

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series: The Local Church
Number: 1
Text: Hebrews 10:19-25
Date: July 19 2009 (a.m.)

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HOW IMPORTANT IS CHURCH?

The whole notion of the Church as an institution has fallen on hard times. The run away best-selling “Christian” novel, *The Shack*, heaped disdain on anything and everything remotely associated with the local church.¹ Not to be out done, the very influential pollster, George Barna, pitched in with a book entitled *Revolution*, where Barna calls upon Christians to become revolutionaries by abandoning the institutional Church and going *solo*, as a new way of “doing church.” This approach seeks to customize one’s spiritual needs, primarily around the internet, as a new model for a personalized faith experience. Everything is built around the individual. Here is how Barna put it. “The United States is home to an increasing number of revolutionaries. These people are devout followers of Jesus Christ, who are serious about their faith, who are constantly worshipping and interacting with God, and whose lives are centered on their belief in Christ. Some of them are aligned with a congregational church, but many of them are not. The key to understanding revolutionaries is not what church they attend, or even if they attend. Instead, it’s their complete dedication to being thoroughly Christian by viewing every moment of life through a spiritual lens and making every decision in light of biblical principles. *These are individuals who are determined to glorify God every day, through every thought, word and deed in their lives*” (p. 8). Elsewhere he noted, “Whether you become a Revolutionary immersed in, minimally involved in, or completely disassociated from a local church is irrelevant to me (and, within boundaries, to God). What matters is not whom you associate with (i.e. a local church), but who you are” (p. 39). According to Barna, the local church is non-essential. Barna wasn’t done. He later co-authored another book with Frank Viola, with this intriguing title *Pagan Christianity: Exploring Roots of our Church Practices*. Practically everything associated with the local Church is labeled “pagan.” Peter Jones in his perceptive review wrote, “This is a profoundly misleading and disappointing book. Or maybe you want to know what I really think!

The title, *Pagan Christianity*, is misleading, even if the subtitle is clear. I was doubtless asked to review this book because of the many years I have spent studying ancient and modern paganism. Great, therefore, was my surprise to discover the absence of any definition of the term. I exaggerate; there is one line: ‘pagans were those polytheists who followed the gods of the Roman Empire’ (p. 6). That’s it, for a book of 295 pages on ‘pagan Christianity,’ which uses the term to analyze what is wrong with virtually everything to do with today’s Church. One unexamined one-liner about Roman polytheism is all we get by way of definition. Absent is any theological analysis of the general pagan worldview that constitutes all man-made religion. Absent also is any reference to the rise of paganism in our contemporary world, either of the Deepak Chopra/Oprah Winfrey/New Spirituality variety, or of the variety popular in some parts of the liberal wing of the Emergent Movement, which is driving great swathes of Evangelicalism into the arms of ‘progressive Christian’ liberalism. Thus trivialized the term ‘pagan’ merely functions as a slam against anything in the present church of which Viola disapproves, like dressing up on Sunday (145ff) or Sunday school programs (212). (I say Viola because manifestly Barna is only named as co-author for the six-page preface he writes and the promotional heft he brings to the project.)

The book first finds paganism in the church as the result of the adoption of Christianity by the pagan emperor Constantine in the fourth century AD. The book implies that this period in Church history doubtless explains many of the deviations from biblical orthodoxy in what became known as Catholicism.

From that time we observe the mystification of the mass, the development of a priestly, sacerdotal caste, and the development of an imperialistic, hierarchical ecclesiastical polity. Even here, however, one cannot draw a simple, straight line to paganism as a religious worldview. The priesthood is a defining Old Testament notion, and while one can certainly argue that the medieval Church misappropriated the Old Testament system, it is not necessarily for 'pagan' reasons. In spite of what Viola claims, hierarchy is a perfectly biblical value, and what he finds as essential to the New Testament church, namely, egalitarianism, is in the final analysis, a much vaunted pagan ideal.

This unexamined term is used as a whip to drive out of the present temple all the money-changers and their godless activities. In addition to 'dressing up for church' and Sunday School ('swelling the cranium' 199), such pagan activities include the notion of a 'personal savior' (190); the liturgy (even the hymn-prayer-hymn sandwich), the sermon, the ordained, salaried ministry or 'pastoral office' (136), robes, youth pastors; elder directed communities: baptism: the Lord's supper ('a strange pagan-like rite' 197): taking an offering and tithing: denominations; Bible Colleges and seminaries; instruments; hymns and church buildings, and choirs. For its all-knowing pretentiousness, one statement is mind-boggling. (Alas, it characterizes so many of Viola's generalizations.) Dismissing the place of the sermon in Christian worship, Viola reveals: '...the truth is that the contemporary sermon preached every week...is often impractical...[and] has little power to equip God's people for spiritual service and functioning' (76). How does he know? If these judgments have Barna polling data to support them, they are not mentioned!

Everything must change, so the whip in Viola's hand becomes a very broad brush, but, alas, not broad enough. When he cannot find a 'pagan' cause, he will drag in the Old Testament. But of course, there is one thing that one can confidently say about the Old Testament—it is in no sense pagan.

Anything that does not fit with Viola's highly personal, non-theological, emotive notion of the true Church, gets the boot."² Thankfully, there are books out there that have responded to this kind of nonsense. One of them, authored by Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck made this excellent point. "Church isn't boring because we're not showing enough film clips, or because we play an organ instead of guitar. It's boring because we neuter it of its importance. Too often we treat our spiritual lives like the round of golf used to open George Barna's *Revolution*. At the end of my life, I want my friends and family to remember me as someone who battled for the Gospel, who tried to mortify sin in my life, who fought hard for life, and who contended earnestly for the faith. Not just a nice guy who occasionally noticed the splendor of the mountains God created, while otherwise just trying to enjoy myself, manage my schedule, and work on my short game."³ Our text in Hebrews underscores the importance of the local church and why it is absolutely essential to the individual believer.

I. OBLIGATIONS: THREE EXHORTATIONS

"The first," says Guthrie, "refers to personal devotion, the second to consistency and the third to social obligations."⁴

A. Our Duty to God: Draw Near

The principal qualification is a *true heart* (cf. Ps. 51:6 and John 4:24). This refers to more than just sincerity. Specifically, it has reference to have a firm and steadfast confidence in the mediatorial work of Christ as our great high priest (Heb. 4:14-16).

B. Our Duty as Believers: Hold Fast Our Confession

The word translated *confession*, is the Greek word *homologia*. "Biblical *homologia* (a term that means 'to say the same thing' and so 'agreement') indicate, not only the individual's ties to Jesus Christ and his confession (particularly regarding Jesus' person and word), but also that of the Christian community, in which the members collectively and openly gave expression to their faith, and in which in consequence they were united. The *homologia* were a declaration of faith that would seem to have assumed one or other fixed form in various circumstances and places was spoken aloud – in public gatherings (Phil. 2:11), on special occasions (I Tim. 6:12), in preaching (Rom. 10:8-10), in encounters with the Jews (John 9:22; 12:42), with pagans (I Tim. 6:13), and with heretics (I John 4:2-3). As examples of the various *homologia*

we might cite the following: *Jesus is the Messiah* (John 7:26, 41; 9:22; Mark 8:29); *Jesus is the Son of God* (John 1:34, 50), or these two in combination – *Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God* (John 11:27; 20:31); *Jesus is Lord* (Rom. 10:9; Phil. 2:11; I Cor. 12:3); *Jesus, the Son of David* (Matt. 12:23).⁵ Since this profession of faith is centered on the Person and Work of Christ, it cannot be understood to be centered abstractly on God apart from Christ. Robert Traill wisely wrote: “In the considering of that faith that we make the profession of, we must consider that God that is to be believed on. Faith natively, faith ultimately, terminates on God: *That your faith and hope might be in God*, I Pet. i. 21, where he joins them both together. There can be no believing where God is unknown, there is no believing in an unknown God. God cannot be known as the object of faith, but only as in Christ Jesus. It is impossible that God can be grasped, may I so speak, by the faith of a poor sinner, but only as this God reveals himself to us in Christ Jesus.”⁶

C. Our Duty to The Church: Encouragement to Christian Love and Service

The word *paroxusmos* is rendered *stir up* in the ESV. The KJV has *provoke*. The word means to incite or work up. “And there is more in it,” wrote John Owen, “than a bare mutual exhortation; there is an excitation of spirit, by exhortation, example, rebuke, until it be warmed unto a duty. This is the great end of the communion that is among Christians in the mutual consideration of one another: considering the circumstances, conditions, walkings, abilities for usefulness, of one another, they do excite one another unto love and good works; which is called the provocation of them, or the stirring up of the minds of men unto them. This was the way and practice of the Christians of old, but is now generally lost, with most of the principles of practical obedience, especially those which concern our mutual edification, as if they had never been prescribed in the gospel.”⁷ Finally, note the admonition *not neglecting to meet together* (the assembly of the Church). “The failure of love shows itself, then, in selfish individualism, and specifically here in *the habit of some of neglecting to meet together*. Such unconcern for one’s fellow believers argues unconcern for Christ himself and portends the danger of apostasy, concerning which our author is about to issue another earnest warning (vv. 26ff.). It is important, therefore, that the reality of Christian love should be demonstrated in the personal relationships and mutual concerns of the Christian community. And it will be found that not only does love promote fellowship but also that fellowship stimulates love, because it is by meeting together as a true community that Christians have the opportunity for *encouraging one another* by mutual support, and exhortation.”⁸

CONCLUSION: One reason for the kind of books like Barna’s is traceable to the whole concept of marketing the Church like a franchise. Barna was actually the leading figure back in the 80’s in getting churches to do this very thing. Everything was structured around a sociological (and not a theological) understanding of the church as community – primarily as an audience with entertainment serving as the drawing card. Interestingly enough, about the time Barna was promoting this kind of thing, noted sociologist Robert Bellah wrote his influential book *Habits of Heart* that described this development, this form of individualism as “Sheilaism.” Bellah used the term in reference to one of the individuals in his book, “Sheila Larson is a young nurse who has received a good deal of therapy and who describes her faith as “Sheilaism.” ‘I believe in God. I’m not a religious fanatic. I can’t remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It’s Sheilaism. Just my own little voice.’ Sheila’s faith has some tenets beyond belief in God, though not many. In defining ‘my own Sheilaism’ she says: ‘It’s just try to love yourself and be gentle with your self. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think he (God) would want us to take care of each other.’”⁹ Bellah concluded that the vast majority of Americans operated with the notion that the individuals should form their own belief system independent of the input of Religious institutions. Organized religion was viewed as a hindrance to religious privatism. Back then the churches that Barna was influencing was preoccupied with attracting and serving the individual. The focus has shifted and Barna now, ever in lock step with the prevailing winds, is changing to keep pace. I will say this-the kind of ‘seeker-sensitive’, ‘user-friendly’ churches that Barna influenced back then can rightly be said to have caused the very problem that now exists. After all who really needs THAT kind of ‘church’ when all that they offered, i.e. entertainment and therapeutic coddling can be had elsewhere?

These kinds of ‘churches’ are totally expendable. Sadly, however, what Barna and others like him are offering likewise falls drastically short of what the Bible teaches about the importance of the communion of the saints that is centered in the New Testament understanding of the local church.

ENDNOTES

¹ For documentation, see my sermon series True Spirituality (Jan. 18, 2009 – Mar. 15, 2009).

² <http://www.reformation21.org/shelf-life/pagan-christianity-exploring-roots-of-our-church-pr...>

³ K. DeYoung and T. Kluck, Why We Love the Church: In Praise of Institutions and Organized Religion (Moody, 2009) p. 7.

⁴ D. Guthrie Hebrews: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (IVP, 1983) p. 213.

⁵ J. A. Heyns, The Church (NGKB, 1980) p. 148.

⁶ The Complete Works of Robert Traill III (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1975) p. 7.

⁷ John Owen An Exposition of the Epistle To The Hebrews VI (rpt. Baker, 1980) p. 519.

⁸ Philip Hughes, A Commentary On The Epistle to The Hebrews (Eerdmans, 1975) p. 415.

⁹ As cited by David Wells, Above All Earthly Powers: Christ In a Postmodern World (Eerdmans, 2005) p. 150.