

What people are saying about ...

REIMAGINING CHURCH

“Dissent is a gift to the church. It is the imagination of the prophets that continually call us back to our identity as the peculiar people of God. May Viola’s words challenge us to become the change that we want to see in the church ... and not to settle for anything less than God’s dream for Her.”

Shane Claiborne, author, activist, and recovering sinner
(thesimpleway.org)

“True to form, this book contains a thoroughly consistent critique of prevailing forms of church. However, in *Reimagining Church*, Frank Viola also presents a positive vision of what the church can become if we truly reembraced more organic, and less institutional, forms of church. This is a no-holds-barred prophetic vision for the church in the twenty-first century.”

Alan Hirsch, author of *The Forgotten Ways* and
The Shaping of Things to Come

“Frank not only pulls fresh insights out of well-known concepts, but also keeps challenging us to go back to basics and focus on Christ Himself. Thank you, Frank! This practical book will identify what church can look like when it is focused on Jesus.”

Tony Dale, author and editor of *House2House* magazine
and founder of The Karis Group

“*Reimagining Church* is a valuable addition to the resources being produced on the subject of organic churches. Written from the perspective of a long-time practitioner, Frank conveys these concepts with his usual clarity and insight and covers many of the practical aspects of starting a church. I recommend this book to anyone interested in organic church.”

Felicity Dale, author of *An Army of Ordinary People* and *Getting Started:
A Practical Guide to House Church Plantings*

Reimagining Church will be certain to disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed at the same time. Frank Viola cuts through the fog by putting his finger on the problems of man-made churchianity, while providing a solidly biblical, practical, and strategic vision for a powerful New Testament expression of the body of Christ.”

Rad Zdero, PhD, author of *The Global House Church Movement* and editor of *Nexus: The World House Church Movement Reader*

Reimagining Church is a readable (and livable!) description of organic, New Testament–rooted church life for the twenty-first century. Avoiding the weeds of both wooden fundamentalism and unreflective over-contextualization, Frank Viola paints a winsome and attractive portrait of a gospel people, inhabited by the Holy Spirit with God in Christ as their energetic center. Frank helps us learn from the peculiar genius of Jesus and His earliest followers, planting seeds for authentic, deeply rooted life together.”

Mike Morrell, Graduate Fellow in Emergent Studies, MA in Strategic Foresight, Regent University (zoecarnate.com)

“What if the word *church* in ordinary conversation called to mind ‘uncontrived,’ ‘joy,’ or ‘where God has His way’ instead of pews, parking lots, and preachers? What if church people had no idea what a ‘sinner’s prayer’ or ‘tithing’ meant, but were instead joyfully repentant, generous without hesitation, and innately compelled by love? What if church were not a place to learn religion but the best tangible proof of God’s existence? *Reimagining Church* hazards a dream while pulling together the best rational arguments for church as it could be.”

Charles J. Wilhelm, author of *Biblical Dyslexia: Overcoming the Barriers to Understanding Scripture*

“For those who are not threatened by the idea that church must change, *Reimagining Church* is an absolutely timely and much-needed perspective, delivering a solid biblical vision for the body of Christ. Using the entire scope of New Testament church life, Frank Viola lays out the core values and the essential principles that must form the foundation of life together as the body of Christ. The book delivers an exceptionally hopeful, visionary picture of all that church can and should be.”

Grace, blogging at Kingdomgrace.wordpress.com

“The body of Christ has been stifled by human traditions for far too long. *Reimagining Church* charts a fresh course for the church that recovers the simplicity of Christ and listens seriously to what the voice of the Great Shepherd is saying to His people.”

Jon Zens, editor of *Searching Together* and author of *A Church Building Every ½ Mile: What Makes American Christianity Tick?*

“If *Pagan Christianity* exposes the reality that much of our current church practice has little basis in the Bible, *Reimagining Church* takes the next step to establish what truly biblical church life looks like. With the inner life of the Trinity as the starting point, Viola paints an amazing picture of organic church life.”

John White, community facilitator at LK10: A Community of Practice
for Church Planters

“If we are indeed at the cusp of the next major reformation of the church, as many suggest, then Frank Viola is one of the significant voices we all should lend our ears to. Frank’s humble heart and bold keyboard have once again delivered a book to be read by those who desire to take an honest

look at the state of the contemporary church. *Reimagining Church* calls us to first remember the church from the original blueprint of Scripture.”

Lance Ford, cofounder of Shapevine.com

“Whether you agree with all that Frank Viola writes in this book or not, I’m sure its contents will challenge you to rethink the way church is done. It will cause you to reconsider why we do many of the things we do and the way in which we do them. If you, like me, believe we are living in one of the greatest shifts in Christendom that we have ever known, then this book is a valuable tool to help you ask the right questions as you journey.”

Tony Fitzgerald, apostolic team leader and international speaker

PURSUING THE DREAM OF
ORGANIC CHRISTIANITY

REIMAGINING CHURCH

FRANK VIOLA

REIMAGINING CHURCH
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To every Christian who has reimagined church

Other Books by Frank Viola

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The Untold Story of the New Testament Church

Rethinking the Will of God

Bethany

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PREFACE

After thirteen years of attending scores of churches and parachurch organizations, I took the daring step of leaving the institutional church. That was in 1988. Since that time, I've never returned to institutional Christianity. Instead, I've been meeting in what I call "organic churches."

Why did I leave the institutional church? To begin with, I became painfully bored with Sunday-morning church services. That was true across the board—no matter what denomination (or nondenomination) I attended. I also saw very little spiritual transformation in the people who attended these churches. And the spiritual growth that I myself experienced seemed to occur *outside* of traditional church settings.

In addition, something deep within me longed for an experience of church that mapped to what I read about in my New Testament. And I couldn't seem to find it in any traditional church I attended. In fact, the more I read the Bible, the more I became convinced that the contemporary church had departed far from its biblical roots. The result was that I pulled the rip cord on institutional Christianity, and I began meeting with a group of Christians in an organic way.

After I took that step, friends and acquaintances would often ask me, "So where do you go to church?" Giving an answer was always a study in awkwardness. "I belong to a church that doesn't have a pastor or a church building; we meet very much like the early Christians did, and we are

consumed with Jesus Christ” was my standard reply. But as soon as those words left my mouth, the person asking would typically look at me as though I had come from Planet 10!

Today, I’m still asked the question, “So where do you go to church?” But I have a better way of articulating an answer than I did twenty years ago (though I admit that my answer is still clumsy and imperfect).

Herein lies the purpose of this book: to articulate a biblical, spiritual, theological, and practical answer to the question, Is there a viable way of doing church outside the institutional church experience, and if so, what does it look like?

If the past twenty years have taught me anything, they have taught me this: There will be two major responses to this book. One will sound something like this: “Thank goodness, I’m not crazy! I thought I lost my mind. I’m grateful that there are others who feel the same way I do about church. This book has given language to feelings and beliefs I’ve had for years. And it’s given me hope that there really is a church life experience beyond what’s commonly known and accepted.”

The other will sound something like this: “How dare you challenge our church practices! God loves the church. What right do you have to criticize it!? And who gives you the right to say that *your* way of doing church is the *only* valid way!?”

I’ll be the first to admit that I am not beyond correction in my views. I’m still growing and learning. However, the problem with this particular objection is that it exposes the very problem that this book sets out to address. Namely, we Christians are very confused about what the church is. By no means am I criticizing the church. In fact, I’m writing this volume because I love the church very much. And it’s because of that love that I wish to see the body of Christ express itself in ways that I

believe God originally intended. The church, therefore, should not be confused with an organization, a denomination, a movement, or a leadership structure. The church is the people of God, the very bride of Jesus Christ. And as I will argue in this book, God has not been silent on how the church naturally expresses herself on the earth. Therefore, it's the *present practices* of the church that I'm seeking to reimagine, not the church itself.

In addition, I would never claim that there is one "right" way of doing church. And I certainly do not claim that I've found it. This book reimagines church in some fresh ways—ways that I believe are in harmony with the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. And for me and scores of other believers, we have found these ways to match our deepest longings as Christians.

Two books precede this one. The first is titled *The Untold Story of the New Testament Church*. In *The Untold Story*, I rehearse the entire saga of the first-century church in chronological order. The book of Acts and the Epistles are blended together to create an unbroken narrative of the early church. *Reimagining Church* is based on that free-flowing story. The difference is that *Reimagining* takes certain frames from that beautiful narrative and divides them up into specific categories. Together, both books paint a compelling portrait of New Testament church life.

The second book, titled *Pagan Christianity*, historically demonstrates that the contemporary church has strayed far from its original roots. The church as we know it today evolved (or more accurately, devolved) from a living, breathing, vibrant, organic expression of Jesus Christ into a top-heavy, hierarchical organization whose basic structure is patterned after the ancient Roman Empire. Tellingly, most churches today still hold that structure.

This book is divided into two parts. The first part is titled “Community and Gatherings.” In it, I explore how the early church lived its life and how it gathered together. I then compare and contrast these elements with the practices of the contemporary church.

The second part of the book is titled “Leadership and Accountability.” In it, I introduce a fresh model for understanding leadership, authority, and accountability. This model is countercultural as well as rooted in biblical principle. But it’s also practical. I’ve watched it work over the past twenty years. I’ve also designed an appendix to give answers to common objections.

Please note that my aim in writing is constructive rather than controversial. Nevertheless, because many of the ideas I present are so radically different from traditional understanding, they will probably raise eyebrows and, in some cases, hostility.

My hope is that you will bear with me and consider each of my arguments in the light of Scripture and under the scrutiny of your own conscience. My attitude in writing is best described by C. S. Lewis: “Think of me as a fellow-patient in the same hospital who, having been admitted a little earlier, could give some advice.” My heart’s desire is to see God’s people set free from the tyranny of the status quo as well as oppressive leadership structures. All for one reason—so that Jesus Christ can be made central and supreme in His church again.

Frank Viola
Gainesville, Florida
October 2007

INTRODUCTION

TOWARD A NEW KIND OF CHURCH

We are living in an age hopelessly below the New Testament pattern—content with a neat little religion. —Martyn Lloyd-Jones

Most professing Christians do not realize that the central concepts and practices associated with what we call “church” are not rooted in the New Testament, but in patterns established in the post-apostolic age. —Jon Zens

A revolution in both the theology and practice of the church is upon us. Countless Christians, including theologians, ministers, and scholars, are seeking new ways to renew and reform the church. Others have given up on the traditional concept of church altogether. They have come to the conviction that the institutional church as we know it today is not only ineffective, but it’s also without biblical merit. For this reason, they feel it would be a mistake to reform or renew the present church structure. Because the structure is the root problem.

I came to this unnerving conclusion twenty years ago, when few people I knew dared to question the practices of the institutional church. For that reason, I felt quite alone. And on some days, I honestly wondered if I had lost my mind.

Things have changed. Today, the number of those who are questioning the institutional church is growing.¹ Their tribe is increasing every year. A large number of them have stepped out of the institutional church. And they are in quest for a church experience that better fits the deepest longings of their hearts.

Indeed, a revolution is brewing today. And that revolution goes beyond church reform and renewal. Instead, it goes straight to the root of the practice and theology of the church itself. Perhaps a historical example will help explain this phenomenon.

For centuries, astronomers in the West sought to understand the rotation of the stars and planets. Yet no matter how many times they sought to tweak the data they possessed, they couldn't make their calculations work. The reason was simple. Their point of reference was flawed. They were working with a geocentric model of the universe. They believed that the stars and planets rotated around a stationary earth. And upon that premise, they built their entire understanding of the universe.

An iconoclast named Copernicus came along and questioned that premise. He postulated the revolutionary idea that the planets and stars rotate around the sun. Copernicus's heliocentric view of the universe was vehemently challenged at first. But no one could dispute the fact that this new model made the data work far better than the geocentric view. For that reason, the heliocentric point of reference was eventually accepted.²

In the same spirit, this book is a hearty attempt to present a new paradigm for the church. One that's built on the New Testament concept that the church of Jesus Christ is a spiritual organism, not an institutional organization.

I have met few Christians who would question that last sentence. In fact, I've met countless believers who have said, "The church is an

organism, not an organization.” Yet as they formed those very words, they continued to be devout members of churches that were organized along the lines of General Motors and Microsoft.

In this book, I will be raising some pointed questions on that score. Namely, what does the phrase “the church is an organism” really mean? And how does an “organic church” operate and function in the twenty-first century?

Throughout the book, I will be using the terms “New Testament church,” “early church,” and “first-century church” as synonyms. All of these terms refer to the early church of Century One as it is portrayed in the New Testament.

I will also be referring to those churches with which most people are familiar as “institutional churches.” I could have just as easily called them “establishment churches,” “basilica churches,” “traditional churches,” “organized churches,” “clergy-dominated churches,” “contemporary churches,” “audience churches,” “spectator churches,” “auditorium churches,” “inherited churches,” “legacy churches,” or “program-based churches.” All are inadequate linguistic tools. Yet to my mind, “institutional church” best captures the essence of most churches today.

Please keep in mind that when I use the term “institutional church” I am *not* speaking about God’s people. I’m speaking about a *system*. The “institutional church” is a system—a way of *doing* “church.” It’s not the people who populate it. This distinction is important, and it’s one that must be kept in mind as you read this book.

A sociologist may object to my use of the word “institutional.” Sociologically speaking, an institution is any patterned human activity. Therefore, a handshake and a greeting hug are institutions. I readily admit that all churches (even organic churches) assume *some* institutions.

But I'm using the phrase "institutional church" in a much narrower sense. Namely, I am referring to those churches that operate primarily as institutions that exist above, beyond, and independent of the members that populate them. These churches are constructed on programs and rituals more than relationships. They are highly structured, typically building-centered organizations regulated by set-apart professionals ("ministers" and "clergy") who are aided by volunteers (laity). They require staff, building, salaries, and administration. In the institutional church, congregants watch a religious performance once or twice a week led principally by one person (the pastor or minister), and then retreat home to live their individual Christian lives.

By contrast, I'm using "organic church" to refer to those churches that operate according to the same spiritual principles as the church that we read about in our New Testament. The New Testament church was first and foremost organic, as are all churches that stand in its lineage. T. Austin-Sparks is the man who deserves credit for the term "organic church." He writes,

God's way and law of fullness is that of organic life. In the Divine order, life produces its own organism, whether it be a vegetable, animal, human or spiritual. This means that everything comes from the inside. Function, order and fruit issue from this law of life within. It was solely on this principle that what we have in the New Testament came into being. Organized Christianity has entirely reversed this order.³

Taking this idea further, my friend Hal Miller brilliantly compares the institutional church with the organic church using a simple metaphor. He writes,

Institutional churches are a lot like trains. They are going in a certain direction, and they will continue in that direction for a good long time even if all hands try to make them stop. As with trains, the options for turning the direction of institutional churches are limited at best. If a switch or siding is available, the train could turn. Otherwise, it just follows its tracks. So everyone aboard had best hope that he is on the right train headed in the right direction.

Organic churches, like those in the New Testament, are different. They are not trains, but groups of people out for a walk. These groups move much more slowly than trains—only several miles per hour at the fastest. But they can turn at a moment's notice. More importantly, they can be genuinely attentive to their world, to their Lord, and to each other.

Like trains, institutional churches are easy to find. The smoke and noise are unmistakable. Organic churches are a bit more subtle. Because they do not announce their presence with flashing lights at every intersection, some believe that churches like those in the New Testament died out long ago. But nothing could be further from the truth. Organic churches are everywhere. I personally have been part of one for more than twenty years. Still, groups like ours are quietly walking together, not bothering to call undue attention to ourselves. We are simply pilgrims together.

Once you learn how to spot an organic church, you will soon discover groups of people everywhere meeting just like the New Testament church—as bodies, families, and brides, rather than as institutions.

Organic churches are groups of people walking with God. The trains pass them by all the time. Sometimes the people on board wave. Sometimes they cannot because the train is moving so fast that people going a few miles per hour just look like a blur. If you are in one of the groups of

people now walking around as an organic church, Reimagining Church will give you a new appreciation of your roots in the New Testament. If you are on one of the trains whizzing by, it may be a bit surprising to find out that some of those blurred patches of color outside your window are groups of people walking with God. That thing you just passed was an organic church.

It's important for you to know that reimagining the church as a living organism isn't a pipe dream. The church actually can express herself organically just as she did in the first century. That said, the following letters were written by various people who have experienced organic church life in recent years. These are their impressions:

LETTER 1

I never planned on leaving the old way of doing church. I wasn't looking for a new church and couldn't even conceive of what an organic church would look like when I was first invited to visit one. But I visited and what I found was unlike anything I had ever seen. This church wasn't a Bible study, a prayer group, a healing/soaking prayer session, or a worship service.

Instead, this church focused on Jesus Christ. And everyone sang about Him, shared about Him, and worshipped Him. These Christians had been captivated by the beauty of the Lord Jesus Christ and, quite honestly, they didn't desire to spend time doing anything else when they met, but sing to/with/about Him, share Him, and love one another through Him.

It was their intimacy I noticed first. I had never met people with such an intimate life with the Lord. These people needed Him and

were sustained by His life. In my previous church experience, I had seen dedicated people, passionate people, and loving people. But I had never met Christians before who seemed to know the very heart of God.

Long ago I learned that the Lord is in His people, but this church was the first one I had ever seen where Christians really put this into practice. They all shared Christ in their meetings one by one so that He was brought right before my eyes. I learned through them that He is our food and our drink. I came to see who He really is in our gatherings and in our life together, and I fell in love with Him as a result.

The intimacy I saw had drawn me in, but it was the freedom that these Christians lived in that kept my attention and made me decide to keep coming back to their meetings and become part of their community life. When I saw something in the Lord that might be an encouragement, I could speak it out and they would say “Amen” or “Praise the Lord.” Their verbal encouragement made me realize that I had freedom to share, but more so, that Christ had freedom to be known in His people—including me.

It was the first time I had seen such freedom among Christians. I began to see what it looked like when Christ has the first place in the lives and meetings of His people, which brought incredible unity. For almost two years, I saw Christ fill every meeting with the truth about Himself. He never ran dry. I cannot imagine fully mining the depths of Jesus Christ. But in this church, with the combined love of my brothers and sisters, I began to discover just how glorious He really is.

(A female schoolteacher)

LETTER 2

The whole experience of organic church life has changed my life in so many ways. The church was planted through a conference. The messages that were shared at that conference were amazing. The Lord was showing me His plan and purpose for the church, His bride. My vision was being lifted to one that was heavenly and truly Christ-centered in nature. But that was just the beginning.

After the church was planted, I was experiencing Christ with my brothers and sisters as I never had before. I knew this was “it” for me. I had finally come home. God knew what my husband and I needed. The revelation I received began to grow and unfold before my very eyes. I saw a beautiful and radiant bride filled with passion for her Lord. I saw a community of believers being built together as a dwelling place. I saw brothers and sisters from different backgrounds who had never met before begin to love one another.

As we loved Christ together our hearts were knit with each other. True change was being made in our lives as we were learning of the Lord’s eternal purpose. I saw that the church really is Christ’s body, and He is the Head. Only as we allow Him to have His rightful place will we experience His life as we were meant to. Church life in this way is the Christian’s natural habitat where we grow and flourish, being nourished by all the riches of Christ. I could go on and on because there is so much more!

All that I have seen and experienced has forever changed my life and my husband’s as well. We prayed long ago for the Lord to reveal His heart and His dreams to us, and I believe He has answered that prayer. It is so exciting to know we will get to spend the rest of our lives seeing Christ revealed in His church!

(An ex-minister’s wife)

LETTER 3

I was raised in a Christian home and attended church every time the doors were open. I knew how to live and behave like a Christian should. You might say I was the poster child.

Late in high school and early college, I met some Christians who sparked a passion in me that I never knew was possible. I saw their passion to know Christ in deep ways, and more than that, they actually seemed to know Christ much more deeply than I. In meeting them, I discovered that my own faith and knowledge of Christ was very shallow. You see, I realized that although I enjoyed going to church to be with my family and friends, I really viewed church as an obligation to endure in order to “hang out” with them before and after Sunday school, services, or youth group meetings.

I quietly sat through sermon after sermon hoping it would hurry up so we could go to the restaurant afterwards. Minutes after the sermons I couldn't actually remember what was said. I already heard that I needed to go to church more, I needed to tithe more, I needed to read my Bible more, and I needed to witness more. It wasn't until I met these other Christians that I realized that all of the previous churches that I was a member of didn't fulfill my thirst for Jesus. They gave me rules and regulations instead of something that gave life. Instead of growing in Christ, I was “dying on the vine,” filled with fear, shame, and inadequacy. I didn't actually enjoy talking about the Lord. Nor was I near as bold to share Jesus with nonbelievers.

I would ask myself, If I was such a good Christian like I thought I was, why do I feel so far behind the curve? The more I was with these believers, the more I wanted to know Christ like they did. I was drawn to Christ like a moth to a streetlight. I gradually began to spend more time

with them and started going to their meetings. Their meetings were free and open. There was no liturgy. There were no clergy. They didn't actually need them. There were plenty of believers who had encountered the Lord and had encouraging things to share with the others.

They didn't need someone to give them permission to speak. They didn't need someone to bury them in rules and lifeless duties. They wrote many of their own songs. They prayed together, taking turns talking to Jesus unrehearsed and from the heart. They met together as if Jesus was actually in the room. They treated each other like a family that loved each other.

After just a short while, I realized that this organic experience of Christ was exactly what was missing from my own experience. I began to crave gathering with these believers. I would go to their meetings and see a much bigger Lord than just someone who died for my sins. I would see Him in much deeper ways.

I was no longer satisfied with watching a performance. In this organic meeting, I began to want to share with my brothers and sisters what I had seen of the Lord. Instead of being passive, I now thought it was easy to function and contribute. Every one of our meetings was free to be different. Sometimes we sang for hours. Sometimes the believers were bursting at the seams to share what Jesus had done in their lives that week. Sometimes we revered the Lord's awesomeness in silence. No one had to tell us to do these things. The Spirit was moving in these ways and they just spontaneously happened. We often ate together as one family. Sometimes we shared scriptures with each other. Other times we enacted scenes and stories from the Bible that shed light on Christ.

We met all throughout the week. In the mornings, the brothers would find another brother or two, and the sisters would get together

with sisters. And we would pursue the Lord in prayer and contemplate Scripture together. We would start our day with Christ. In the evenings, some of the members would open up their homes and share Christ over dinner. We had brothers and sisters meetings where we would collectively decide on matters relating to the church. And we would share responsibilities for caring for one another.

If there were no pressing needs, we would just sing to the Lord and pursue His presence together. If there was a member in need, we would think of ways to help them. Sometimes we would just plan ways to bless each other for the fun of it. Sometimes the single people would babysit for the parents and give them a night out on the town. Sometimes when one of the brothers or sisters went away on a long trip, the whole church would show up at the airport to greet them. And we would have a church meeting right in the airport.

There was always something happening where you could share Christ and love the Lord together. We would also have spontaneous times of outreach to the lost. Everything we did, the Spirit was free to move and change the direction of the event. When we did get together, I saw a Christ glorified and magnified. We were constantly making new discoveries in Him. Every time I saw Him in a new way, I wanted to see more. The feeling of guilt, shame, and unworthiness was gone. I had a passion to know Christ in deeper ways.

I am through with dying on the vine. I have now seen the freedom that Christians can really have in meeting together organically, just like the early church did.

(A male international marketing and business consultant)

In short, this book reimagines a vision of church that's organic in its construction; relational in its functioning; scriptural in its form; Christ-centered in its operation; Trinitarian in its shape; communitarian in its lifestyle; nonelitist in its attitude; and nonsectarian in its expression.

Stated simply, the purpose of this book is to discover afresh what it means to *be* church from God's standpoint. So with the New Testament as our starting point, let's reimagine church together.

I HAVE A DREAM

I have a dream that one day the church of Jesus Christ will rise up to her God-given calling and begin to live out the true meaning of her identity—which is, the very heartthrob of God Almighty—the fiancée of the King of all Kings.

I have a dream that Jesus Christ will one day be Head of His church again. Not in pious rhetoric, but in reality.

I have a dream that groups of Christians everywhere will begin to flesh out the New Testament reality that the church is a living organism and not an institutional organization.

I have a dream that the clergy/laity divide will someday be an antique of church history, and the Lord Jesus Himself will replace the moss-laden system of human hierarchy that has usurped His authority among His people.

I have a dream that multitudes of God's people will no longer tolerate those man-made systems that have put them in religious bondage and under a pile of guilt, duty, condemnation, making them slaves to authoritarian systems and leaders.

I have a dream that the centrality and supremacy of Jesus Christ will be the focus, the mainstay, and the pursuit of every Christian and every church. And that God's dear people will no longer be obsessed with spiritual and religious things to the point of division. But that their obsession and pursuit would be a person—the Lord Jesus Christ.

I have a dream that countless churches will be transformed from high-powered business organizations into spiritual families—authentic Christ-centered communities—where the members know one another intimately, love one another unconditionally, bleed for one another deeply, and rejoice with one another unfailingly.

I have a dream today...⁴

PART ONE
**COMMUNITY AND
GATHERINGS**

CHAPTER 1

REIMAGINING THE CHURCH AS AN ORGANISM

A truth's initial commotion is directly proportional to how deeply the lie was believed. It wasn't the world being round that agitated people, but that the world wasn't flat. When a well-packaged web of lies has been sold gradually to the masses over generations, the truth will seem utterly preposterous and its speaker a raving lunatic. —Dresden James

The ministry of the Holy Spirit has ever been to reveal Jesus Christ, and revealing Him, to conform everything to Him. No human genius can do this. We cannot obtain anything in our New Testament as the result of human study, research, or reason. It is all the Holy Spirit's revelation of Jesus Christ. Ours is to seek continually to see Him by the Spirit, and we shall know that He—not a paper-pattern—is the Pattern, the Order, the Form. It is all a Person who is the sum of all purpose and ways. Everything [in the early church] then was the free and spontaneous movement of the Holy Spirit, and He did it in full view of the Pattern—God's Son. —T. Austin-Sparks

The New Testament uses many images to depict the church. Significantly, all of these images are living entities: a body, a bride, a family, one new man, a living temple made up of living stones, a vineyard, a field, an army, a city, etc.

Each image teaches us that the church is a living organism rather than an institutional organization. Few Christians today would disagree with that statement. But what does it mean in practice? And do we *really* believe it?

The church we read about in the New Testament was “organic.” By that I mean it was born from and sustained by spiritual life instead of constructed by human institutions, controlled by human hierarchy, shaped by lifeless rituals, and held together by religious programs.

To use an illustration, if I try to create an orange in a laboratory, the lab-created orange would not be organic. But if I planted an orange seed into the ground and it produced an orange tree, the tree would be organic.

In the same way, whenever we sin-scarred mortals try to create a church the same way we would start a business corporation, we are defying the organic principle of church life. An organic church is one that is *naturally* produced when a group of people have encountered Jesus Christ in reality (external ecclesiastical props being unnecessary), and the DNA of the church is free to work without hindrance.

To put it in a sentence, organic church life is not a theater with a script; it’s a gathered community that lives by divine life. By contrast, the modern institutional church operates on the same organizational principles that run corporate America.

The DNA of the Church

All life forms have a DNA—a genetic code. DNA gives each life form a specific expression. For example, the instructions to build your physical body are encoded in your DNA. Your DNA largely determines your physical and psychological traits.

If the church is truly organic, that means that it, too, has a DNA—a spiritual DNA. Where do we discover the DNA of the church? I submit that we can learn a great deal about it by looking into God Himself.

We Christians uniquely proclaim a triune God.¹ In the words of the Athanasian Creed, “The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, yet there are not three gods, but one God.” Classic Christianity teaches that God is a fellowship of three persons: Father, Son, and Spirit. The Godhead is a Community of three, or a “Trinity” as theologians call it. Theologian Stanley Grenz writes,

God’s triune nature means that God is social or relational—God is the “social Trinity.” And for this reason, we can say that God is “community.” God is the community of the Father, Son, and Spirit, who enjoy perfect and eternal fellowship.²

For many years, I heard precise teachings on the doctrine of the Trinity. But they never had any practical application in my life. I found them highly abstract and impractical.

Later, I discovered that understanding the activity within the triune God was the key to grasping everything in the Christian life—including the church.³ As Eugene Peterson has said, “Trinity is the most comprehensive and integrative framework that we have for understanding and participating in the Christian life.”⁴

Other theologians agree. Catherine LaCunga says, “The doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for the Christian life.”⁵

In the same vein, Miroslav Volf writes, “The triune God stands at the beginning and at the end of the Christian pilgrimage and, therefore, at the center of Christian faith.”⁶

The biblical teaching of the Trinity is not an exposition about the abstract design of God. Instead, it teaches us about God’s nature and how it operates in Christian community. As such, it shouldn’t be relegated to an endnote to the gospel. Rather, it should shape the Christian life and inform the practice of the church.⁷

Throughout the gospel of John, Jesus makes many statements that give us insight into His relationship with His Father. He says, “Father . . . you loved me before the creation of the world” (John 17:24). He also said, “The world must learn that I love the Father” (John 14:31). From these two texts alone, we learn that there was a mutual love flowing within the Godhead before the foundation of the world.

In the opening chapters of Genesis, we discover that there is also fellowship within the Godhead: “Let *us* make man in *our* image, in *our* likeness” (Gen. 1:26). Here we see the triune God taking counsel and planning.

The gospel of John teaches us further about the nature of the Godhead. Namely, that the Son lives by the life of the Father (5:26; 6:57). The Son shares and expresses the glory of the Father (13:31–32; 17:4–5). The Son lives within the Father and the Father lives within the Son (1:18; 14:10). The Son lives in complete dependence upon the Father (5:19). The Son reflects the Father in His words and deeds (12:49; 14:9). The Father glorifies the Son (1:14; 8:50, 54; 12:23; 16:14; 17:1, 5, 22, 24), and the Son exalts the Father (7:18; 14:13; 17:1, 4; 20:17)

Within the triune God we discover mutual love, mutual fellowship, mutual dependence, mutual honor, mutual submission, mutual dwelling, and authentic community. In the Godhead there exists an eternal, complementary, and reciprocal interchange of divine life, divine love, and divine fellowship.

Amazingly, this same relationship has been transposed from the divine key into the human key. The passage has moved from the Father to the Son, from the Son to the church (John 6:57; 15:9; 20:21). It has moved from the eternal God in the heavenlies to the church on earth, the body of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The church is an organic extension of the triune God. It was conceived in Christ before time (Eph. 1:4–5) and born on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1ff.).

Properly conceived, the church is the gathered community that shares God's life and expresses it in the earth. Put another way, the church is the earthly image of the triune God (Eph. 1:22–23).

Because the church is organic, it has a natural expression. Accordingly, when a group of Christians follows their spiritual DNA, they will gather in a way that matches the DNA of the triune God—for they possess the same life that God Himself possesses. (While we Christians are by no means divine, we have been privileged to be “partakers of the divine nature”—2 Peter 1:4 NASB.)

Consequently, the DNA of the church is marked by the very traits that we find in the triune God. Particularly, mutual love, mutual fellowship, mutual dependence, mutual honor, mutual submission, mutual dwelling, and authentic community. Put another way, the headwaters of the church are found in the Godhead. It is for this reason that Stanley Grenz could say, “The ultimate basis for our understanding

of the church lies in its relationship to the nature of the triune God Himself.”⁸

Theologian Kevin Giles echoes this thought when he says that the Trinity is the “model on which ecclesiology should be formulated. On this premise, the inner life of the divine Trinity provides a pattern, a model, an echo, or an icon of the Christian communal existence in the world.”⁹

Simply put, the Trinity is the paradigm for the church’s native expression. Beloved theologian Shirley Guthrie unfolds this concept by describing the relational nature of the Godhead:

*The oneness of God is not the oneness of a distinct, self-contained individual; it is the unity of a community of persons who love each other and live together in harmony.... They are what they are only in relationship with one another.... There is no solitary person separated from the others; no above and below; no first, second, third in importance; no ruling and controlling and being ruled and controlled; no position of privilege to be maintained over against others; no question of conflict concerning who is in charge; no need to assert independence and authority of one at the expense of the others. Now there is only fellowship and communion of equals who share all that they are and have in their communion with each other, each living with and for the others in mutual openness, self-giving love, and support; each free not from but for the others. That is how Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are related in the inner circle of the Godhead.*¹⁰

Look again at the triune God. And notice what’s absent. There’s an absence of command-style leadership. There’s an absence of hierarchical structures.¹¹ There’s an absence of passive spectatorship. There’s an absence of one-upmanship. And there’s an absence of religious rituals and programs.

(Some have suggested that there is a graded hierarchy within the Trinity. But this view is scripturally and historically untenable. See pages 295-96 for details.)

Command-style relationships, hierarchy, passive spectatorship, one-upmanship, religious programs, etc. were created by fallen humans. And they run contrary to the DNA of the triune God as well as the DNA of the church. Sadly, however, after the death of the apostles, these practices were adopted, baptized, and brought into the Christian family.¹² Today, they have become the central features of the institutional church.

Four Paradigms for Church Restoration

There are four chief paradigms for reimagining the church today. They are as follows:

Biblical Blueprintism. Those who advocate this paradigm champion the idea that the New Testament contains a meticulous blueprint for church practice. To their minds, we simply need to tease out of the Bible the proper blueprint and mimic it. But as I shall argue in this book, the New Testament contains no such blueprint for church practice. Neither does it contain a list of rules and regulations for Christians to follow.¹³ As New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce puts it, “In applying the New Testament text to our own situation, we need not treat it as the scribes of our Lord’s day treated the Old Testament. We should not turn what were meant to be guiding lines for worshippers in one situation into laws binding for all time.”¹⁴

Cultural Adaptability. Those who advocate this paradigm are quick to point out that human culture changes over time. The church of the first

century adapted to its culture. Today, the culture is very different. So the church must adapt to its present culture. Champions of this view say that in every age the church reinvents itself to adapt to the current culture.

This paradigm is based on the idea of “contextualization.” Contextualization is the theological method that tries to translate the biblical message into different cultural settings.

Contextualization is certainly needed when we apply Scripture. It’s because of contextualization that we don’t wear sandals, togas, speak Greek, and use horses for transportation.

However, some people wave the contextualization flag to the point of *overcontextualizing* the Scriptures until they have no present relevance at all. Overcontextualization eats up the biblical text to where it disappears entirely. And we are left to create the church after our own image.

F. F. Bruce warns against the dangers of extreme contextualization, saying,

*The restatement of the gospel in a new idiom is necessary in every generation—as necessary as its translation into new languages. [But] in too much that passes for restatement of the gospel, the gospel itself disappears, and the resultant product is what Paul would have called ‘another gospel which in fact is no gospel at all’ (Gal. 1:6f.). When the Christian message is so thoroughly accommodated to the prevalent climate of opinion that it becomes one more expression of that climate of opinion, it is no longer the Christian message.*¹⁵

I’ve met many advocates of the cultural adaptability paradigm. And I’ve been fascinated to discover that every one of them believes that there *are* normative church practices that transcend time and culture. For instance,

most Christians who hold to the cultural adaptability paradigm would find the suggestion that we should abandon water baptism and change the Lord's Supper from bread and wine to french fries and mugs of root beer to be offensive. (Those under ten years old may be the exception!)

The critical question then becomes which practices of the New Testament church are solely descriptive and which are normative? Or to put it another way, which are tied to the culture of the first century and which are reflections of the unchanging nature and identity of the church?

The dangers of overcontextualization are real, and not a few Christian leaders have been unwittingly guilty of it. We must be careful not to hold to biblical principles unconsciously when they suit our purposes, but abandon them in the name of "contextualization" when they do not.

The fact of the matter is, virtually all Christians derive their ideas of the Christian life and church life from the Bible. (Ironically, those who claim that they do not nearly always end up turning to the teachings of Jesus or Paul to support or condemn a particular idea or practice.) The early church was not perfect. If you doubt that, just read 1 Corinthians. So romanticizing the early Christians as if they were flawless is a mistake.

On the other hand, the first-century church was the church that Jesus and the apostles founded. And insofar as the first-century communities were fleshing out the teachings of Jesus and the apostles, they can teach us a great deal. To ignore them as irrelevant for our time is a gross mistake. In the words of J. B. Phillips,

The great difference between present-day Christianity and that of which we read in these [the New Testament] letters is that to us it is primarily a performance; to them it was a real experience. We are apt to reduce the Christian religion to a code, or at best a rule of heart and life. To these

*men it is quite plainly the invasion of their lives by a new quality of life altogether.*¹⁶

Postchurch Christianity. This paradigm is rooted in the attempt to practice Christianity without belonging to an identifiable community that regularly meets for worship, prayer, fellowship, and mutual edification. Advocates claim that spontaneous social interaction (like having coffee at Starbucks whenever they wish) and personal friendships embody the New Testament meaning of “church.” Those who hold to this paradigm believe in an amorphous, nebulous, phantom church.

Such a concept is disconnected with what we find in the New Testament. The first-century churches were locatable, identifiable, visitable communities that met regularly in a particular locale. For this reason, Paul could write a letter to these identifiable communities (local churches) with some definite idea of who would be present to hear it (Rom. 16). He would also have a good idea of when they gathered (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 14) and the struggles they experienced in their life together (Rom. 12—14; 1 Cor. 1–8). While unbiblical in its viewpoint, the postchurch paradigm appears to be an expression of the contemporary desire for intimacy without commitment.

Organic Expression. Throughout this book, I will argue for this particular paradigm. I believe that the New Testament is a record of the church’s DNA at work. When we read the book of Acts and the Epistles, we are watching the genetics of the church of Jesus Christ expressing itself in various cultures during the first century. Because the church is truly a spiritual organism, its DNA never changes. It’s the same biological entity yesterday, today, and tomorrow. As such, the DNA of the church will always reflect these four elements:

1. It will always express the headship of Jesus Christ in His church as opposed to the headship of a human being. (I'm using the term "headship" to refer to the idea that Christ is both the authority and the source of the church.)¹⁷
2. It will always allow for and encourage the every-member functioning of the body.
3. It will always map to the theology that's contained in the New Testament, giving it visible expression on the earth.
4. It will always be grounded in the fellowship of the triune God.

The Trinity is the paradigm informing us on how the church should function. It shows us that the church is a loving, egalitarian, reciprocal, cooperative, nonhierarchical community.

F. F. Bruce once said, "*Development* is the unfolding of what is there already, even if only implicitly; *departure* involves the abandonment of one principle or basis in favor of another."¹⁸

All that enables the church to reflect the triune God is development; all that hinders it from doing so is departure.

As George Barna and I have argued in our book, *Pagan Christianity*, very little of what is practiced in the modern institutional church has its roots in the New Testament. Instead, human-invented practices that were spawned centuries ago have both shaped and redefined the church. Such practices undermine the headship of Christ, hamper the every-member functioning of Christ's body, violate New Testament theology, and disaffirm the fellowship of the triune God. As Emil Brunner puts it, "The delicate structure of the fellowship founded by Jesus, and anchored by the Holy Spirit, could not be replaced by an institutional organization without the whole character of the *ecclesia* being fundamentally changed."¹⁹

Yet despite this fact, many of these practices are justified by Christians even though they lack biblical merit. Why? Because of the incredible power of religious tradition. Consider the following texts:

The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever. (Isa. 40:8)

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. (Heb. 4:12)

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. (Isa. 55:10–11)

These texts inform us about the enormous power of God's Word. The Word of God stands forever. The Word of God will accomplish whatever God desires. The Word of God will achieve the purpose to which God has sent it. The Word of God will not return void.

Yet despite the incredible power of God's Word, there is one thing that can stop it dead in its tracks. That one thing is religious tradition. Note the words of Jesus, the incarnate Word:

Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. (Matt. 15:6)

And again:

*Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men....
You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep
your tradition. (Mark 7:8–9 NASB)*

In so many ways, religious tradition has shaped our minds. It's captured our hearts. It's framed our vocabulary. So much so that whenever we open our Bibles, we automatically read our current church practices back into the text.

Whenever we see the word *pastor* in the Bible, we typically think of a man who preaches sermons on Sunday mornings.²⁰ Whenever we see the word *church*, we typically think of a building or a Sunday-morning service. Whenever we see the word *elder*, we typically think of someone on a church board or committee.

This raises an important question: How can we read our present church practices back into the New Testament so easily? One of the reasons is because we have inherited a “cut-and-paste” approach to Bible study. In this approach, out-of-context “proof-texts” are pieced together to support man-made doctrines and practices. This process is largely unconscious. And two things make it very easy. First, the New Testament letters aren't arranged in chronological order. Second, the New Testament letters are divided into chapters and verses.²¹

Philosopher John Locke articulated the problem well when he wrote, “The Scriptures are chopped and minced, and, as they are now printed, stand so broken and divided, that not only the common people take the verses usually for distinct aphorisms [rules]; but even men of more advanced knowledge, in reading them, lose very much of the strength and force of the coherence, and the light that depends on it.”²²

By contrast, when the New Testament is read in chronological order, without chapters and verses, a beautiful narrative emerges. A story materializes. When we read the New Testament as it's presently arranged, however, we encounter that story in fragments. And we miss the fluid narrative.

In Greek mythology, a man named Procrustes was reputed to possess a magical bed that had the unique property of matching the size of the persons who lay upon it. But behind the “magic” was a crude method for creating a “one-size-fits-all” bed. If the person lying on it was too small, Procrustes would stretch the person's limbs out to fit the bed. If the person was too large, Procrustes would chop off his limbs to make him fit!

The modern concept of church is a Procrustean bed. Scriptures that do not fit the shape of the institutional church are either chopped off (dismissed) or they are stretched to fit its mold. The cut-and-paste method of Bible study makes this rather easy to pull off (no pun intended). We lift various verses out of their chronological and historical setting and then paste them together to create a doctrine or support a practice. By contrast, the chronological narrative provides a control on our interpretation of Scripture. It prevents us from cutting and pasting verses together to make the Bible fit our preconceived ideas.

The fact is, many of our present-day church practices are without scriptural merit. They are human-invented practices that are at odds with the organic nature of the church. They do not reflect the desire of Jesus Christ, nor do they express His headship nor His glorious personality (the very things that the church is called to bear). Instead, they reflect the enthronement of man's ideas and traditions. And as a result, they smother the church's native expression. Yet we justify them by our cut-and-paste hermeneutic.

Violating the Church's DNA

Some Christians have tried to justify a slew of unbiblical church practices by suggesting that the church is different in every culture, and it adapts to the world in which it lives. It is thought, therefore, that God now approves of the clergy system, hierarchical leadership, the performance-spectator order of worship, the single leader model, the concept of “going to church,” and a host of other practices that were created around the fourth century as a result of Christians borrowing from the Greco-Roman customs of their day.

But is the church really different in every culture? And if it is, does that mean that we are free to adopt any practice we like into our corporate worship? Or is it possible that the church has overadapted to modern Western culture in both its theology and its practice?

Speaking of the problem of overcontextualization, Richard Halverson writes, “When the Greeks got the gospel, they turned it into a philosophy; when the Romans got it, they turned it into a government; when the Europeans got it, they turned it into a culture; and when the Americans got it, they turned it into a business.”²³

I will borrow from Paul when he said, “Does not nature teach you?”

The New Testament is clear that the church is a biological entity (Eph. 2:15; Gal. 3:28; 1 Cor. 10:32; Col. 3:11; 2 Cor. 5:17). This biological entity is produced when the living seed of the gospel is planted into the hearts of women and men and they are permitted to gather together naturally.

The DNA of the church produces certain identifiable features. Some of them are the experience of authentic community, a familial love and devotion of its members to one another, the centrality of Jesus Christ, the native instinct to gather together without static ritual, the innate desire to form deep-seated relationships that are centered on Christ, the internal

drive for open-participatory gatherings, and the loving impulse to display Jesus to a fallen world.

While the seed of the gospel will naturally produce these particular features, *how* they are expressed may look slightly different from culture to culture. For instance, I once planted an organic church in the country of Chile. The songs they wrote, the way they interacted with each other, the way they sat, what they did with their children, all looked different from organic churches born in Europe and the United States.

However, the same basic features that reside in the DNA of the church were all present. Never did any of these churches produce a clergy system, a sole pastor, a hierarchical leadership structure, or an order of worship that rendered the majority passive.

In nature, there's a flowering shrub called the bigleaf hydrangea. If you take the seed of that shrub and plant it in the soil of Indiana, it will yield pink flowers when it blooms. But if you take that same seed and plant it in the soil of Brazil or Poland, it will produce blue flowers. Even more interesting, if you take the same seed and plant it in another type of soil, it will yield purple flowers.²⁴

The bigleaf hydrangea, however, will *never* produce thorns or thistles. It will never bear oranges or apples. And it will never grow tall like a pine tree. Why? Because these features are not within the DNA of the seed.

In the same way, the church of Jesus Christ—when planted properly and left on its own without human control and institutional interference—will produce certain features by virtue of its DNA. Like the bigleaf hydrangea, the church may look different from culture to culture, but it will have the same basic expression wherever it's allowed to flourish.

On the other hand, when we humans introduce our fallen systems into this living organism, the church loses her organic features and produces

a foreign expression that runs contrary to her DNA. To put it bluntly, it's possible to distort the organic growth of the church and violate its DNA.

Let me tell a tragic story that illustrates this principle. On November 4, 1970, a very unusual thirteen-year-old girl was discovered. From early childhood, she had lived in a state of intense sensory and social deprivation. Genie, as she came to be called, wasn't taught to speak. And she was denied normal human interaction.

Genie was tied to a potty-chair and left to sit alone day after day. In the evenings, she was tied into a sleeping bag, which restrained movement of her arms. She was also beaten for making noises—including forming words.

The result: Her natural traits were permanently distorted. Genie had a strange bunny-like walk. She constantly held her hands up in front of her body like paws. She couldn't chew solid food, and she could hardly swallow. She also spat constantly, sniffled often, and couldn't focus her eyes beyond twelve feet. Genie's speech was limited to short, high-pitched squeaks that were barely understandable.

After years of being removed from her abysmal home life, Genie's vocabulary grew significantly. Yet she wasn't capable of stringing words together into meaningful sentences. What happened? Some scientists concluded that her normal DNA was altered because she was deprived of proper nutrition and stimulation.

Let's apply this story to the spiritual realm. Like the bigleaf hydrangea, the culture in which an organic church is born may influence its expression. At the same time, like Genie's tragic experience, the culture can also distort the church's expression by interrupting its organic growth. In my opinion, that's exactly what has happened with the church historically.

Hence, what passes for “church” today is not what God had in mind from the beginning.

The church is organic. If her natural growth is not tampered with, she will grow up to be a beautiful girl—a living witness to the glories of her Bridegroom, Jesus Christ. She will not grow up to be an organization like General Motors or Microsoft. She will be something wholly different—completely unique to this planet. Just as unique as Jesus Christ was when He walked this earth. For after all, the church is His very body, and its nature is identical to God’s.

That said, this book is an effort to reimagine church in the image of the triune God. It seeks to anchor the practice of the church in the eternal Godhead rather than in the shifting sands of cultural fads, the muddied bottom of biblical blueprintism, or the polluted waters of religious tradition.

Questions That Must Be Faced

- Do you think the New Testament offers any guidance for our church life and practices today, or should we discard it as being completely irrelevant? Explain.
- Consider the churches you have been a part of in the past. In what ways did they or did they not reflect the relationship of the triune God?
- What does it mean to be faithful to the Word of God with respect to our church life and practices? How about our individual life and practices? Explain.
- On what basis do we determine what is normative and timeless in the New Testament from what is merely descriptive and tied to first-century culture? Explain.