

Preaching the Gospel

A monthly magazine for preachers and those who want to preach.

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Kenneth Williams has written an article giving detailed instructions as to how to use a computer to compose a sermon. He has included two “templates” which are very useful. I will send these as email attachments to everyone who requests.--PKW

*Peter McPherson of Peterborough, Ontario, Canada (pmacpherson@cogeco.ca) sends me his weekly **Proclaimer** (free on request.) It is different from most “bulletins” as it consists mostly of his own writing. The following is an article in a series he is now sending out.*

CLOSING THE “GAPS”

(Nehemiah 4:7; A Series, Part 6)

GAPS IN DOCTRINE:

To avoid having any “gaps” in our public teaching, preachers and teachers need to be fully balanced in our preaching and teaching. That challenge is awesome. We often feel that we have lacked in this charge. But in the course of time, we must attempt to, in some degree, orally or written, have all subjects covered. This would include, but not exhaust such topics as: The Inspiration of the Bible. The Grand Theme of the Bible. Prophecies. Evidences. The Precious Blood. Faith. Repentance. Baptism. The Lord’s Supper, The Kingdom...the church universal. The local church, its work and worship. Church Discipline. Christian living. Negative lessons. Positive lessons. Material on Creation. Refutation of denominational doctrines. OT History. NT History. The Deity of Jesus. The Cross. The Resurrection. The Gospels. The Book of Acts. How to be Saved. The NT Books, etc., etc., etc.

It would be best to keep a record of the sermons we deliver and from time to time review just what we have been teaching, whether or not we are covering all the subjects that we should be or maybe we have been lop-sided. One younger preacher (a great personal worker) came to a village in Ontario many years ago and preached near 100% on water baptism. He said that he could preach on baptism 1000 different ways. And, he did! As it turns out, at that time, it appears that that is what was needed. He baptized a number. Sadly, because of good reasons, he left the work prematurely and his work suffered.

I remember a member said to me on one occasion, “Peter, would you preach more on doctrine.” I understood what he was saying. Apparently I had been preaching too much on Christian living, moral matters, etc., whereas he wanted to hear more on other “issues” and matters – refuting denominational errors, etc. Another beloved brother at Salem, Ohio said that I was “a

positive preacher.” Now I am not sure that either of the above spells that I was a very well-rounded-out preacher. If both were true, then I was slipping. I was off-balance. A well-known (now deceased) preacher self-proclaimed himself to me as a Negative preacher. Well, he was off too, wasn’t he? Both Positive and Negative teaching are necessary, but a diet of just one kind or the other is lacking in balance. I have heard it stated that something like two thirds of the Bible is Negative (compare Jerermiah 1:10). The best thing then is to make sure we are at least half and half – half positive and half negative. 2 Timothy 4:1-4

Teaching (DIDACHE) *all* the Doctrine (DIDACHE) is our great task. What a compliment for preachers for it to be said: “He Preaches what the Bible Teaches.” Even, “He is a Bible thumper.” Or, “He leaves nothing out...He tells it just as it is in the Good Book,” etc., etc.

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!)

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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 reformer’s 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* (www.ptmin.org/start.htm). *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).

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