
Editorials

COME OVER TO MY HOUSE

All believers need to be in a house church, according to pollster George Barna and church planter Frank Viola. Anything else is, according to these two, absolutely pagan. In their view, meeting in buildings rather than houses all started with Constantine, who is cast as the villain. Church buildings — even pulpits — are bad. House churches are good.

All of this reconstructed history and claims of a new restoration of the Church by Barna and Viola can be found in their book *Pagan Christianity: Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practice*. The book is a rewrite of Viola's 2003 book, *Pagan Christianity*.

Viola's views are not new, but are recycled from Gene Edwards. Edwards is all over the doctrinal map and has even appeared on Benny Hinn's telecasts. He was ordained in the Southern Baptist Church, but became enamored with the ideas of Frank Laubach, which set him on a mystical course. He then became interested in Watchman Nee, and even went to China to study the house church movement. Even after he fell out with Nee's followers and moved on, he never abandoned the idea that house churches were the only acceptable kind of congregation. It seems like Edwards hardly knew where to land theologically.

For a time, Edwards ran a publishing house of his own and published the writings of medieval Catholic mystics such as Madame Guyon. In the 1990s, he worked hard to establish the house church model in the United States, though it has always remained a small minority and a subculture. Edwards bases his house church structure on the total equality of everyone involved. He opposes pastoral oversight. This is unlike both the structure for the Christian home and the Epistles' view of churches, which included pastoral and deacon oversight and leadership. Further, Edwards teaches that organization and administration are the result of the fall and that egalitarianism is in.

Edwards also is committed to the teaching called Baptist Secessionism, which proposes that there is an unbroken line of Baptists from New Testament times until the present. In his attempt to create historical continuity, he takes heretical groups throughout history and declares them to have been Baptists.

History and archaeology are the enemies of Barna and Viola's house church mandates. Scripture reports that early believers met in homes, but never mandates it.

The use of buildings does not constitute an evil in itself, otherwise Paul would have never met in a hall as reported in Acts 19:9-10. Paul used the school hall of one Tyrannus to gather and teach his disciples. He spent two

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years doing that and there is no indication he was doing anything wrong. It may not have been Sunday church, but it was religious church activity.

Long before Constantine, early Church Fathers like Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 195) said clearly, "It is not the place but the assemblies of elect that I call the church." It could not be much clearer than this. To the early Church where they met was not the issue, but rather who met. The Church was the people and the gathering place inconsequential and unimportant.

We know that in Cappadocia early Christians met in cave structures, which are neither a house nor a large building. All of that history and those meeting places can be viewed in Ray VanderLaan's DVD series, *In the Dust of the Rabbi*.

One of the early — and documented — Christian complaints before Constantine was that Rome prohibited, for a time and in certain areas, the construction of churches. Apparently someone forgot to tell the early Christians they were forbidden to meet anywhere but in house churches.

Barna and Viola also have missed the Jewish milieu into which the Church was born. The early Church throughout Israel — and especially in Jerusalem — was Jewish to its core. These were children of the synagogue and it can be established that some early churches were simply converted synagogues. The Church was born in the synagogue and in some cases remained.

There have been early buildings excavated and it can be shown that a church either existed in or was built over a synagogue by Christians and used as a church. These were buildings and not homes. This precedes Constantine and was accepted in the spirit that it is not the place but the people. These facts have been commented on by Dr. Jack Finegan in his *The Archaeology of the New Testament*, and in Hershhal Shanks' *Judaism in Stone*.

The house church movement is elitist and therefore divisive. Christians should have no problem with those who wish to meet in homes or have house churches, but should never say it is the only way or that it is the more spiritual way. Where the body of Christ gathers is inconsequential. The leadership structure of the Church is mandated in the New Testament, but there is liberty as to the place of meeting, whether it is a home, a converted synagogue, a school hall, or a building built for the purpose of meeting.

Charges of paganism against those who do not meet in homes is wrong and unbiblical. True, there were pagan elements and heresies that infiltrated the Church after Constantine, but where people met was not one of them.

The exclusivity of house churches is a view that will always remain in the subculture. Hopefully, most Christians know too much to be taken in by it.

—GRF

NEWS UPDATES

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and provided a continued plotline for the movie, was "a phenomenon even for many Christians." She went on to write, "For years, good churchgoing friends of mine secretly raved about *Sex and the City*. They told me that I, a 30-something single woman (and a singles columnist to boot), would appreciate the randy little show. I was a late adopter [to viewing the show] only because I didn't have cable. ... it was refreshing to have a single woman's sexuality acknowledged."

Courtney further applauded the movie's central characters, while demeaning "many Christians," saying that the women depicted in the film "show how challenging it really can be for intelligent, accomplished, and admittedly neurotic women to find lasting love. They, unlike many Christians, don't insult my intelligence."

Courtney apparently was an avid fan of the television series, observing that in the movie one particular character "As usual ... offers the weakest plot line." She further admitted the program to be "soft-core porn" and that "many viewers were no doubt drawn by the sex."

The magazine's review drew a firestorm of response from its readers; however, less than half of the posted letters were critical. One, who chided the review, said the periodical "should either abandon [its] stated Christian aims and mission statement, or stop condoning pornography." Another asked, "Are you guys really serious about Jesus, the Bible, holiness, and biblical truth?" The magazine countered with: "to slam us for reviewing the film makes no sense. Our mission statement is to help readers make discerning choices about movies — not to make the choices for people." *CT* also offered, "But we'd like to again reiterate that our star ratings do NOT imply an 'endorsement' or 'recommendation.' The star ratings have nothing to do with the film's 'moral value,' because such an assessment can vary widely from person to person."

The *CT* review also informed readers that the movie contains "several scenes with nudity, including a brief glimpse at frontal male nudity, a brief guy-to-guy kiss, and several graphic sex scenes, including a threesome. The language is colorful at times, but not as problematic as the sex and nudity. This isn't a movie for children or teens, and due to the content, not even for some adults."

—MKG