

WHY I LEFT THE INSTITUTIONAL CHURCH

Frank Viola

Since the release of *Pagan Christianity?* (Tyndale, 2008), I've been asked numerous times, "What caused you to leave the institutional church?"

When I stepped out of the institutional church back in 1988, I thought I was only one of a handful of people who had taken that particular plunge. Today, one million Christians a year leave it, and the number is increasing. As Reggie McNeal shockingly said, "A growing number of people are leaving the institutional church for a new reason. They are not leaving the church because they have lost their faith. They are leaving to preserve their faith."

If I had to nail it down to a list, there were essentially four things that led me out. In this piece, I'll walk through each of them briefly.

The Testimony of the New Testament

When I was 16, I had become a serious student of Scripture. I figured that if I wanted to know the Lord, I needed to understand the "Good Book." That led me to devour Scripture on a regular basis.

If you met me back in those days, I was the kind of guy who would quiz my pastors about all those thorny passages in the Bible. And if they preached something that didn't jive with my understanding, I would pelt them with questions. (I was no doubt a modest pain to them; though to their credit, they never let that on.)

Sometimes after the church service, I would ask the pastor a barbed question that sounded something like this: *I read this in the New Testament the other day, and I was wondering why we don't practice this in our church?*

I wish I could tell you that I remembered their answers. I don't. But I do have the distinct impression that I was often unsatisfied. I came to discover, like so many other Christians, that what I saw in the New Testament was galaxies apart from what I was experiencing in all the churches to which I belonged. That discovery only intensified as the years passed by.

The more I read Scripture, the more I became convinced that God was not silent regarding how His church should function. I concluded that the church wasn't something for us humans to tamper with and create in our own image. It was a spiritual organism that has an organic expression.

Some years later, my studies in church history led me to believe that many of our contemporary church practices are based on human tradition rather than on the principles of the Bible. And they have been passed on from generation to generation like paternal blood. Consequently, the more I read church history, the more the traditional church structure began to sag under the weight of historical scrutiny.

In my personal judgment, when it comes to church practice, we've thrown out the baby and kept the bath water. The book, *Pagan Christianity?* is an early run in that direction. It's a sober exposition of our modern church practices. It strikes at the root of why we do what we do on Sunday mornings and challenges them on biblical and spiritual grounds.

Deep Calls Unto Deep

The second thing that got me out of the traditional church has to do with what I felt to be the shallowness and superficiality of modern Christianity. According to my own frail assessment, contemporary Christianity is ten miles high and two inches deep. In fact, it's so shallow that I question if a gnat could drown in it.

In this regard, reading Watchman Nee's *The Normal Christian Life* forever marked me as young man. After reading that book, I looked for that same depth, that same flavor, that same life, and that same unveiling of Christ in every sermon I heard. Sadly, however, I couldn't seem to find it anywhere.

Warning: What I'm about to say in the next few paragraphs is not "religiously correct."

To be quite candid, I became increasingly bored with attending church services. I mean bored with a capital B—as in bored to tears. As in bored to the point that I had mastered the thousand-yard stare. Bored to the point that my right leg would shake through the entire service as if I had St. Vitus Dance (Chorea).

This was true across the board—no matter what kind of church I attended.

I came to the point that I would rather paint my garage, pull up a chair, and watch the paint dry than to sit through another Sunday morning church service. They became that dull for me. A genuine snorefest.

To help alleviate the anguish, I developed the habit of sneaking books into the building and inconspicuously read them during the sermons.

Thankfully, I wasn't the only one who had been numbed by the roteness of the order of worship. As I panned the congregation every Sunday morning, I noticed that others were being lulled to sleep by it also. So many times I wanted to put the sermon on pause and have the congregation engage the subject. But that was never an option in any of the churches I attended (that list would include Southern Baptist, Independent Baptist, CMA, Evangelical Free, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopal, non-denominational (many), Church of Christ, Assembly of God, Church of God, and a host of different charismatic churches.)

As I reflect back on my years in the traditional church, I can't remember one sermon that I heard. I know that some of them were good. The first few years of my Christian life I took copious notes on all the sermons I listened to. But today, I can't recall any of them. I find that interesting to say the least.

Most sermons make a splash and then fade from the memory banks. So it's been for me at least. (A Spirit-inspired message, however, is quite a different thing. I remember many of those. Interestingly, the ones I remember were all delivered outside traditional church services.)

In short, I felt like the little boy who was in the foyer of the church building, looking at a large plaque that hung on the wall. The names of thirty men were printed on the plaque. Next to each name was an American flag. The boy was mesmerized. He stood for five solid minutes staring at all the names and the flags. The pastor walked into the foyer and stood next to the boy. Both of them pensively gazed at the plaque in quiet respect. Then the boy spoke and asked, "What is this, Pastor?"

The pastor replied, "These are the names of all members of our church who died in the service."

The little boy was dumbfounded. His lips began to quiver and he asked ever so reverently (but with fluid honesty), "Which service . . . the 9 a.m. or the 11 a.m.?"

To my mind, Sunday morning “church” was little more than attending a show. You clocked in, watched the show, clocked out, and then lived your individual Christian life. It was the same song, different verse, could get better, but it’s gonna get . . . *the same*. Or to quote Robert Plant, “the song remains the same” . . . for the last 500 years.

What I saw in the New Testament, and what I experienced during my college years when I first touched organic church life, flew in the face of that.

An Unforgettable Spiritual Experience

In all the experiences I had in the charismatic movement (and some of them were quite dramatic), there was some part of me deep within that was starving to death. I dipped from the well of charismatic Christianity until it went dry. I later came to summarize my experience in the movement as “outer garment Christianity.” In my experience at least, most of what I encountered dealt with outward power. But it lacked those intangible spiritual realities that were necessary to nourish the inner man.

Consequently, the third reason had to do with how ill-equipped the traditional church was in delivering those who were suffering from spiritual oppression. In those days, myself and another young man made ourselves available to God 24/7. I recall receiving phone calls at 1:00 and 2:00 a.m. from people who were in dire straits. We were in our early twenties, so we didn’t know a great deal. But our faith exceeded our knowledge. We would pray for anything that moved. That would include your dog if you wanted us to!

Our reputations for ministering to those in need quickly spread among our peers. And that’s how I met my first demon. Let me tell you the story.

His name was Derick. He was a young African American man, probably twenty-two or twenty-three years old. He had a small frame, standing around five-foot six inches. When in his right mind, he had a pleasant personality. He was, however, *authentically* demon possessed. I’ll save the high drama, but I’ll try to give you the flavor of what it was like being around him. My memories are quite vivid.

He would be coherent at one point. And then, suddenly, he would begin “manifesting.” This is the term we used to describe those episodes when the alien entities living inside him seized control.

It looked something like this: His eyes would turn glassy, his voice would become guttural, and other personalities would begin speaking through him. It was profoundly eerie. Sometimes he would shriek and scream. Other times he would exhibit clairvoyance (knowing things outside natural means).

Even more disturbing, he would sometimes mimic the genuine gifts of the Holy Spirit. He would speak in tongues for example; but these were no ordinary tongues. They were demonic utterances. If you heard them, they would send chill bumps down your spine.

So Derick was brought to us. I had never witnessed anything like it in-all-my-natural-born-put-together! We immediately contacted the Pentecostal church that we were attending.

Here's what we told the church secretary: "We know a young man, and we believe he's demon-possessed. We are in our twenties, and we are inexperienced at casting out demons. Can pastor Fielding or assistant pastor Melvin help him?" (yes, I've changed the pastors' names).

Here's what we were told. "You need to get him psychiatric care." Our answer: "He's been to a psychiatrist, but it's not solved the problem. We are convinced that the problem is spiritual and not physical or mental."

The answer: "I'm sorry, we can't help him."

We were stunned.

This was one of the largest and most famous Pentecostal churches in the state of Florida. To our minds, the answer we received was unacceptable. Especially given the fact that this church *claimed* to believe in the supernatural.

So we began calling all the charismatic/Pentecostal churches in our city. Now this may shock you, but we received the same answer from virtually every one of them. Here's what it was:

"Is this man a member of our church?"

Our answer: "No, he's not. But if someone from your church can set him free, we will join your church. We're in our twenties, and we want to learn how to help people like this. So if someone in your church can minister healing and deliverance to him, you will have at least two new members."

The response: "I'm sorry, but if he's not a member of our church, we cannot help him."

If you're amazed, so were we.

There was only one church who gave us a different answer. I remember the conversation quite well. The secretary gave me the phone number of someone on the pastoral staff who I was told was very experienced in dealing with spiritually tormented people. We'll call him Ed.

I spoke with Ed at length about the situation. When I hung up the phone, I was hopeful. He sounded both knowledgeable about demon possession and confident that Derick would be made whole. He asked me to bring him to the next Sunday evening service.

So we did. I was so excited, thinking to myself, "Derick will be delivered, and we're going to learn how to cast out demons. Hot dog!"

When the service ended and everyone left, Ed asked us to bring Derick toward the front stage. So we did. Ed walked over to Derick, looked at him, put his hand on his head, and yelled something that sounded like, "El Shundai." Derick fell to the ground. (I'm quite certain that Ed pushed him to the floor.) My friend and I looked at each other quizzically.

Ed looked at us and said, "That's it. It's done."

When we pulled Derick up to his feet, we noticed that he still had that classic glassy-eyed look.

"He looks the same," we said.

Ed matter-of-factly replied: "You just have to believe."

Well, we didn't believe that Ed's prayer (or whatever it was) had delivered Derick. We felt that Ed presumed too much. Unfortunately, we turned out to be right. Shortly afterward, Derick began "manifesting" again.

The sad but sober truth is that no one in the traditional church would or could help us. All the churches and so called experts in our city seemed ill-equipped to handle a genuine case of demon possession. Consequently, we concluded that if Derick was going to be delivered, it was upon us to minister the Lord's healing to him. But there was a problem. We had no experience, and precious little knowledge.

What ended up happening, however, was the summary witness to me that the Lord Jesus Christ does not need a clergy or a professional ministry to manifest His power and to show principalities and powers that He is still Lord.

We set up an evening meeting with Derick in one of our homes. We called all our Christian friends, told them what was happening, and asked them to pray. As I recall, some of us fasted a day or two beforehand. There were two brothers, myself, and Derick. Of their own accord, the Christian sisters we knew stayed home and prayed.

The date was July 18, 1987. I remember opening up the New Testament to Mark 16:17. Our prayer was both innocent and simple. Perhaps naive even: “Lord, we have no idea what we’re doing, but you said, ‘These signs shall follow them that believe. They shall cast out demons in my name.’ Lord, we believe.”

In effect, we were setting out to “prove” the Lord and His Word.

In the beginning, Derick was in a normal state of mind. Nothing unusual was happening. So we started to engage him by praying for him. Immediately he started manifesting. This launched us into a four hour tug-of-war with unseen powers. When it ended, I had never been so drained in my life.

I’ll give you a few snapshots of that evening. The memories are burned into the circuitry of my brain.

Not having any clue what we were doing, we would repeat things that Jesus said to demons in the Gospels, such as: “What’s your name?” To my surprise, the demons responded and began telling us their names. As I recall, Derick was possessed by six or seven spirits. I can only remember one of their names, however. It was “Gunge.”

We would ask other questions like, “How did you get inside of him.” They answered by listing a battery of gross sins that Derick had committed. The sorts of things that Paul told God’s people never to talk about (Ephesians 5:12).

My most vivid memory was when we began invoking the name of Jesus. The reaction was violent. The demons would scream out, “Don’t say that! No, don’t say that! He belongs to us. You have no right to do this. He’s ours. We live here. Don’t say that! Shut up!”

That only provoked us to declare, “We adjure you by the blood of Jesus Christ and by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, come out of him” . . . and the spirits inside Derick would scream and yell all the more. I kept thinking to myself, “Oh, my goodness, it’s real. This stuff is real!”

They would also repeatedly say to us, “You’re afraid of us.” And we would reply, “No we’re not. We have authority over you.”

It was like watching a movie. I kid you not.

Another young man, a friend of ours, walked into the room late while Derick was “manifesting” at full force. When he walked into the house and saw and heard what was taking place, his face turned ashen. The whole event scared the liver out of him. (Looking back, I have no idea why I wasn’t scared.) The demons in Derick had just finished telling us how afraid we were of them; but when our friend walked in the room, Derick looked straight at him and said “he’s afraid.” Our friend was so stunned that he almost turned into a pillar of salt.

It was a chilling moment.

Four hours into this spiritual tug-of-war, Derick began vomiting. I’ve never seen anything like it. It looked like ectoplasm from the movie *Ghost Busters*. It was a putrid green color. One of the brothers ran to grab whatever he could to catch the vomit. It was an old brown box.

Derick was totally delivered. Jesus Christ had shown Himself to be alive and well—and still mighty over demonic powers. And He exercised that might through inexperienced, non-professional, poor, ignorant “laymen” in their early twenties!

It was a sobering experience for me to say the least, but the drama taught me a great deal. Before my very eyes, I had witnessed a real-life encounter where Christ’s resurrection power was displayed and found triumphant. As I stepped back from that experience, I discovered that God used us without the help (or hindrance) of the traditional church. This made a deep impression on me to say the least. It was an electric night, indeed.

I define faith as trusting in God when the odds don’t appear in your favor. People of faith cling to God’s promise, God’s love, and His benevolent character despite what the odds are against them. And they expect Him to act in accordance with each in the face of those odds.

I had believed in the Lord before this event. But when I saw firsthand the invisible powers of God’s enemy being overcome by an invisible Lord, my faith was raised to a new level. Fresh meaning was poured into Paul’s words, “We move from faith to faith” (Romans 1:17.)

I lived in the afterglow of that experience for months.

Neglecting the Poor to Maintain and Enhance the Building

The fourth thing that led me out the traditional church is rather sad. As I said, I belonged to one of the largest Pentecostal churches in the State of Florida. It was incredibly wealthy. I was good friends with a family who attended there. They were very poor.

I have a vivid memory of sitting in my friend's living room with his wife and four children. We all sat in the dark with a flashlight and some candles. The reason? They couldn't meet their electric bill that month so the power was turned off. That wealthy church (the one we all belonged to) didn't give this man a red cent. At the time, I thought that was outrageous. Funny thing . . . I still do.

At the same time that this episode occurred, this wealthy church was raising money to extend the balcony of the church building.

For me, this sad event was the nail in the coffin. I left the traditional church shortly afterward, and I've never returned.

To put all four reasons into a sentence: I had been captured by a higher vision. I envisioned the church to be something far beyond what I had experienced in my thirteen years of traditional Christianity. And that vision sent me on a 20-year odyssey.

And the clock is still ticking.

It's important to note that I personally have no issue with the institutional church. While I don't believe it's compatible with the teachings of Jesus or the apostles, I believe God still uses it to save souls and to heal people. As George Barna and I wrote in *Pagan Christianity?*, we owe our salvation and our baptism to the institutional church.

However, we . . . like millions of other Christians . . . simply couldn't abide it any longer. For we've found something (that for us is) far better on the other side.