

# Reimagining Church by Frank Viola

## Book Review

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Today, people understand the word “church” to refer to a building or a religious business institution. Along with this, is the general assumption that it necessarily includes sacred rituals, sacred persons and clothing, orations and sacred places. This is the tradition that has been handed down. However, does this tradition set aside the enduring New Testament ideals for Christian gatherings? That it does so, is the central argument and passion of “Reimagining Church” by Frank Viola.

The currently prevailing paradigm of church is described in terms of a “business” or “institutional” model. This is said to generally have a single CEO and paid officials working to provide religious theatre in the form of rituals and orations for a mainly passive audience. The author sees this as the outcome of Greco-Roman culture and human tradition being inappropriately integrated into the church.

The question naturally arises: how would Christians function in a gathering where there are no sacred rituals in sacred places? Is it possible or desirable? How would order be maintained? To even contemplate it would need a radical re-think, or a “re-imagining”, of the whole of traditional church practice. The book attempts this in 15 chapters and an appendix. There are questions at the end of each chapter to give the opportunity to discuss the issues that arise, to relate it to one’s own experience, and to perhaps explore how it might be engaged in one’s particular context.

The central doctrinal position of the book is that the non-hierarchical, mutual indwelling (Greek: “perichoresis”) of the triune God finds its natural expression in Christian gatherings by mutual ministry. In the author’s words: “Within the triune God we discover mutual love, mutual fellowship, mutual dependence, mutual honor, mutual submission, mutual dwelling, and authentic community ... this same relationship has been transposed from the divine key into the human key” p.35. (One has to wait till page 295 for argument against the view that there is hierarchy within the Trinity).

The function of Christian gatherings is described as “organic” in that there is no hierarchy between the leaves of a plant or between the roots, stem and branches. Each provides for and supports the other. With regard to hierarchy the author comments: “clergy need not use vicious forms of authority to be harmful ... The mere presence of the ... hierarchical mode ... suppresses mutual ministry” p.162.

Christian gatherings are said by the author to have four “spiritual DNA” elements.

- 1) Christ is both the authority and source of the church - not any human being.
- 2) Every member has a function.
- 3) New Testament theology will be expressed in action.
- 4) The fellowship of the triune God is the ground of its being p.41.

The DNA metaphor should not be taken in any literal way.

As usual, a few disclaimers. In addition, some human tradition creeps in with the symbolism of the “broken bread” at the Lord’s dinner p.74.

Overall, this may be the book to read if you have experienced a growing disquiet about church experience. If church has become boring or frustrating, the author advocates a quest for “authentic community” over theatric performance. However, the author’s warnings need to be taken seriously: “living in organic church life is incredibly difficult ... fraught with problems” p.278.

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