

## **BOOK REVIEW**

by Beryl Clemens Smith

### **PAGAN CHRISTIANITY: Exploring The Roots Of Our Church Practices**

by George Barna

Published by Tyndale House Publishers, 2005

Basically, this book traces the history of organizational and worship practices of the Christian Church from the 1st Century to modern times. Its premise: "Most of what present-day Christians do in church each Sunday is rooted, not in the New Testament, but in pagan culture and rituals developed long after the death of the Apostles."

The authors go to great lengths to prove that the origin of the concepts of "clergy" and "laity" were derived from Greek and Roman cultural practices. Constantine's adoption of the Christian religion, according to the authors, started the organizational changes which turned the "house-church" worship of the apostolic era into more organized church assemblies where the clergy (dressed and orating like secular leaders in Greek and Roman times) pontificated while the congregants sat and listened. Church practices of today find their origins in practices established in the 4th Century and simply magnified as time went on. The clergy became more organized. The laity became more passive. That's the way it is in the vast majority of "Christian" (broadly defined) churches of today.

I feel that some of the authors' arguments are based on silence. Example 1: "Tithing was not a practice of the New Testament church." (p. 249). Example 2: "The New Testament church did not have a clergy." (p. 248). Just how much evidence do we have of the way the churches of the 2nd and 3rd Centuries organized themselves? Did God mean for the invisible church to remain organized as house-church with membership around 30 individuals?

One of the key principles of the authors is that "The New Testament church was organic, not organizational. It was not welded together by putting people into offices, creating programs, constructing rituals, and developing a top-down hierarchy or chain-of-command structure. The church was a living, breathing organism." To the authors, ordination, Bible college, seminaries, youth pastors, choir directors, Sunday school, church buildings, etc., are all man-made institutions or offices that work against their concept of Christ being head of the Church. This is how they define the "organic church":

"Organic church life is a grassroots experience that is marked by face-to-face community, every-member functioning, open-participatory meetings, nonhierarchical leadership, and the centrality and supremacy of Jesus Christ as the functional leader and head of the group. Put another way, organic church life is the 'experience' of the Body of Christ. In its purest form, it is the fellowship of the triune God brought to earth and experienced by human beings." (pp. 240-241).

This somehow smacks of what the early Marxists called the "dictatorship of the proletariat," a utopian political/economic concept that sounds great in theory but is totally

impractical due to the depravity of human heart. If we had no Constitution, what kind of mob rule would abound in the American culture? If we had no Westminster Confession of Faith, how many Benny Hinn's would there be dominating the professing Christian church?

Weaknesses of this book (in my opinion):

1. There is no recognition of the pastoral/shepherd/overseer gift and role that Paul taught. Just what does Ephesians 4:11-12 teach us?
2. Developing conclusions from silence or non-documented periods of time and place. What were the churches of Asia-Minor really like?
3. Using glittering generalities (a propaganda technique).
4. Straw-man building that makes the institutional church it is not at all times and all instances.
5. Failing to show the New Testament references and expand upon them to fully define what they call the "organic" church.
6. Viola's failure to fully describe and provide examples of what they call an "organic" church.

One thing I did appreciate was their inclusion of a "delving deeper" section at the end of each chapter, in which they attempted to answer the questions of some of their critics (and not always successfully, in my opinion).

**CONCLUSION:** If you'd prefer not to buy this book, but borrow my copy with all my comments and criticisms in the margins, let me know. Otherwise, buy it and stick with it all the way to its end. You will profit from it!

Beryl Clemens Smith