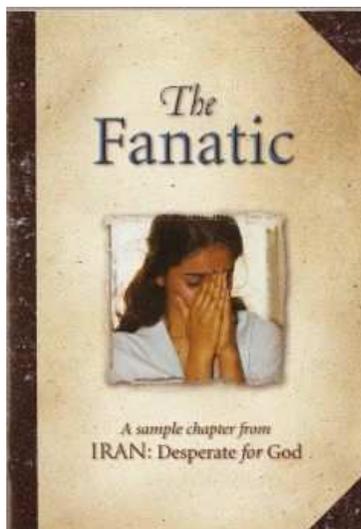
is therefore not surprising that he can advise the [State of Arizona](#) to not allow Teen Challenge access to Department of Corrections Juvenile facilities. What is a bit more bothersome is the [reports from others](#) on his website claiming abuses and cult-like activity in Teen Challenge.

Certainly these are anecdotes, and you have to take them with a grain of salt. Also, it should not be surprising that some religious groups (Teen Challenge regional chapters, even) might be abusive or cultic, but this doesn't mean that Teen Challenge or any other Christian group as a whole is abusive or cultic. But it *definitely leaves a bad impression of Christianity*. In fact, Rick Ross (bio [here](#)) is a Jew who objected to a Christian charismatic group "evangelizing" in his grandmother's nursing home.

The other came up while reading up on the terrorist attack in Mumbai. Roger Simon is an agnostic Jew who wrote [this article](#) about his reactions to the Chabad movement within Judaism, since the Jewish facility in Mumbai that was targeted by the terrorists and whose staff was horribly tortured and killed, was a Chabad house. Apparently, the Chabad sect are orthodox, but not exclusionary, and a notable feature of the group is their outreach to other Jews without expecting them to conform to traditional religious codes. The comments of the readers posted with the article are also generally favorable to Chabad.

So two secular, agnostic Jews react to present-day religious movements - in one case, Christian "evangelism", and the other, Chabad realness and love. Clearly, more flies are attracted with honey than vinegar.

December 13 2008: Witnessing in Iran



As a supporter of [Voice of the Martyrs](#), an organization dedicated to the relief of Christians being persecuted in other countries and to raising awareness of Christians in the West, I get their mailouts. In a recent one, a pamphlet with a chapter from *IRAN: Desperate for God*, with the story of Jilla, was included. Jilla as a young girl was very passionate about Islam, hoping to connect with Allah in a real and personal way. Of course, she could not, since the Allah of Islam isn't real. When she was older, it seems her sister had become a Christian, and shared the *Jesus* video with her. Then they moved to Tehran together to attend the university, and there, they visited some ethnic Armenian churches and got into a home group. In short order, Jilla also became a Christian. Her former passion for Islam, motivated by a desire to know Allah, now became a passion for sharing how Jesus fulfilled that desire. The booklet ends with how she is making a significant

impact with other women she meets on buses, shops, and a hair salon.

It is a beautiful and moving story, but it raises an unavoidable question for the Western Christian: How is this former muslim so passionate a witness, and we are not?

She has something personal to share

I remember being in a "witnessing" class in some previous church. They were teaching us to write out our "testimony" on a 3x5 card, and practice presenting it to each other within three minutes. This is perhaps the first time I realized it - what sort of "testimony" does someone have who accepted Christ at age six? I then proceeded to mention this question to some other church kids around me. When the group leader discovered me sabotaging the exercise like this, he levelled a baleful glare at me that shut me up.

But this is the stock-in-trade for at least our Southern Baptist churches, and it works so well that the Convention is quite concerned about the falling number of baptisms and attendees. I compare the passion and energy that Jilla had in her home group (the leaders were actually trying to put on the brakes, to avoid drawing attention from the muslim authorities) to the churches I've been in, I have to admit: I really am not motivated to talk to my friends and acquaintances about Christ, I really am not shining as obviously as Jilla did, and I really am not inclined to invite my friends to a church where we really don't have anything to offer.

It's all just religious theory and doctrine in our churches. Now, obviously, theory and doctrine are necessary, but *that's all we have*. On the other hand, I have been to a few [Teen Challenge](#) concerts, and heard their *real* testimonies and seen the *real* light shining out from them. There is a *real* difference here!

So, from a evangelical church perspective, since most are in the same boat as me (came to Christ from a Christian family at a young age), we are wasting our time (obviously, considering the negative results!) trying to train or guilt each other into "witnessing" a testimony we really don't have. If we can't or won't "witness", the proper reaction is not righteous indignation, like my old group leader did; it is to recognize that our people *don't have a vital relationship with Christ that is worth sharing*. Forget witnessing, evangelism, making converts, turning the baptism numbers around. Fix the problem: Let's connect with God!

She lives in a religious culture

Even if we do change our approach to Christianity away from obligatory evangelism and toward our First Love, we Westerners still have a problem. Much of the world is quite religious, even anti-secular. The muslim world certainly is. Jilla grew up in a religious society, where God talk is common and universal religious identity and

practice is the default. Jilla was encouraged by her culture in her passion for Islam.

In contrast, the West is quite secular. God-talk is discouraged, even mocked. Religious activity is merely tolerated, and in some places (like California, in the aftermath of the passage of Proposition 8) faces hostility.

When Jilla became a Christian, she knew what her fellow Iranian women were thinking. She knew they wanted what she had; the only challenge was how to safely transfer it to them.

In our Western pulpits, we hear of the "God-shaped hole" that everybody has, and how our neighbors are desperately trying to fill it with sex or materialism or chemicals. But because they have been culturally trained to reject anything supernatural or religious, their first reaction to our suggestion of a better way is scorn. This has been driven home to me in the past few years, as we have attempted to contact the people in the area around the church. Even though many of them are clearly suffering with the decisions they have made, they view our efforts to talk to them, pray for them, give them "no strings attached" light bulbs or cans of soda, as attempts to get them to come to our church services. They don't want what we're offering. They don't see us offering anything other than religion.

So we don't have anything worthwhile to offer them, and they don't want what we *are* offering them. This is an impasse we can't solve by ourselves.

When we hear about the growth of Islam in Europe (France, Belgium, and England), we are inclined to mourn; the thought of the cathedrals turned into mosques, the cradle of Christendom finally succumbing to the Saracen. But maybe we shouldn't. Maybe a muslim society would be better for Christianity than a secular one.

December 7 2008: [Quitting Church](#)

I'm trying to clear out my backlog of books that I figure I ought to read. [Quitting Church](#), by Julia Duin, is one of those books, and it is a fairly quick read. Since I am aware of the "back door" and how so many new believers leave a church through it, the title of the book resonated. Furthermore, since Ms. Duin is a *journalist*, and on staff to a major (i.e., "liberal" mainstream) newspaper, but as the *religion editor* (a position which is not usually appreciated by those "liberal" mainstream newspapers), rather than another prominent evangelical author, I thought she might bring a different perspective to the table. I think she does.

**Quitting
Church**



Why the Faithful Are Fleeing
and What to Do about It

Julia Duin
Religion Editor,
The Washington Times

Part of this perspective is being a young, single feminist. From what I've seen, feminism is caught in a tension between biology (or traditional roles, or the

God-ordained pattern) - wanting to be a wife and mother - and the right to be respected as a person - which, in our culture, means having a career and access to positions of authority. So in one chapter, she decries a church culture that doesn't help single women to become "wife and mother", and in another, she decries the limiting of women to the roles of "wife and mother". I was amused that in one chapter, she wanted women to be pastors, and in another, she identified pastors as a big part of the problem! But I will reserve my thoughts about feminism for another time.

I very much appreciated her perspective on single ministries in churches, because I've seen the same thing in churches I've attended: the emphasis is on *purity in singleness*, not on *getting married*. Maybe this is an outgrowth of our youth and college ministries - certainly we expect high school and college students to remain single (despite isolated cases when it's not the wisest course), and certainly we expect students to be sexually pure. We ought to expect single people to remain sexually pure even after graduation and entry into the "adult world". But why should we expect such to *remain single*?. But Ms. Duin is right: we do. I remember some of the most contentious events related to the Singles' Ministry in my previous churches were when older single men (40s, 50s... 60s?) wanted to go to the Singles' Class, but the leadership didn't want them "hitting on the young women." Yet these older single men weren't really welcome in the age-graded adult Sunday School classes, which, no question, were geared toward married couples.

Actually, I've got a growing awareness of this issue in my small church - as young people grow older, they *ought* to be shopping for mates, but a small church doesn't have the opportunities. Now, I *have* recommended to some teens and college students that, rather than drop out, they ought to find a bigger church with better resources. I don't think I can confidently do that with singles, considering what I've seen in those other churches. An additional problem is that these physically-maturing young people are not being trained or equipped - by churches, or by the government schools, or by their families - to be emotionally mature enough to have a family.

But this brings out another point the book makes: the institutional church does very poorly at teaching. Partly, the teaching (preaching) is geared to winning new converts, and has little to offer older believers. Partly, the teaching (preaching) attempts to be culturally relevant, or social or political commentary, to appeal to "seekers", or for "life application", instead of deep Bible study. Partly, the teaching (preaching) is constrained by the expectations on the pastor by the congregation (real or perceived). The effect is to drive older Christians who are tired of the milk and need the meat out the "back door". Now, the book aims this bolt at the sermons, and identifies "teaching" with "preaching", omitting Sunday School or Small Group Bible study; however, the literature I've seen used in Sunday School and small groups, at least for youth, is either so Biblically shallow, or emphasizes

knowledge over obedience, that I can give Duin the point.

This leads to another point the book makes about pastors: They either get burned out due to the expectations of the congregation, not having friends they can confide in, or attempt to do what only God can do, or they damage the church by falling into sin or exerting autocratic control. Either way, mature worker Christians (maybe including the pastors themselves) end up dissatisfied, and leave the church.

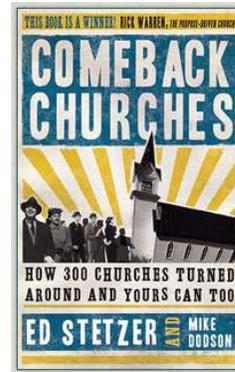
Probably the strongest point the book makes is about *Christian community*. Duin compares the "supermarket" church with various community-oriented structures, like L'Abri, or Shane Claiborne's Simple Way, or Christian "ghettos" like Houston's Church of the Redeemer and places like Ann Arbor and South Bend, where the people live close together and reinforce their shared principles. House churches fall into this category, and Duin gives both sides to this movement: yes, they can be good for that sense of community and belonging, but they can formalize into the very institutional churches they are intended to escape. In addition, if they are like church smallgroups, which often fail to meet the members' spiritual and emotional needs, the house church movement can't last long.

There's a chapter about the charismatic movement, and how this is the most quickly growing segment of Christianity in the world today. People are looking for power, and there's the appearance of that in Charismatic and Pentecostal churches, but it is subject to abuse and control and pastoral shortcomings. Now, I haven't really been in any charismatic churches, outside of some (mild) Assembly of God ones, but my kids have, and I know some charismatics, and they are much more hung up on tongues than Duin appears to report. If someone has to be coached for "how to speak in tongues", then it isn't a gift of the Spirit, it's a purely emotional state of consciousness thing.

The book is fairly well-balanced on all points (except maybe the ordained women pastors issue), and makes excellent points, but, like the journalist she is, Duin reports, and doesn't really offer much of a solution. In fact, she explains that, after she adopted a child, she shopped for a church with a Sunday School program for children. So for herself, it came down to being a religious consumer. But she returns to the idea of the Christian community as being the best hope for the problem of people quitting church.

November 29 2008: Comeback Churches

It was a fast read: [Comeback Churches](#), another book based on a big survey the authors conducted, this time of 324 churches that self-identified as "plateaued" (slow or no growth) or in decline, and have turned it around and have experienced significant numeric growth. At this point, there is no question that Central Baptist / Element would be in the "decline" category, so the book is appropriate and timely. Partly it is a distillation of trends and themes from the research, along with encouraging anecdotes from the surveyed pastors; partly it is a how-to book with suggestions and guidelines.



There's some things in here that make a lot of sense, and I wholeheartedly agree with:

- **Leadership:** Now, Frank Viola and the House Church people may disagree, saying that the only leader a church needs is Jesus, but I'll bet that even in House Churches, you have some who take a leadership role, and certainly in an established (traditional style) church, the most obvious leader is the Pastor. I'm coming around to the point of thinking that an influential layperson can affect a church negatively all by himself/herself, but he/she cannot affect a church positively (particularly, lead it out of decline) without the Pastor. If the Pastor of a church does not lead, that church is done for. At the same time, the Pastor cannot lead alone. The Pastor must groom others for leadership roles. The Pastor must set the cadence for the ministry of the other members. So the leadership component of a church revitalization is indisputable.
- **Spiritual Maturity:** Or, as the book describes it, "closing the back door." All the outreach and prettifying efforts will be for naught if the people who visit are not followed up on, or if those who are won are not guided into discipleship and relationship contexts.

I particularly noted the point made on p. 130:

"Friendliness is not enough - People are not looking for a friendly church, they re looking for friends. Many churches are not prepared o move visitors into relationships with others in the church.

Central is billed as a "friendly church". Yet how many people have come, perhaps for several weeks, and been greeted with smiles and had their hands shaken - during the Sunday service. They never broke into any groups, they never connected with any others, never had meaningful contact with church members beyond that 10-minute "greeting time"... and they quit coming.

- **Mobilizing the Laity:** The Pastor is not the church. If the entire membership doesn't get on the wagon, it won't go on down the road. Even a small band of

recalcitrant members can block progress for the whole show. While I appreciate the tips and stories of how to get the other members engaged, I wonder if none ever had to deal with intransigent members. I recall one church which had a few deacons who were adamantly opposed to the reforms identified by the pastor and the rest of the congregation - and eventually, the pastor had to ask them to leave the church. I've heard stories of W. A. Criswell of First Baptist, Dallas, who dealt with an old ladies' Sunday School class by simply ignoring them and building around them - and in time, the problem took care of itself.

- **Small Groups:** I really hope Central never joins the K-Club (1000 members or more). I think when a church gets too big for its facilities, it should spin off daughter fellowships, and that a church revitalization effort ought to plan for that right up front. But even a manageable 300 people is too big for anything but an eyes-on-Jesus worship time. Humans can't form connections with that many people, but they *can* in a smaller group of 6-10. In my opinion, discipleship cannot occur in a large group; like relationship connections, it can only occur in a small group. Even if the "small group" is actually an appropriately designed Sunday School class.

Now, that said, there are a few things I'm not entirely sure about.

First, I wonder if the emphasis is misplaced. I know the book is all about how these declining churches turned things around, but the implication is that survival or success as a church is the object. Maybe this is a fine point; a church that regains her focus on Jesus will likely survive and succeed, and hopefully that was *the* motive for the churches that the book is based on. But I know of many churches who were/are in decline (yes, including Central) and came up with various strategems to survive or succeed, **but they failed** (so far), because the *motive* was *survival*, not *Jesus*! If a church restructures itself to become more effective at connecting people to Jesus, then I will be keenly interested. If a church moves mountains just to get more (churchy) people to join and donate money to keep the club running - it doesn't deserve to survive.

Second, the "missional church". There are some things I understand and applaud about the "missional church" concept - how can a church teach about and financially support and pray for missionaries, and not understand that *they* must apply missionary tactics in their own community? Missionaries don't go to Africa and start churches for church people with stained glass and organ music and age-graded Sunday Schools and hymnbooks, they make relationships with the people in those cultures, share the Gospel in terms those cultures can understand, and plant churches that are relevant for those cultures. Why do we think it should be different *here*? And yet... *the purpose of the church is to win souls*? I know this is the party line in the Evangelical community, and I know that evangelism is a

necessary component of a healthy well-balanced church (a la Purpose-Driven). But I'm coming around to the idea that Christ wants us to be focused on *HIM*, that the *purpose of the church* is to glorify Christ, in our lives, our obedience to the Spirit, our submission to one another, our love for others.

I think the book is a bit confused on this point. In some places, particularly the Evangelism chapter, where the usual prooftexts for universal obligatory evangelism are quoted, and even in the Spiritual Maturity chapter, where "evangelism" appears above "discipleship" in the sequence, the "missional" emphasis is pretty clear. In other places, the opposite dependency is suggested, like Principle #1 of "Building an Evangelistic Vision", where the authors state, "The greatest motivation for evangelism is our own relationship with God" (although even here, the need is for a *relationship*, not a "compelling vision for outreach").

Third, the book makes quite an emphasis on Sunday Morning Service topics, like music styles and preaching. I could see the music style issue from this point: If people are actually focused on Jesus, and singing *to* Jesus, because *they love Jesus*, then outsiders will see and take note. If a music style is employed because that's what the church members want (their own preference; that is, they're focused on *their own interests* and not *Jesus*), then it isn't going to do any more than appeal to others with the same musical tastes. From this perspective, I'd rather see a church build an effective discipleship ministry, and let the music styles arise naturally from a heightened overall spiritual maturity.

Preaching? According to Frank Viola, House Churches don't need preaching, so preaching isn't quite as indispensable as the (trained pastor) authors think it is. I've been in many churches with tremendous preachers, and they do grow! But is it because the people are connecting with Jesus and the Word of God, or because they are impressed with the speaking abilities of the preacher? In some cases, it is indisputable the latter, and when the pastor is called to another church, or retires, many people leave that church, because it was the rhetoric of the preacher that held them there, not the love of Jesus. I have no beef with sermons myself (other than to think other styles more in the line of teaching would be more appropriate); I just suspect that preachers (those who write books about church health, and those who read them) have a touch of myopia on the subject.

Now, the thing I liked THE BEST about the book was this:

The authors recognize that church decline is a spiritual condition, and that a spiritual cure must precede anything else.

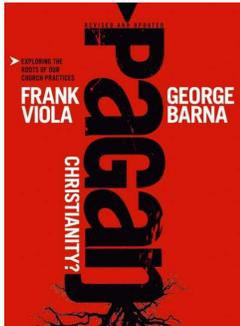
These spiritual cures include the following:

- A renewed connection with Jesus and understanding of the purpose of the Church.
- A renewed attitude about serving others.
- A renewed commitment to corporate prayer.

It is significant that the chapter on spiritual renewal, at the very beginning of the book, follows the chapter on leadership. The book is very clear: **The Leaders Must Pray, And Call The Membership To Prayer.** I think it is also significant that most of the chapters reiterate the foundational importance of prayer.

But I guess I *would* find that significant, since it is a personal fixation!

November 26 2008: Pagan Christianity



I have now finished reading [Pagan Christianity](#), by Frank Viola and George Barna. Wow. Thought provoking. I *highly* recommend it, to evangelical pastors (particularly of small churches, who have a ghost of a chance to move at all) and to those, like me, who are seeking for a better church, or how church could be done better, more Biblically, more effectively.

Here is a summary of the points made by the book:

1. **Church Buildings:** How the church met in homes at first, and didn't start using dedicated buildings until Constantine, and how the church building tradition inherits from the pagan temple. Of particular interest is how architectural structures reinforce the distinction between participatory clergy and a spectator laity.

My conflict: I totally agree with the problem of a building becoming an albatross. Much of my grief over First Baptist of Tucson (recently disbanded) is that their tiny congregation (due to other problems) was unable to support the tremendous real estate investment of their more "successful" past. Our church now, Central Baptist, is facing a similar problem with our much more modest facility.

And yet, if we understand the principle of "Worldview", and how Christianity must be expressed in every part of life and culture, and how art is part of life and culture, and how architecture is part of art, how better (and how much tremendous historical legacy) than the church building?

2. **Order of Worship:** Where the Sunday Morning liturgy came from, and how it "evolved" especially in the 18th and 19th centuries, particularly with the influence of key figures like Wesley and Moody. The problem is primarily that a rigid order of worship, planned and established by clergymen, actually

quashes Spirit-led worship, and inhibits participation and contribution from the whole church.

3. **The Sermon:** As Christianity moved into the Greek realms, it was influenced by that civilization's appreciation of rhetoric and oratory, as exemplified by the Sophists. To this day, the traditional church expects a rousing sermon, and grades their preachers (a major criterion for pulpit committees) on how well they speak.

Unfortunately, the Sermon tends to further reinforce the separation between an active clergy and a passive laity. Furthermore, even as a teaching tool, it isn't very effective. I've remarked on this point myself to a few pastor friends, but I guess we've got a *paradigm effect* going - when someone is steeped in the traditional expectations, when someone's job depends on continuing it, and when someone gets positive feedback ("I really appreciated your message, pastor, it spoke right to where I am"), then they really aren't open to the suggestion that sermons really can't bring about life-change.

4. **The Pastor:** Originally, there weren't any. Then there were elders, and "bishops" who had no special authority. But all that changed with Constantine, and the church hierarchy soon looked like the pagan priesthood and the Imperial court. Even with the change of name ("priest" -> "pastor") with the Reformation, and the change of emphasis from performing the Mass to preaching, this artificial barrier between *clergy* and *laity* robbed the Body of its original organic unity and participation. This situation persists to this day, and, like the Building, a professional pastoral staff creates a considerable financial burden for a church. Seems that Central Baptist is also suffering from these financial pressures, and Pastor Travis has started moving towards being a bivocational pastor - a move I heartily applaud.
5. **Sunday Dress:** Tradition, and class distinction, pure and simple. Directly invokes the prohibition against partiality in the book of James. Includes a discussion of clerical vestments, which at least we in the Baptist tradition don't have to deal with.
This really isn't a big deal for me; I've already sworn off happy clothes for Sunday morning, but I know it is still a hangup for our older people.
6. **Music Ministers:** Discussion of where the choir came from, and choir robes, and whether or not instruments were used (particularly the pipe organ). Ends with favorable remarks about the "worship team". Again, the primary objection is that choirs and music leaders (who choose the songs to mesh with the sermon) separates the body and turns the "laity" into passive participants who are being entertained more than they are worshipping.
7. **Money:** There is a discussion of the *tithe*, and how it is really not Biblically applicable to the New Testament church. This emphasis on an obligatory tithe places a heavy obligation on the poor members. Providing a salary to the pastor creates a burden for the church, and puts the pastor himself into the bind of having to please the congregation in order to win his livelihood.

8. **Sacraments:** This was an interesting chapter. In times past, baptism was the mark of the new birth; in *recent times*, the "sinner's prayer" and the act of "accepting Christ as one's *personal* Saviour" have replaced it. This was unknown prior to Moody and Finney. Similarly, the Lord's Supper was originally part of a shared meal, and was a joyful occasion. Later, after the Roman church turned it into the Mass and all the "transubstantiation" business, even the Evangelical church presents the Lord's Supper as a stylized, formal, solemn, symbolic event, performed on infrequent or even rare occasions.
9. **Christian Education:** The origins of Christian scholasticism are traced from the pastoral training in the medieval church, through the monastery schools and cathedral schools, to the universities and seminaries of today. Greek philosophy was carried in and corrupted primitive Christian theology. An intellectual, theoretical knowledge about God replaced an spiritual, practical experience of God. Even "Sunday School" gets a rough treatment. I think this argument goes too far. To the extent that 18th and 19th Century pastors placed their emphasis on knowledge and teaching, I would agree that there is a problem with school learning. To the extent that liberal scholars even today use their dry theory to challenge the very foundations of the Faith, I would agree there is a problem. However, God is *Mind*, and He created us in His image with minds; Logic and Reason are part of what we are, and we are to worship Him with all of what we are, including our minds. I further propose that specialized school learning is important for some (currently pastors) to understand theology, church history, Greek and Hebrew language, and other intellectual tools to instruct the church and guard us against error. I also find it interesting that the author would rely on the arguments of prominent scholars (as he does on pp. 228 and 239) while largely denouncing scholarship.

The historical part of the book risks being dismissed on the same grounds that the majority of Christians dismiss the complaint that the Christmas Tree has pagan origins. Even if it did (which it appears it did not), modern Christians certainly do not celebrate paganism. However, the point of the book is not to reject the office of Pastor (and other institutions) due to its pagan origins, but rather

- To make the argument that the institution does not have the Biblical basis we often attribute to it, and
- To suggest that the institution has deleterious effects for the church.

Of course, this argument is made in support of the promotional part of the book. Viola and Barna are advocates of the house church movement, and this book is an apology for the movement. I suppose many in the institutional church would be inclined to dismiss the book for this reason, also. In fact, Barna has a reputation for being bitter against the institutional church - which is something I would expect

partisans of the institutional church would say.

Semper Reformanda - "Always Reforming", the principle that Luther (and others) acted on in their generation and recommended for future ones. If the institutional church of Luther's day - medieval Roman Catholicism - needed reforming, and there are certainly no evangelicals of this day who would deny *that*, then how could evangelicals insist that the institutional church of our day has no such need?

I believe that the house church model is a good one, perhaps better than the Purpose-Driven Church or the Seeker-Sensitive Church or the Family-Integrated Church. I think it is too much to say that it is the solution to all our problems. First, I think it is too much to say that the house church, with no pastor and no building and everyone participating, is the *correct, God-ordained* model, merely because it is the model in place in the First Century. After all, Acts is a book of *history*, not *doctrine*, and if God intended to draw the church back to its origins, why has He waited til the 21st Century to get men like Barna and Viola on the job? Second, while I might agree that the house church is likely to be a more effective, Spirit-led model, the majority of 21st Century Western Christians are not able to conceive of a church without a building or a pastor. If I were in Viola's place, I might suggest interim steps, perhaps starting with a bivocational pastor, then replacing the sermon with an interactive teaching time, then trading in the organ for a few guitars and having the congregation request songs on their own. Maybe later, moving most of the real activities into homes and reserving the building for special occasions, such as holidays or once-a-month seasons of worship.

I would go for those interim forms. I think my outsider friends would, too, better than the stiff, structured churches I've been in so far.

.....

Mark D. Roberts recently ran a series on Spiritual Gifts. In [one of the articles of the series](#), he makes exactly the same observations about "clericalism", and then "professional ministers", which stifle the ability of the Body of Christ to function with the spiritual gifts the Spirit has brought to us. Like Roberts, I don't know about "tongues", but I *do* believe that the gifts of power and service have not been removed from the Church. I would agree that, at least in our non-Charismatic fellowships, the church has been structured to remove our dependency on the Spirit.

November 15 2008: [The Business of Church](#)

Pastor Jeremiah shared a magazine article with me last week. The magazine is produced by [Lifeway](#), the publishing division of the Southern Baptist Convention. There is lots of good stuff there from an evangelical viewpoint. Specifically, there is a research group (www.lifewayresearch.com) that does polls and assesses trends and the same sort of stuff for the Southern Baptist-affiliated church that [The Barna](#)

Group does for the broader evangelical community.

The **article**, entitled "Poor Planning Hinders Small Church Progress", addresses the problems that especially small churches have in achieving "progress" (which, I suspect, really means "growth"). It seems there are four areas that the article deals with directly.

Vision: It seems that the pastors of these small churches know what God wants them to do.

Most pastors of small churches have assessed their church's cultural context.

75% have studied their communities.

90% have examined trends in their congregations.

71% say they try to be actively involved in their community.

Most pastors of small churches see what God is calling their church to be and do.

94% say they clearly see the needs, hurts and problems God is calling their church to address.

80% have shared with the congregation a clear, compelling picture of what God is calling their church to look like several years from now.

Resistance: But they can't do it. Many pastors report that "lay leaders in the congregation often resist change to protect their area of responsibility", and that they have "experienced disruptive conflict in the past year." Even the Lifeway researchers recognize these as spiritual problems.

Planning: "Change requires leadership", the article correctly states, and then goes on to report

- 29% of pastors have "a clear plan to accomplish the things God has called their church to do."
- 44% note that they "don't understand why things they try don't work."
- 30% are "confused about where they should invest their own time and effort."

Metrics: After making a plan, leaders need to monitor how well the plan is doing. In my context at a major defense company, this is called "Metrics" - indicators of progress that are measured and analyzed to determine where problems may exist and what adjustments may be appropriate. This is a big part of professional

software engineering. In the small church context,

- 40% of pastors note that their church "rarely has time to step back and plan accordingly."
- 67% of churches "rarely change who is responsible for certain work or responsibilities."
- Less than 60% "regularly evaluate methods and results of events and programs."

What is significant about this article is, if you removed the occasional references to "God", and replaced "pastor" with "manager", and "church" with "company", you could have lifted the article from a business journal or a management seminar. Business leaders "cast a vision" and invent "mission statements" (and boy, are my coworkers and I ever tired of the endlessly circulating and changing parade of "visions" and "mission statements"), they have problems with recalcitrant employees and with making plans, and few look at any sort of "metric" other than the bottom line of sales and profit.

This similarity of church operation to the business world has been observed by many, often by those in smaller churches witnessing the tactics of larger, more "successful" churches like Saddleback. Having studied the Purpose-Driven method, I can see the point. Some of these activities are necessarily part of any activity involving humans, such as planning, and I'm actually a fan of metrics - as long as the metrics are few and significant (and not so many, and so abstract, and require so much effort to collect that you get the "tail wagging the dog" phenomenon that I am immersed with in my job). But the fact that God is involved in this process so remotely is a point of concern.

- **Vision:** Why is it the *pastor* and not the *church* that gets the word from God? Why is it always the *pastor* that gets the vision, and has to convince the *church*? Seems to me that the *pastor* (i.e., "shepherd") should be working to get the church into a place with God where the "body of Christ" can hear what the "Head" (which is *Christ*, not the *pastor*) is directing, and not regarding the church as merely a labor pool for his "divinely directed" projects.
- **Resistance:** Granted that resistance to the pastor's leadership is a spiritual problem. Might it also therefore be an indicator? Perhaps the lay leaders (and the members in general) are spiritually immature, and the real effort needs to be expended on the church rather than by the church. Perhaps the members are cynical of yet another "I've had a word from God" episode by the pastor, when they weren't involved in receiving this word themselves.
- **Planning:** Some planning is certainly necessary, since humans are involved. But, as my "Experiencing God" class points out, "God's work can only be done God's way". Planning is the management of available resources, but if

the work is really from God, He will provide what we do not have. How does one plan with what doesn't exist yet? More important than the leaders to be planning is for the entire church to be in a state where they accurately hear from God and effectively ask of God so they can miraculously receive from God.

- **Metrics:** In most of our Baptist churches, there are only three metrics that count: "Number of baptisms", "Number of attenders", and "Amount of money collected". They are easily taken, they affect our actions (well, at least the sermon topics), and they are certainly relevant if the objective is "church growth". Not so much if it is "spiritual maturity".

So it seems to me that all these pastors (especially of small churches) would be better employed in guiding their churches to spiritual maturity, to a point where the entire body can receive instructions for outreach to the community, than looking to God for these instructions on behalf of the church, and then having to coerce the church through planning and evaluations to follow "God's Will".

[It's actually somewhat troubling that the Lifeway research group, operating on behalf of the Southern Baptist Convention, recognizes that "discouraging baptism and membership trends in the Southern Baptist convention show us that change is needed in many local congregations" (the aforementioned easily-collected metrics), but respond with a report with so little spiritual content. It's a "paradigm" issue, a "worldview", and we as Southern Baptists will make no progress in our culture if we continue to operate on a "church as a business" paradigm rather than "church as the Body of Christ".]

[November 9 2008: Persecution Coming for American Christians?](#)

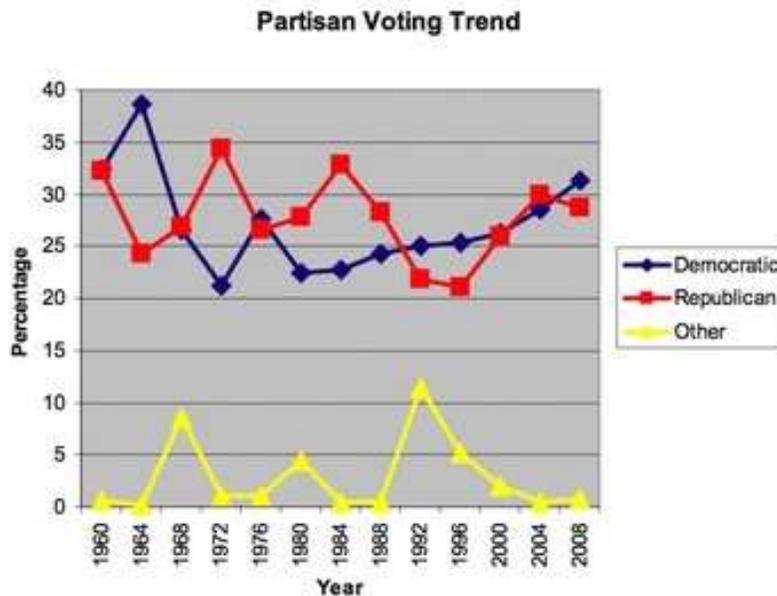
Once upon a time, we were having a discussion in youth group, and the subject was "persecution". Of course, we were mostly talking about historical (Roman) and international (Korean, Muslim) persecution of Christians, but I mentioned that someday, Christians in America will be persecuted, too. One of the girls declared, "No way, it will never happen here!"

I'd say it's getting closer. This month, California passed a constitutional amendment defining marriage as exclusively between one man and one woman. Of course, this came after the California Supreme Court imposed same-sex marriage on the state, overruling a state law that the voters had overwhelmingly approved. So now, [certain homosexuals are threatening violence against Christians](#).

This in itself is no real surprise - in the two episodes of societies dominated by homosexuality (Sodom, Genesis 19; and the Tribe of Benjamin, Judges 19-20), when homosexuals are not restrained by a contrary public morality, they practice assault and rape and murder, and the society protects and enables them. This appears to be the situation in Northern California.

The problem is, American society at large is becoming more protective and enabling of homosexuals, largely through the efforts of a public education system and media services that are controlled by politically liberal persons sympathetic to the homosexual lifestyle and opposed to the traditional values that Christians identify with.

This point is driven home by an American University report cited in [Powerline](#), which presents this chart



and ascribe the monotonic upward trend to "cultural forces" that Democratic partisans wield. Powerline's recommendation is for Republicans to do a better job at the cultural molding gig; however, fundamentally, this is a spiritual issue, and secular Republicans are not equipped to deal with it. Unfortunately, neither is a sick and ineffective American Christian church.

But that's not all. Barack Obama has been elected President, and he is already on record as intent on changing America toward his own liberal values (however under-reported those may be in the national media). And for the first time since the Culture Wars really started, a liberal president will have a liberal Congress and Senate and unparalleled opportunity to liberalize the federal judiciary. A government unfriendly to Christian values. A popular culture unfriendly to Christian values. A rising generation of young people unfriendly to Christian values. I think we can expect persecution in the near future.

But we discussed this very thing in the Central/Element youth group, just before the election. God is the one who sets up kings and governments, and this trend has been long in the forming. The end of the world will come sometime, preceded by

world-wide persecution. But persecution, like yesterday's consideration of the Roman persecution calmly administered by Pliny the Younger, has a way of purifying the church, and helping it focus on What (Who) is really important.

Not a pleasant prospect. But if that's what it takes...

November 8 2008: The Ancient "Real Church"

A little while ago, I mentioned the writings of [Pliny the Younger](#) in the context of Christian morality and "unChristian" judgmentalism. But Pliny's letter is interesting on many levels as a look at a primitive church structure and Christian practice (before centuries of cultural accretions and expectations, resulting in the present church situation). Here's the whole thing:

It is my custom, Sire, to refer to you in all cases where I am in doubt, for who can better clear up difficulties and inform me? I have never been present at any legal examination of the Christians, and I do not know, therefore, what are the usual penalties passed upon them, or the limits of those penalties, or how searching an inquiry should be made. I have hesitated a great deal in considering whether any distinctions should be drawn according to the ages of the accused; whether the weak should be punished as severely as the more robust, or whether the man who has once been a Christian gained anything by recanting? Again, whether the name of being a Christian, even though otherwise innocent of crime, should be punished, or only the crimes that gather around it?

In the meantime, this is the plan which I have adopted in the case of those Christians who have been brought before me. I ask them whether they are Christians, if they say "Yes," then I repeat the question the second time, and also a third -- warning them of the penalties involved; and if they persist, I order them away to prison. For I do not doubt that -- be their admitted crime what it may -- their pertinacity and inflexible obstinacy surely ought to be punished.

There were others who showed similar mad folly, whom I reserved to be sent to Rome, as they were Roman citizens. Later, as is commonly the case, the mere fact of my entertaining the question led to a multiplying of accusations and a variety of cases were brought before me. An anonymous pamphlet was issued, containing a number of names of alleged Christians. Those who denied that they were or had been Christians and called upon the gods with the usual formula, reciting the words after me, and those who offered incense and wine before your image -- which I had ordered to be brought forward for this purpose,

along with the regular statues of the gods -- all such I considered acquitted -- especially as they cursed the name of Christ, which it is said bona fide Christians cannot be induced to do.

Still others there were, whose names were supplied by an informer. These first said they were Christians, then denied it, insisting they had been, "but were so no longer"; some of them having "recanted many years ago," and more than one "full twenty years back." These all worshiped your image and the god's statues and cursed the name of Christ.

But they declared their guilt or error was simply this -- on a fixed day they used to meet before dawn and recite a hymn among themselves to Christ, as though he were a god. So far from binding themselves by oath to commit any crime, they swore to keep from theft, robbery, adultery, breach of faith, and not to deny any trust money deposited with them when called upon to deliver it. This ceremony over, they used to depart and meet again to take food -- but it was of no special character, and entirely harmless. They also had ceased from this practice after the edict I issued -- by which, in accord with your orders, I forbade all secret societies.

I then thought it the more needful to get at the facts behind their statements. Therefore I placed two women, called "deaconesses," under torture, but I found only a debased superstition carried to great lengths, so I postponed my examination, and immediately consulted you. This seems a matter worthy of your prompt consideration, especially as so many people are endangered. Many of all ages and both sexes are put in peril of their lives by their accusers; and the process will go on, for the contagion of this superstition has spread not merely through the free towns, but into the villages and farms. Still I think it can be halted and things set right. Beyond any doubt, the temples -- which were nigh deserted -- are beginning again to be thronged with worshipers; the sacred rites, which long have lapsed, are now being renewed, and the food for the sacrificial victims is again finding a sale -- though up to recently it had almost no market. So one can safely infer how vast numbers could be reclaimed, if only there were a chance given for repentance.

Now, what does Pliny's letter tell us about the sort of Christianity that was practiced in Asia Minor by the locals (not Jewish believers, as in the New Testament) a few hundred years after the Resurrection?

Church Focus: Christianity was a minority, alien, persecuted faith. Believers met quietly, perhaps even secretly. Outsiders were potentially dangerous. Clearly, "church growth" and "evangelism" were not driving forces. They didn't appear to be advocating "Purpose-Driven", "Seeker-Sensitive", "Emerging", or any other sort of methodology or organizational philosophy. While they probably were "family-integrated", and homeschooled their children, these were not distinctives they championed in contrast to other church structures.

Rather, they were willing to die for their faith in Christ. Looks to me that this underground church was about as close to a Jesus-centered "Real Church" as you could ever find.

Church Infrastructure: There wasn't any. They met in homes, or remote places. No pews, no pulpit. No piano or organ or other musical instruments; they sang a capella. There's no mention of a pastor or bishop or key leader, and if there was one, the persecutors would go after him first, so there probably wasn't any. In fact, the only "office" mentioned was *deaconesses*, and the execution of these didn't seem to slow things down at all.

Church Services: They sang some songs and they committed themselves to holiness. No preaching (more evidence that there was no unique leader individual). No offering; probably there was a collection for the poor, but it was done "off-line". No special music, no choir, no stiff, formal, canned prayer. No "Children's Church", no youth group. Nothing structured at all.

When the Governor demanded it, they stopped their Sunday morning meeting entirely. The loss did not seem to slow things down. Their church - the local instantiation of Christianity - was not identical with nor dependent on the Sunday Morning Service.

Yet they *did* meet on Sunday morning, in spite of the danger. They had a potluck dinner after the Sunday meeting, every week. They may not have had a Sunday Night Training Union or Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting, but I'll bet they continued to meet randomly through the week with smaller subsets of the entire body, even after the Sunday morning meeting was discontinued. Lots of smallgroups going to each other's homes, for quiet worship and teaching and study.

Life Application: Their commitment to Christ went well beyond Sunday morning. They committed to *living their faith* in holiness and moral purity and regard for others. They held each other accountable for their commitments.

Commitment of Believers: First off, obviously, they were willing to die rather than renounce their faith. Jesus was real to them, and important, and

non-negotiable, even if their Sunday morning meeting was. Perhaps some may have recanted under threat of death, but most did not, hence Pliny's predicament.

However, more subtly, Christianity was spreading. Under the circumstances, the primary "evangelism" was the lifestyle of the believers. The "light and salt" of these believers, and their commitment to Christ in the face of persecution and death, made enough of an impression on their neighbors that they, too, were willing to risk the danger and consider Christ.

Presence of Unbelievers: There was *NOT* any sizeable group of pseudo Christians, people who go through the motions and claim the Name but have never experienced the New Birth. After an initial exposure, apparently of varying durations, these false Christians left the church and rejected the faith they never actually owned. They eagerly confessed this when accused, and had no problems with worshipping the Emperor and the gods approved by the State.

For the same reason, the persecution probably did away entirely with the "Crowd". Real believers, perhaps from some other location who moved, would join themselves sincerely to the church, probably after some careful checking on both sides. Unbelievers would be unwilling to risk being fingered as "Christians" merely for visiting a Sunday "service" out of curiosity. In fact, the reports of Sunday activities to the Governor were made by apostates, not unbeliever witnesses. The Christians were probably hesitant, even reluctant to admit unbelievers to their meetings.

Influence on their Community: The Bad: Phooey on "Busters and Mosaics having unfavorable impressions about Christianity". These unbelievers were willing to betray their neighbors to death! Some people had their cherished pagan notions so challenged by the lifestyles of those committed Christians that they would accuse them to the Romans of a capital crime. Actually this isn't "the bad"; even for those believers who lost their lives, who can "rejoice and be exceedingly glad" (Matt. 5:12) for their reward. The Better: Phooey on evangelism strategies and crusades and programs! The church was growing, and the authorities were alarmed! When Christians *live the Truth*, and are focused to Christ even in the face of abuse and death, *more outsiders come in than insiders are lost!*

That's not what we see in our world today. At least not in the "Christian" West. But that's what a Real Church looks like!

Now, truly, that's history, and the context for the primitive church was different than ours today. Still, we can profit by the example of those ancient Christians who could surrender their Sunday morning fixtures and be *more fervently Christian* than we can with our precious buildings and liturgies and professional pastoral staff. They had a greater influence on their Community in the absence of any planned "evangelism" strategy or inclusive worship service than we have with all our best

efforts.

November 1 2008: [Who is in a Real Church?](#)

At this point, I've read several books, like Rich Warren's (Purpose-Driven Church) and Voddie Baucham's (Family-Integrated Church) and Rob Bell's (Emergent), and I'm more than half way through Frank Viola's "Pagan Christianity" (advocating House Church), and many others. I've been a member of large and small Southern Baptist churches that emphasize the speaking abilities of the preacher, or the intention to grow numerically, or "friendliness". I've visited many churches, talked with their pastors, worked with their youth ministers, read their websites and their promotional literature. I'm thinking there is no Right Answer to what is *The Real Church*, but it seems that some answers fall outside more obviously than others. One of the fundamental questions that sees answers falling in a broad pattern is,

"Of what sort of people does the church consist?"

The answer to this question, and all the others, has to start with the answer to the fundamental question:

Question: *What is the object of the Church?*

Answer: *Jesus Christ.*

Duh! Well, not so fast...

If the object of a church is a methodology (Purpose-Driven, Emerging) or a sociological construct (the nuclear family) or the friendships between members (the religious club) or a political or cultural or social agenda (the liberal church, or the homosexual church, or the anti-homosexual church), then Jesus is not the object. He may be mentioned during the liturgy or the Sunday School class, He may be the object of the sentences in the songs (which is not the same as being the object of the songs, the motive for singing the songs), His Name may be over the door or on the walls of the auditorium, but something else is the driving force, the guiding light, the *raison d'etre* of the church.

Now, there will be a chicken-and-the-egg phenomenon here. Christians who are focused on Jesus are required to form a church that is focused on Jesus, and a church that puts Jesus first over everything else is required to produce Christians who center their lives around Jesus. Not quite sure how you jump-start this loop (but of course, I've got ideas - later), but it does point out the important, if trite and frequently-repeated point that,

"The church is the people, not the building"

In some cases, like a Catholic or Episcopalian diocese or a Presbyterian presbytery, this isn't true; the building *is* the church. The pastor or priest may change, the congregation may leave, but the building is the outpost of the denomination in that region. However, I think that most Protestants and Evangelicals would recognize this is an aberration.

Okay, then if a church is the people, and the church needs to be focused on Christ, then what sort of people are focused on Christ?

Obviously Christians. People who have come to the point of acknowledging that God exists, that Jesus of Nazareth is God, that Jesus has made the way to God through His sacrifice. People who are therefore trusting in Jesus' finished work for their hope of connecting with God now and forever, who have committed themselves to obedience and faithfulness to Jesus, and who have expressed that commitment through baptism. (Which presumes a position on the "infant baptism" question.)

Conversely, a Real Church, one which is centered on Jesus, does *NOT* consist of unbelievers. Now, unbelievers may be present, and will be in a Real Church, when they are attracted by the Christ-centered lives of the Christians. However, a church that is structured to appeal to unbelievers, whether in an attempt to introduce them to Christ ("seeker-sensitive", a la Willow Creek) or just to get a large crowd (a la Crystal Cathedral) are focused on something other than Jesus. Such a church may be successful (and both Willow Creek and Crystal Cathedral are successful, in introducing unbelievers to Jesus, or forming a large congregation, respectively), but they fail (in obviously varying degrees) to be a Real Church whose object is solely Jesus*.

It might be useful to take a page from Warren's Purpose-Driven strategy - the Circles of Commitment:



The Real Church starts at the "Congregation" level, those Christians who are committed to the object of the church - Jesus. The diagram indicates that there is a spectrum of the maturity of believers, from the Congregation to the Committed to the Core, and certainly a Christian who has been walking with Jesus for many years, through the ups and downs and joys and testings of the Christian life will be more mature and "functional" than the newly-baptized believer. But old and new, all are focused on Jesus, and not anything else. Even though other things (discipleship programs, fellowship events, etc.) are happening, the focus of the *church* - the believers in membership, from new to mature - is *JESUS!*

Then what about the Crowd? There will be some believers. Mostly Christians from other church experiences, whose focus is *not* Jesus, but perhaps the speaking ability of the preacher, or the quality of children's or youth programs. There is always a flux of Christians visiting other churches, maybe "shopping" for a new home. I was one myself, and will be again (should I move, or Central/Element actually "fails"*). Unless the church members (not just the "staff", should the Real Church have a pastoral "staff") makes it clear that it is Jesus, not ministries or programs or even friendly people, that is the object of the church, these people can join and potentially deflect the church away from the True Object. It appears to be easier to gradually *fail* at being a Real Church than to intentionally *transform* into one. So the Real

Church needs to be very careful about encouraging or enticing Christians with pre-formed expectations to become members. Remember, the object cannot be *church growth*. If they want to join the adventure of seeking Christ with every nerve, great! "Welcome!" Otherwise, "thanks for visiting, but we might recommend the Baptist church down the street for you."

There will also be unbelievers. Work associates or classmates or neighbors who have seen the joy, or the patience in misfortune, of the church members they know. People in the Community who have received ministry through service projects or prayer requests, or who have been invited to special services like Easter or Christmas or even Fourth of July (what would a patriotic service look like in a Real Church?). Others who have been "evangelized" through the testimonies of church members in supermarkets or parking lots or recreational attractions. But the moment the church makes an organized effort to reach unbelievers *for the purpose of evangelism*, then the object becomes "evangelism" rather than Jesus!

I'm not sure this is *necessarily* a Bad Thing; after all, telling people about Jesus and hoping to save them from Hell is something that the Apostles did themselves, but

- it risks deflecting the Object of the church away from being Jesus to being "evangelism", something that is all too common in Evangelical churches already, and
- it perpetuates the "unChristian" perception of the church being more interested in getting people "saved" than in the people themselves, as persons. This self-defeating activity produces "burned-over" unbelievers who are then even more cynical and resistant to a pure testimony than before.

So I can't say that outreach activities are "bad" for a Real Church, but they have to be done for the *right reasons* - to share the joy the Christians have about Jesus, and not to induce them to "get saved", and certainly not to achieve "church growth".

So probably the best thing a Real Church can do is to *not* consciously reach out to unbelievers, but to allow God to draw them to Himself, and grow the church organically. The Real Church ought to focus on Jesus, and equip the member Christians to actually and fully surrender their lives - because that's what a Real Church is.

.....

* As a point of relevant interest, last Sunday, the announcement was made that the project to plant Element as a church has failed. In Southern Baptist terms, this means that there is no chance that Element will gather enough members capable of contributing money sufficient to pay a full-time pastor's salary, rents or building payments, and the other costs associated with operating a "church" in the traditional model. In order to do this, a church plant has to work to attract enough

people, either believers or unbelievers. Guess what? This becomes the object of the church plant! Not Jesus Himself, but the project of becoming a "successful" traditionally-structured "church".

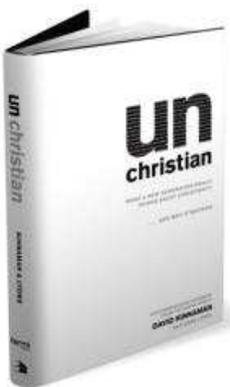
The result of this denomination-directed strategy is to *exclude the possibility* of producing a Real Church. Once a church has a successful focus other than Jesus Himself, it appears to be extremely difficult to redirect it afterwards. From this perspective, I'm not really sorry that Element has "failed". From the Real Church perspective, Element has *NOT* failed - it will fail only when Jeremiah the church planter despairs at the prospect of constructing a non-traditional church that *is* focused on Jesus - which is the best, probably only hope of transforming Central Baptist / Element Community Church away from a dying "religious club" into a Real Church.

.....

UPDATE: Jeremiah informs me that the decision to discontinue Element was NOT made by the denomination (Southern Baptist North American Mission Board). The church planting funds would have continued to come in for a year, supporting Jeremiah and Stacy so they could (at least part-time) work to establish Element as a traditional church. Jeremiah was responding to God's direction to discontinue Element, and merge with Central Baptist, and to voluntarily turn off the flow of money from NAMB.

I don't really think this affects my argument that NAMB *would* cease funding a church plant when it fails to become a self-supporting traditional church by a certain date, nor that this strategy by evangelical denominations necessarily force church starts into the traditional mould. It certainly doesn't diminish my hope that the change will serve to transform Central/Element from a dying traditional church to an effective non-traditional church!

October 27 2008: [unChristian: Final Thoughts](#)



This book is centered around the proposition that young Americans in the Mosaic and Baby-Buster age groups, primarily 16 to 29 years old, are hostile toward Christianity. The [Barna Group](#) did a proper survey in the field, and identified six leading issues that young people have with Christianity:

- **Hypocritical:** Christians say one thing and do another, especially about moral subjects

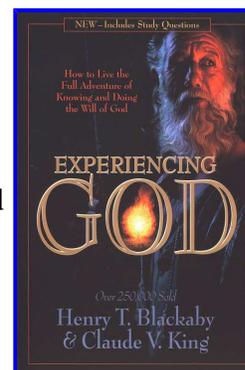
- **Fixated on Making Converts:** Christians are too focused on getting people "saved", and really don't care about people for themselves
- **Anti-Homosexual:** Christians are hateful toward homosexual people
- **Sheltered:** Christians are old-fashioned, boring, and out-of-touch.
- **Too Political:** Christians are primarily motivated by a right-wing political agenda
- **Judgmental:** Christians are quick to judge others

In my opinion, two of these deal with our approach to behavioural morality (Hypocrisy and Judgmentalism), and the Outsiders are quite right to take us to task. Two of these deal very accurately with our toxic church culture (Evangelism and Being Sheltered/Old Fashioned), and again, I agree with the points David Kinnaman makes in the book. The other two (Anti-Homosexual and Overly Political) seem to be Catch-22s, where despite the mollifying advice Kinnaman gives, there's probably no way for us to escape a Cultural Attitude Shift, and we just have to do our best to work with it in a godly way.

The book is structured in this way: In each chapter, as the subject is discussed, the author makes some general recommendations for what we can *DO* about it. At the end of each chapter is a collection of short essays written by Christian (or Emergent) leaders about what we should *DO* or what they are *DOING* about it. The last chapter and "Afterword" are more advice from Kinnaman and Fermi Project leader Gabe Lyons and those other Christian leaders about what we can *DO* to change the bad image Christianity has. Oh, and www.fermiproject.com is bursting with words, ideas, testimonies, case studies, and encouragement to *DO* stuff about this generation's attitude about Christianity. I hope you see where I'm going with this...

When I first started reading the book, I was pretty fired up about it. Partly because I work with young people in this age group, and I wanted to introduce them to these ideas a la Sunday School (sorry, guys). Partly because I'm part of a startup church that's trying to reach this generation, and a city and a local community that largely *IS* hostile to Christianity. That's why I started writing this series on "unChristian".

Toward the end of the book, two things happened. I basically realized that the youth and student group at Central Baptist Church isn't going to plug into God until I do myself - so I should stop pouring useless energy into *DOING* stuff to make it work. At the same time, and partly because of this, I got involved in the "Experiencing God" study. The basic lesson of this study really reinforces the idea that I've had for a long time, on-and-off, that I as a Christian *cannot* be effective in God's service by coming up with ideas for stuff to *DO*. I must *wait*, focus on God, and let Him guide me into what He wants done.



So while I understand David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons and their passion to *DO* something for God, and fix this bad impression that outsiders have of us, I have very little hope for their success. In fact, by seeking to serve God according to their own wisdom, *they are repeating the very patterns that got us into this situation.*

I think Kinnaman and Lyons have done us a great service by having done this study and shown convincingly that there is a problem. However I'm thinking the best solution to the problem is to turn to the only One who has a solution to the problem, rather than cheering us to come up with our own ideas or following someone else who claims success.

October 26 2008: unChristian: Judgmental



The last of the Big Six Reasons why 16-29-year-olds have a Negative Impression of Christianity is: We are viewed as judgmental.

Now, when I first saw this chapter heading, particularly after reading the chapter on "Hypocrisy", I wondered how it could be different. Well, it is, and it isn't. The point on "hypocrisy" was from the perspective of an outsider looking in - hearing how we emphasize moral rectitude, but seeing how we are not very moral. The "judgment" bit involves them, and how they feel they are viewed by those hypocritical Christians. So both points are connected with morality, and how Christians deal with it.

Kinnaman goes into some detail on the motivation to be judgmental (building ourselves up by putting someone else down, or trying to impress other judgmental church people), and different ways we are judgmental (passing a wrong verdict, passing the right verdict but at the wrong time, expressing the right moral thought but with the wrong motivation, and treating different kinds of people with partiality). I think it really all comes down to this (and Kinnaman mentions this): Jesus' chief word on judgment is the famous Matthew 7:1-5) - Don't Judge Others. Judge Yourself.

I've been thinking about what a church should be (hence this web page), and one of the Most Important aspects is the moral character of the Christians in the church. For example, in early Christian history, [Pliny the Younger](#) observed that Christians

were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft, or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after

which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food -- but food of an ordinary and innocent kind.

At this time, Christians were not noted for pointing their fingers at people outside the church. They were pointing the fingers at themselves, and covenanting together for their own moral purity. No hypocrisy. No judgment. And note: unlike now, at that time, Christianity was growing rapidly at the expense of contemporary paganism.

Maybe this focus on themselves released them to form the sort of relationships that Kinnaman recommends, to treat others respectfully, win their trust, and gain access. I would suggest that having this moral perspective ("deal with myself, period") also headed off any taint of hypocrisy. As a result, they were either admired (and joined by others coming into the Kingdom) or persecuted for the *right* reasons.

.....

This chapter also contains a *very* significant statistic related to church perception. Since "judgment" stands opposed to "love and acceptance", Barna Group asked the question, "Does the church love unconditionally?" Who said "yes":

- **20 % - outsiders of all ages**
- **41 % - Church Members**
- **47 % - Born-Again Christians**
- **76 % - Pastors**

Only one-fifth of the unbelieving community that we are trying to reach sees our churches as loving. Less than half of *church members* see their *own church* as loving. But three-quarters of the pastors think things are fine!

Those very leaders, who are supposed to be aware of the spiritual temperament of their flock, and who lead the effort to reach a lost world for Christ, appear to be greatly mistaken about how well their church is fulfilling one of the Most Important aspects of Christianity! Is this blindness? Distraction? Denial?

But clearly, until the Church *does* learn how to love unconditionally, the outsiders are not likely to come in. And the only ones who can change this (speaking from experience, laypeople don't have a *chance* of effecting change within a church) are characteristically resistant (being Type-A Leader individuals) to the suggestion that something is wrong.

What hope indeed. Outside of divine intervention.

October 25 2008: unChristian: Too Political

This is an interesting subject. Especially now, on the eve of an historic election.

The premise of this chapter is that young unbelievers view Christianity negatively in part because they regard Christians as motivated primarily by a right-wing agenda. I understand (and mostly agree with this premise), but the arguments made for it in the chapter are... weak.



The chapter starts out with a name-recognition quiz. It seems that more young unbelievers recognize George Bush as a Christian than Billy Graham, and even young churchgoers had the President in a prominent place. But surely, all this really says is that the President is a prominent public figure, with lots of name recognition, and it isn't a secret that he is a Christian.

Then the author quotes some statistics. It's somewhat confusing, but a couple of them come to the surface for me:

- Two-thirds of Mosaic and Baby-Buster outsiders, and half of churchgoers in the same age group perceive the actions of conservative Christians to be a problem. That's a lot. But later in the chapter, we are told that Mosaiacs and Busters are much less traditional than the previous generation. That says to me that they are going to trend politically liberal. No surprise, then, that politically liberal young people object to the activities of politically conservative people.
- Half of the adult population are concerned about the political involvement of Christians. Smaller percentages believe that this involvement is a "problem" for the country. I assume this "problem" group is a subset of the "concerned" group. But for several election cycles, the country has been almost evenly split between Democrat ("liberal") and Republican ("conservative") supporters. If half the country trends politically liberal, how is it a surprise that they object to the involvement of conservative Christians?

In my view, the argument from statistics fails to escape the reasonable conclusion that a large part of the population, particularly the younger members, tend to be politically liberal, and oppose the involvement of politically conservative people.

Then the author tries to make the point that both sides - the young outsiders *and* the Evangelicals - make assumptions about "Christian" and "non-Christian" political stances based on the incorrect notion that the other group is monolithic. Given that

most people in America self-identify as "Christian", certainly a large portion of "Christians" are not politically conservative. I think this misses the point; the Christians that politically liberal people are going to take issue with are those Christians that act (and vote) consistently with the Christian worldview. A "Christian" who supports the same liberal positions as a young Mosaic or Baby-Buster isn't a "Christian"; they're "one of us". The "Christian" that opposes their positions, in keeping with the Identity Politics popular with the liberal side of the house, is labelled a "Christian".

Similarly, it doesn't work very well to note that the youth population is "diverse", and then a few pages later to note that the youth population is much less traditional than the previous generation. All that says is, yes, diverse, but the majority is going to be politically liberal. This doesn't justify classifying young people as "liberal", but if you do, you won't be wrong.

I suspect that, like the issue with Christians being "anti-homosexual", there's no way to win this one. When there is a pervasive double-standard, where "Christians" are denounced for being too political, and churches are threatened with losing their tax exemptions for even naming candidates, yet Democrat candidates regularly campaign in liberal churches without any notice from the media, there is simply no way for Christians to be politically involved *at all* in a way consistent with their worldview and not be scorned for it.

That said, I definitely agree that some of the mud thrown sticks to the wall. There is certainly a trend in some Christian groups to use "militaristic" language in political discussion. Certainly there is a hysteria in the pleas from conservative political action groups (both Christian-based and just plain Republican) when directed at Christians. There is a tendency to cheer with relief and confidence when "our" candidates win, and to express anguish and defeat when they don't. When the unbelieving world - or even the young people in the church - see this, a negative impression is unavoidable.

But really, is this not a different manifestation of our human inability to live consistently with our own worldview? Politics are important - but our relationship with God is far more significant. We say, "God is in control". How much do we actually believe it?
