

*The Assembly of the Saints*  
*Lesson 6 – Misconceptions about the assembly*  
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**Introduction:** We must be reminded of the foundation every Christian builds on.

- A. We are to be built up in Christ and His foundation. **(Mt 7:24-25; Eph 2:20-22)**
  - 1. I am thankful that I do not have to come up with my own foundation.
  - 2. Those who do will find that sand does not hold up in a flood.
- B. God warned Christians how they were to build on this foundation. **(1 Cor 3:10-15)**
  - 1. We live in a world where truth, morality and doctrine is hated.
  - 2. “The church which is married to the Spirit of its Age will be a widow in the next.” —William Ralph Inge

***I. The assembly is to build up Christians in the word of His grace***

- A. What kind of teaching would an apostle give in an assembly? **(Acts 20:32)**
  - 1. Paul pleaded with the elders to follow the example he gave. **(Acts 20:18-21)**
  - 2. What kind of teaching brings repentance?
  - 3. Here is where the church must not give in to following the religions of men.
- B. The message must be God centered and not man centered.
  - 1. One common misconception is that we must have preaching that is not offensive. If that is true then we must not preach Christ! **(1 Pt 2:1-4, 7-8)**
  - 2. We should be gentle, kind and humble but we must be faithful, plain and firm.
  - 3. Far too many Christians have fallen in love with denominational authors and denominational preaching. A certain kind of preaching will bring a certain kind of fruit!
  - 4. There are two very different approaches that Christians take from man-made religion. **(1 Jn 4:1, 5-6)**
- C. We must teach the whole council of God. **(Acts 20:26-27)**
  - 1. Think about the number of subjects this would involve. Why must we do this?
  - 2. Can we possibly be able to do this when we decide that there is anything in God’s word we must not preach on?
  - 3. What fruit is produced when a leadership of fear decides that certain subjects are not “positive” and then removes teachers that will not yield to a peer group? **(2 Tim 4:1-4)**
  - 4. What fruit did Paul fear? Was Paul a “positive” preacher? **(Acts 20:28-31)**

**Questions**

- 1. How is the foundation Christ spoke of in the Sermon on the Mount built?
- 2. What happens over time when a church receives weak or even false teaching?
- 3. What kind of teaching comes from the grace of God? What false concepts of grace cause people to oppose the “word of His grace?”
- 4. What is wrong with changing the services and kind of teaching to make sure that others are not offended? (Mt 15:12-14)
- 5. Make a partial lists of the subjects that need to be covered when your goal is to preach “the whole council of God?” Why must we do this?

## ***II. The assembly is not the only place to teach God's word***

- A. Many make the mistake of letting the assembly be the only place they study and even pray.
  - 1. The overwhelming bulk of learning, teaching and worshipping must be done outside the assembly. **(1 Pt 2:1-3; Col 4:2; Phil 4:6-7)**
  - 2. Consider the folly of one who sends their children to Bible class or a given school so that others may teach them. **(Eph 6:4)**
  - 3. Those who do not love to study and pray daily will be the very one who find the assembly boring! Consider the interests of one who is evangelizing the lost and one who has no interest.
- B. There are other occasions of teaching that cannot be done in the assembly.
  - 1. Taking time to know another person, learning their interests, participating in social activities while teaching is to be done in another setting.
  - 2. The personal interaction, questioning and confession of personal issues is a great strength of other arrangements in the home or other setting. **(Jn 4:17-24)**
  - 3. There are those who seek to make the assembly casual and interactive in a way that would not be expedient and even unlawful. **(1 Cor 14:32-34, 40)**
  - 4. Let us use our homes and our time to meet with others in smaller settings!

## ***III. The assembly must be God centered and not man centered***

- A. Too many want to change the assembly because of popular religious culture.
  - 1. We are seeking to build in a way that produces "sound" minds. **(2 Tim 1:7, 13; Titus 1:9-14)**
  - 2. Learning to worship and yield your heart to God is an acquired "taste."
- B. Meditation and reflection can be considered "boring" and "sterile" to some.
  - 1. Some are embarrassed by the length of time the Lord's Supper is served in silence.
  - 2. Some have decided that we need to have a reader or even sing a song while we are partaking of the Lord's Supper.
- C. We should make our assemblies friendly to visitors by greeting them and taking time to explain things in an understandable way. **(1 Cor 14:23-25)**
  - 1. We should not make our services performances. We stand before God.
  - 2. The use of choirs and plays in the assembly violate the purposes of God.
  - 3. When you see "one another" passages in the Bible you are seeing a "reciprocal pronoun" which indicates participation of everyone. **(Eph 5:19)**

### **Questions**

- 1. Give reasons why it is wrong to depend upon the assembly as your only time to learn?
- 2. What things are done in teaching children in the home that cannot be done in an assembly?
- 3. What advantages may a small group meeting have over an assembly of the church?
- 4. What is wrong with having singing groups or plays in the assembly?
- 5. What is wrong with having singing while we partake of the Lord's Supper?
- 6. Should we change the services because some find it boring? What should be the basis for any change?

***Pagan Christianity (by Frank Viola) Reviewed  
by Warren E. Berkley***

"Have you ever wondered why we Christians do what we do for church every Sunday morning?" This inquiry is the lead sentence on the back cover of a 2002 book published by Present Testimony Ministry. The book is *Pagan Christianity* by Frank Viola.

Viola writes in a style typical of iconoclasts and hyperactive reformers. He has discovered something almost everybody else has missed and he seeks to be our teacher. Before he lays out his agenda, you know he has one. With inflated urgency he uncovers the apostasy he has discovered in (to name a few sins): the order of worship, preachers and preaching, church buildings, dressing up for services and the order of New Testament epistles. The title *Pagan Christianity* reflects his thesis that all such things have no basis in the Scriptures but were appropriated over time into the modern practice of "churchianity." The promotional blurb makes the claim: "This book is reserved for those who are ready to embark on an eye-opening venture that challenges every aspect of their church experience as well as offering a better alternative." Out with the old, in with the new.

Frank Viola is "a high school Psychology and Philosophy teacher," who in "his spare time...plants house churches, speaks at church-life conferences, and authors books on Christ and His church." On one of the opening pages he says that he "left the religious system." One of his arguments against preaching is "it suffocates mutual ministry." And as he debates the case against church buildings, he implies the friendlier, warmer atmosphere of a house (the sofa over the pew). So the agenda emerges. He is a destroyer of one system in the interests of promoting another. This phenomenon (the house church movement) is built on certain common premises: (1) smaller is better, (2) informality {though defined by the leaders} is preferable over order, (3) spontaneous/conversational teaching is superior to a prepared orderly presentation, (4) diversity is celebrated, (5) breaking from "tradition," and (6) opposition to pulpits, buildings and treasuries. All of these items (like a systematic theology) show up in some form in Viola's book, urged upon the reader as a warmer, more spiritual atmosphere and derived from the New Testament (not as a "manual," but more like a love-letter hermeneutic).

Viola's proof is highly touted on the back cover and in promotional material: "Viola proves his point by documenting every claim he makes." Well, there are abundant footnotes. Yet proof lies not in the quantity of footnotes but the content. Often, the author quotes himself! Or he quotes from others who have said what he is saying. There is a conspicuous deficiency in Scripture citations and no attempt to expound passages. He makes only passing reference to key passages on the subjects addressed. He is heavy on what a passage does not say, but usually silent on the real meaning. Some of his historical references bear some scrutiny, but he falls far short of "documenting every claim he makes."

He is critical and cynical about the claim: "The New Testament is our guide for faith and practice," but then seeks to make his case by quoting almost every book in antiquity except the New Testament, with weighty dependence on modern writers who also "left the religious system." What we need on these subjects is serious, objective and prayerful exposition of Scripture. No doubt, there are subjects and issues to be critically visited, but with Scripture in hand. That will serve us better. (I just remembered - I was engaged in conversation with a prominent reformer 30 years ago who was pleading for an emphasis on "grace" that I had reason to question. When I asked him where I could find this "approach" he was so zealous about he said, "read my books." I was really asking him for a higher authority! I have found this characteristic of militant reformers, citing their own writings as proof of their own writings!)

Like most reformers, Viola manages to express some valid issues that need attention. He well states the clergy-laity distinction. He is clear about the disastrous domination of clergymen, the official function of "pastors" who enforce denominational creed and tradition, and even speaks with validity against the Charismatic movement and its' impact in modern worship "styles." I believe there is veneration of religious architecture that can cripple us both spiritually and financially, though Viola goes way beyond questioning an expediency. He well shows the origin of things like the altar call and choral presentations. Likewise, he is on the mark regarding infant

baptism, sprinkling and the "sinner's prayer." These portions of Viola's work will provoke thought and study that can have good result, even though he is lacking in providing scriptural evidence and stuck on the claim of pagan origin.

In his firestorm against preachers and preaching he is particularly contentious against the public sermon. Ignoring the extensive direct evidence of the role of preaching (**Acts, 1, 2 Timothy, Titus**), he utters his prejudice against public preaching. He says: "Ironically, 'the Book' knows nothing of a sermon." He lays the blame on pagans and puritans (in that order). To make clear his resistance he says again: "...that the sermon does not have a shred of Biblical merit to support its existence..."

His opposition to the sermon is a function of his firmly held mutual ministry, house church model. He argues that the sermon is a "one-way affair," that "produces passivity," "lames the church from functioning," "suffocates mutual ministry" and "smothers open participation." He is painting with a wide brush here, and covering up things of value in the sweep.

Did Peter preach a sermon on the Day of Pentecost? What did that sermon about Jesus Christ and Him crucified produce? "Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them," and "with many other words he testified and exhorted them," (**see Acts 2:22-47**). This was no "one-way affair!" God's truth was presented with power and people were persuaded to participate. The sermon generated activity in the hearts of people who became obedient to God, who functioned without suffocation (by sermons) and who had favor with all the people. All of that sounds good to me.

I understand the "excessive and pathological dependence on the clergy," but I'm not willing to classify all preaching within that condemnation. (This is the same old stuff - human abuse is cited as the reason to cast out something legitimate when used properly.) When we tell people what the Word of God says and challenge the right response, there is no excess or pathology in that! Let's expose and condemn the real problem, without throwing out the legitimate.

And I'm wondering about something. Frank Viola has written a book. What is it that lifts his book out of the condemned category? What if someone read his book to a group of people (he does affirm his book to be needed truth)? Would the reading of his book stifle spiritual health and create a pathological dependence on his writings or books in general? Nonsense.

Don't overlook, Viola is a high school teacher. When he speaks to a class in a building with attention focused on him, does he consider that to be an exercise that is passive, tradition bound and pagan? Likewise, he "speaks at church-life conferences!" Apparently the kind of speaking he does he values in some way. Yet he reacts with outrage when someone stands before an audience and directs their attention to the text of Scripture in an orderly form without interruption. This is the excess and decoration of a militant reformer, who is in bondage to his system while attacking another. It is gimmickry and passion born in the contention of a reformers narrow mentality, not based on the content of Scripture.

Behind the charm and sophistry of these reformers there is an arrogant spirit. Mr. Viola wants us to know that "the NT is not a manual for church practice." Yet, he wants us to be led by "the light that is within you!" When all of that has been said, the footnote on the last page of the book is truly the bottom line. He says in this small print entry: "If you plan to leave the institutional church, I strongly recommend that you read the next volume in this series: *So You Want To Start A House Church? First-Century Styled Church Planting For Today*. It will give you the next step."

Unbelievable! He steers us away from the New Testament, then recommends his next book as our next step. Now here is my recommendation. Don't let any man dictate "the next step." Not Viola, Berkley or any man. Open the Bible. Read what it says, and let God direct your steps (**Psa. 37:23; 119:133**).