

“WORSHIP IN THE EARLY CHURCH”

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(This study was written in response to a letter I received)

The first page of this material is a letter I wrote to a friend regarding Frank Viola & George Barna's book titled "PAGAN CHRISTIANITY?" The book was a good read – in part – but as I state below, I felt it also ventured into territory that wasn't fully justified. If you've got the time to read the book, go for it; if not you're welcome to peruse my notes on the issues that were the most troubling to me. Viola & Barna take a very strong position against the "Institutional Church" (vs. House Church), and many of their positions on "Worship" seem to me to be unmerited. It troubles me when writers disparage the development of the church in all its forms, especially without clear biblical support. When your criticisms seem steeped in “opinion” rather than “indisputable facts,” for me you have crossed the line. Here is what I wrote to my friend:

Finished the book you sent me... it was a good read... provocative at times... and even a little "out of the box" at other times. Most of this material has been rehashed over and over again over the years, but I felt the need to do a little research and respond back. The "title" of the book is problematic – PAGAN CHRISTIANITY? — a title like that is obviously provocative, and will probably help sell books, but it is also dangerous and could do some damage to those who are undiscerning. Though most of the material in the book has a reasonable degree of credibility to it, some of it does not. There's an old maxim I like to use – "There is enough information out there in the world to support your ignorance on any subject." I think it applies "in part" to what Viola and Barna have written.

One needs to be very careful about making "expository statements" on things that are really not that clear... they didn't seem to hesitate in making them... and for that reason I am troubled. Their attack on the "Institutional Church" is unmerited... as is some of their content on "Worship" in the early church. I have tried to address these issues in the following study I have put together (starting on the next page). I don't wish to "debate" these issues... I simply want to present some relevant information on these subjects that Viola & Barna seem to have ignored.

You need to know that "hundreds" of great scholars have gone down this road before... and their level of scholarship is vastly superior to that of Viola and Barna. Though Barna has in the past "taught" at Talbot Seminary as an adjunct professor, his area of expertise is clearly not "the Bible" – nor is Viola's – both of them seem to “misinterpret Scripture” on a number of occasions. Barna's a wonderful guy... but seems to like the "sensational" aspects of things... he also seems quick to draw conclusions without working through the entire issue. There is an "upside" and a "downside" to almost every issue... when you only entertain one side of an argument, your "bias" begins to rule... and that's where things get muddled.

Regarding the "House Church" issue... there are no "hard numbers" on exactly how many House Churches there are in America, but the best scholars seem to think there are between 15,000 and 20,000. The growth of house churches in the US really started to take off in the 70s, and has continued to this day. Most churches start as "House Churches." What I have written in no way attacks the house church – it is not only a valid biblical model, it is a very successful one, and it has been used in thousands of places all over the world. It should be noted that Viola and Barna are out-

spoken “House Church” proponents – that is “their agenda.” Furthermore, after reading their book, it is pretty apparent that Viola to a greater degree, and Barna to a lesser degree, are “somewhat Charismatic” in their theological understanding; as such, they seem to struggle with a strong hermeneutic in matters of interpretive analysis. There is plenty of good stuff to be said regarding the House Church without having to skew what Scripture says. Remember, our “final line of authority is Scripture,” and that’s one place we don’t want to err... and “context” is probably the paramount hermeneutic when it comes to interpretation; but even on that score, you have to do very careful research.

Nuff said. Enjoy what I have written... and read the cross references I have listed.

In the good yoke, Don

----- Following is my study on Worship in the Early Church -----

WORSHIP IN THE EARLY CHURCH

The most basic “acts of worship” in the early church were the reading and exposition of Scripture, prayer, the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, and the observance of the sacraments; all of these were derived from the example and command of Jesus Himself. With the exception of the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, however, Jesus did not originate these practices – they were derived from the Synagogue worship of the Jews. Since the first Christian community in Jerusalem was almost exclusively *Jewish*, it accepted the Old Testament as the Word of God. The early Christians continued celebrating in the *Synagogue* alongside the Jews on the Sabbath for several years in some places. What distinguished the early Christians from their Jewish counterpart was their conviction that Jesus was the promised Messiah and that salvation was found only in Him; as such, they continued to worship in a basically Jewish fashion but added the Lord’s Supper (cf. Acts 2:42, 46) and prayers in the name of Jesus (cf. Acts 4:24-30). Although the Christians *gathered daily* for prayer, fellowship, preaching, and teaching (cf. Acts 2:46; 5:42), the “chief day” for services of worship in the church was changed from the Jewish Sabbath to the first day of the week almost from the beginning, because it was the day of resurrection.

Historically, the “Synagogue” likely dates back to the 6th century BC, during the Babylonian Exile; it became central to Jewish religious life after their Temple was destroyed. Without a Temple, the Jews gathered in local “*meeting houses*” (synagogues) for public worship – though sacrifice was denied them, prayer in common was not. The longer their exile from the national altar of sacrifice, the greater became their need for “houses of prayer” – this need was met by building an ever-increasing number of synagogues throughout the land of exile. Upon returning from captivity in Babylon, this national system of synagogue worship was brought back with them to Jerusalem. James, the blood brother of Jesus, says: “For Moses from ancient generations has in *every city* those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath” (cf. Acts 15:21). The word “synagogue” itself literally means a “*meeting*,” or “*assembly*.” The Synagogue replaced Jewish “Temple ritual sacrifice” with Torah readings, prayer and teaching. The primary purpose of the synagogue is as a “house of prayer” (cf. Is 56:7; Mt 21:13); group prayer is extremely important in Judaism. Another primary functions is as a “house of study” – it is the place where Jewish children receive their religious education, and where adults study the sacred Hebrew texts that are housed in the synagogue. Finally, like the houses of worship of most faiths, the synagogue functions as a “social gathering place,” a town hall for community events and a headquarters for social and charity work. So synagogues generally have a large hall for prayer (main sanctuary), and smaller

rooms for study, and frequently a social hall and offices. Many modern-day synagogues here in the west also include additional facilities such as a catering hall, a kosher kitchen, religious school, library, day care center, and a smaller chapel for daily services.

From the outset of Christianity the synagogue was in full power of its various functions. The New Testament refers to it fifty-five times. Our Lord taught in the synagogues of Nazareth and Capernaum; Paul preached in the synagogues of Damascus, Salamis of Cyprus, Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, and Ephesus. According to the Babylonian Talmud, at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, there were 394 synagogues in the city itself; according to the Jerusalem Talmud there were 480 synagogues. It should be noted: besides synagogues for the Palestinian Jews, each group of Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem also had its own synagogue – the synagogue of the Alexandrian Jews is mentioned in Acts (cf. 6:1, 9; 9:29). Both the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmud make mention of numerous Galilean synagogues, which were centers of rabbinical literary, and religious and political influence. The first century philosopher and writer, Philo of Alexandria, expressly states that the large Jewish population of Alexandria had many synagogues in various quarters of the city, as well as several in Rome – the seventy scholars who translated the *Hebrew Scriptures* (Old Testament) into Greek all lived in Alexandria; this translation was referred to as the *Septuagint* (Latin for “seventy”). The city of Alexandria was founded by Alexander the Great in 332 BC, and was situated on the coast of North Africa near the Nile River; it quickly grew to become the largest city in the Mediterranean basin, and was the greatest center of both Hellenistic and Jewish culture. It also became the greatest Roman provincial capital. Alexandria was home to a world renowned museum and university, and two royal Greek libraries that contained over 700,000 scrolls; hence, it attracted scholars from all over the world. Ultimately, Alexandria also became a center of Christian learning that rivaled Rome and Constantinople, and was the seat of a patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church. In the region of Galilee, there are also a number of ancient ruins dating back to the first century, including a synagogue at Capernaum; this beautiful, colossal synagogue was probably the one in which Jesus taught (cf. Lk 7:5).

Every Jewish settlement was obliged by Talmudic law to have its “synagogue;” the members of the Jewish community were designated “*sons of the synagogue*,” and they were governed by a council called the “*Sanhedrin*” (transliterated “council”). The members of this council were twenty-three in larger towns, seven in smaller, and were called “rulers” (cf. Mt 9:18, 23; Lk 8:41) or *presbuteroi* in Greek (cf. Lk 7:3), from which we get our word “presbytery” The “rulers of the synagogue” had it in their power to punish by excommunication, scourging (thirty-nine stripes) and death (cf. Mt 10:17; 23:34; Mk 13:9; Acts 22:19; 2 Cor 11:24). Three elders made up a tribunal competent to inflict the penalty of scourging; the death penalty was inflicted by the Sanhedrin in full session of all twenty-three elders; Jesus probably referred to this (Matt 5:22). The “ruler of the synagogue” (cf. Mk 5:22, 35, 36, 38; Lk 8:49; 13:14; Acts 13:15; 18:8, 17) presided over the synagogue and its services. This presidency, however, did not prevent the “sons of the synagogue” from freely officiating. Note the freedom with which Jesus and Paul stood up to explain the Scriptures in the various synagogues of Palestine and the Diaspora.

The “liturgy” of the first-century synagogue consisted of five elements: 1) The Shema consisted of two opening blessings (from Deut 6:4-9; 11:13-21; Num 15:37-41. 2) The Prayer consisted of eighteen benedictions and petitions; after AD 70, one of these benedictions mentioned Christians – “*may the Christians and heretics perish in a moment, and may they be blotted out of the book of life*” (the reason for this is explained on the next page). 3) The Torah consisted of the reading of the Law; it was divided up into fifty-four sections for Sabbath readings. 4) The Prophets (the second part of the Hebrew Canon) were read to exemplify or drive home the lesson from the Law which immediately preceded. 5) The Scripture

Lesson – the exposition of Scripture was already an integral part of synagogal liturgy at the time of Christ (cf. Mt 4:23; Mk 1:21; 6:2). Any of the brethren might have been called upon to give the “*word of exhortation*” (cf. Acts 13:15). There was also an antiphonal chanting of one or more *Psalms*; and at the end the precentor chanted the *doxology* and called upon the people to answer “Amen,” which they did.

In Palestine, the synagogues were built “within the city.” In the Diaspora, they were generally built “outside the city gates,” either by the seaside or by a river (cf. Acts 16:13). There seems to have been no established style of synagogal architecture – until recently, they were built in whatever style was vogue in that place and at that time. The interior setting included an “Ark” that contained the sacred scrolls; and in the center of the room was a “*raised platform*” (the “*bema*”) upon which they placed a lectern. The seats nearest the Ark were reserved for those who were highest in rank, and women (at least since the Middle Ages) sat in galleries to which they enter by stairways from the outside.

Because the early Church primarily consisted of Jews, Christians saw themselves as a Jewish sect. Their worship was modeled on Jewish services and their understanding of what Jesus taught was grounded in the Hebrew Scriptures. The rapid growth of the Christian movement within Judaism caused unrest among Jewish leaders, and as a result they threatened and persecuted the followers of Christ. Because of the struggles and tensions that existed within first-century Judaism, the Christian community had to learn not only how they differed from Judaism, but also what they had in common with it. No matter what culture they found themselves in they had to address these and other questions. During the first century, the Jews were in a volatile political situation because they were involved in periodic outbreaks of insurrection against Rome. In AD 66, an unprecedented Jewish rebellion took place against the Romans in Jerusalem – it resulted in one of the most savage wars in history; more than one million Jews were killed or sold into slavery, and the city was destroyed. Since a significant part of the early Church was Jewish, this war of national liberation presented a serious problem to those who were Christians as well. As such, Jewish Christians were caught between the demands of national identity and the words of the gospel. Full of apocalyptic expectation and reminded of Jesus’ teachings about the last days, many Jewish Christians fled the city. This act made them *traitors* in the eyes of Jews.

The destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in AD 70 was an earth shattering event for the Jews and resulted in a radical shift for Jewish Christians. It was a powerful sign that the “*Kingdom*” indeed had come. The center of Jewish life was the Temple; it now no longer existed. The book of Hebrews had been written just a few years earlier to explain to the Jewish Christians that Jesus was the true High Priest, that animal sacrifices were no longer necessary, and that Christ’s sacrifice was perpetually sufficient. These facts seem obvious to us in hindsight, but they weren’t obvious to the early Jewish Christians, particularly while the Temple was still standing. In AD 90, twenty years after Jerusalem was destroyed by Rome, the *Sanhedrin* (a kind of Jewish Supreme Court) convened, and many Jews elected to rid Judaism of any trace of Christianity and condemn those Jews who had accepted Jesus as Messiah. A formal curse against Christians was added to Jewish morning prayer – “*may the Christians and heretics perish in a moment; and may they be blotted out of the book of life.*” From that point on, Christians were also prohibited from associating with Jews. Therefore, the Christian community was forced to develop an identity completely separate from Judaism, though it was obviously indebted to the Jews for its roots, its Scripture, and for its liturgical forms of worship.

When Christians were no longer allowed to worship in the Synagogues, they continued celebrating approximately the same rite as their Jewish counterparts with added Christian developments and themes. Thus their “*meeting*” strongly resembled synagogal worship – whereas the Jews read in order of

descending importance, starting with the Pentateuch... the early Christians kept the original order of the Synagogue, but as Christian Scripture became available, it was tacked on at the end. So the order of importance became reversed for Christians – they read in ascending order of importance. Hence the basic liturgical structure would probably have been something like this:

~*Old Testament Reading*
~*Chanting of Psalms*
~*New Testament Reading*
~*Chanting of Psalms*
~*Gospel Reading*
~*The Scripture Lesson*
~*Intercessory Prayers of the Faithful*

Though it is not clear what the “precise order of worship” was in the Early Church, the service was a simple one. All the early evidence, including both the New Testament & non-canonical writings, indicates that while the elements of the service had no fixed sequence, the climactic event of the weekly service on the Lord’s Day was the sacrament of the *Lord’s Supper*. One early source, the *Didache*, gives us a detailed description of how the Lord’s Supper was celebrated, including the prayers to be used, as well as other liturgical directions and usages. Fixed forms of prayer were included, but provision was made for free prayers in some places in the liturgy. Confession of sin was required before partaking of the Lord’s Supper. The *Didache* and *Justin Martyr* (middle of the second century) describe the Lord’s Supper as the *Eucharist* (Greek word for “thanksgiving”). In its fullest proper setting, the “Eucharist” was a celebration of the new Passover. By the end of the first century, the liturgical practice of the Church was to celebrate every Sunday as a “*mini-Easter*.” The Eucharist would have been celebrated early on Sunday morning, a working day in the Roman empire, and initially the duty of the bishop. But as the Church grew, this became impractical, and by the end of the first century this duty was being delegated to presbyters.

In describing a “service of worship,” Justin Martyr says, “The memoirs of the *Apostles* [the Gospels] and the writings of the *Prophets* [books of the Old Testament] were read aloud as long as time allowed.” From Justin’s writing it is clear that the churches had a definite order of service established by tradition, but the service was still very simple. In the primitive church there were gatherings in which believers who had been baptized celebrated the Lord’s Supper along with a *full scale meal*; a meal Jesus would have celebrated many times with His disciples. At a very early date, however, the meal was separated from the sacrament, as attested to by Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian – this meal was called the *agape* or *love feast*. During the early years of the Church, the standard Christian liturgical observations would have been as follows — on Saturday, you would attend *Worship*; on Sunday morning you would attend the *Eucharist* (at dawn), and you would go to work after that; and then in the evening you would attend an *Agape meal* at the house of a presbyter or perhaps the bishop. According to Augustine, the observance of the Agape meal had largely died out by the fourth century, because of disorders in its conduct.

The New Testament does not offer detailed instructions for the order and leadership of worship. However, from its pages we are able to glean some indication of what worship looked like in the church’s earliest days. The Christian assembly usually met in private homes for worship and instruction (cf. Acts 2:6; 16:40; 18:7; Philemon 1:2). In commemoration of the resurrection, the congregation assembled on the “*Lord’s Day*” (Sunday), the first day of the week (cf. Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2). Paul, in his writing to

the church in Corinth, describes two types of Christian gathering – one is the Lord's Supper (cf. 1 Cor 10:16-17; 11:20-29) or the ceremonial community meal; a second gathering was the Prophetic Assembly, which included both singing and thanksgiving in unknown languages, with interpretation (for purpose of edification), and prophecy (cf. 1 Cor 14:1-33). Perhaps these were two aspects of the same gathering. Elsewhere the New Testament suggests that Christian worship incorporated singing of hymns and psalms (Eph 5:19), prayer (1 Cor 11:4-5), vocal thanksgiving (Eph 5:20; Heb 13:15), and instruction (cf. 1 Cor 14:26; Col 3:16). The New Testament does not specify who is to officiate in worship, or to administer the Lord's Supper, although prophets clearly had a role in corporate worship (1 Cor 14:23-33). By the second century, Christian worship had developed beyond what is described in the New Testament, though it stayed centered on the celebration of the Lord's Supper and the proclamation of the Word of God.

The apostle Paul mentions revelations, speaking in tongues, and the interpretation of tongues as present within the worshiping congregation. The exercise of these special spiritual gifts (*charismata*) was strictly regulated so that the service could be carried on in “good order” and the believers edified (cf. 1 Cor 14:40). Thus, the free expression of the Spirit went hand in hand with liturgical restrictiveness in the same service. This free expression of the Spirit in tongues and prophecy seems to have died out very early, in all probability concurrent with the recognition of the final authority of the writings of the apostles as canonical. As early as the time of Justin Martyr (middle of second century), prophesying, speaking in tongues, and interpretation of tongues had disappeared. What remained was a service of two divisions – the first part being an adaptation and expansion of the synagogue service of praise, prayer, and instruction, and the second the observance of the Lord's Supper. At this point, it seems appropriate to briefly look at the subject of “literacy” in the Greco-Roman world, because it is critical to the matter of the preaching and teaching of God's Word — that material is presented in a supplemental study on the next page.

The “gift of teaching” is clearly related to but carefully distinguished from the “gift of prophecy” (cf. 1 Cor 12:28-29; Rom 12:7); the teacher “explained” what the prophet proclaimed – he reduced it to statements of doctrine, and applied it to the situation in which the church lived and witnessed. The teacher would offer systematic instruction (cf. 2 Tim 2:2) to the local churches. In his letter to the Ephesians Paul adds the idea of “pastor” to that of teacher, because no one is able to communicate effectively (*teach*) without loving those who are being instructed (*pastor*). Likewise, to be an effective pastor, one must be a teacher. The importance on the “**ministry of the Word**” was clear from the earliest days of the Church; the twelve disciples summoned the congregation and said to them, “*It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables... we need to devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word*” (cf. Acts 6:2-4). The apostles knew their priority was praying, preaching, teaching, and studying the Word; they knew that they could not let “other things” distract them from these duties. The problem in many churches today, is their “chief shepherds” have neglected their primary duties. Paul clearly states that pastors are given to the church “*for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ*” (cf. Eph 4:12) – their calling is to mature the saints so they can “do the work of ministry;” by neglecting their calling they doom their congregations to languish in spiritual infancy. Programs are no substitute for the power of God and His Word. By the way, prayer and the ministry of the Word are inseparably linked – *prayer must permeate a pastor's sermon preparation*; the man of God must also pray that he would be a pure channel through which God's truth can flow to his congregation (cf. Rom 1:9-10; 1 Cor 9:16-17, 26-27; Eph 1:16; Phil 1:3-4; Col 1:9; Acts 20:18-21).

LITERACY IN THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD

According to most historians, very few inhabitants of the Greco-Roman world were able to read even the simplest documents, and few could write as much as their own name. In that respect, Roman antiquity conforms to our expectations about the world in general before mass education, the printing press, the industrial revolution, and all the paraphernalia of modern, western civilization. Because there is no “hard evidence,” however, as to the percentage of individuals who were literate in the Roman world, we must depend upon the collective writings of that era for an answer. Most scholars today believe the literacy rate of the Roman population around the time of Augustus, to have been between 10-20 percent of the entire population; the most liberal scholars believe that number could have been as many as 33 percent. Because very few people possessed the skill of writing, there was a group of people in the New Testament who were called “*scribes*” – so few people could write that a trained professional subgroup was required to handle the writing needs of the whole community. Here are some important points to consider —

- ~Modern universal literacy is associated with the Industrial Revolution.
- ~Political despots had reason to fear a literate populace.
- ~Later, the Roman Catholic Church feared a literate populace.
- ~Only the wealthy and the powerful were insured a good education.
- ~Some wealthy slave-masters had their “slaves” educated to make their own ventures more profitable.
- ~The Greek philosopher Seneca tells of a man who purchased numerous literate slaves, to make others think he was a learned man – one of his slaves knew “Homer” by heart.
- ~There were only a “few libraries” in the ancient Roman world, and few had access to them.
- ~Shepherds, slaves and agricultural workers in ancient literature were assumed to be illiterate.
- ~Memorization was one of the most popular “learning methodologies” of the ancient world.
- ~Students didn’t have pencils, pens and paper upon which to “take notes,” like we do today.
- ~Students didn’t have access to “books” like we do today; and they didn’t take them home.
- ~People would memorize scores of psalms, hymns, songs, poetry, and chapters of the Bible, etc; as such, their minds were a great resource of knowledge for them; they had good memories.
- ~Teachers and clergy were highly esteemed in the ancient world because they were literate; as such, most parishioners were illiterate and unable to read, study or teach.
- ~Only large churches had complete copies of the entire Bible, and generally only clergy read them.
- ~Until the advent of the Printing Press in the 15th century, books were fairly rare and costly.
- ~The literacy rate actually declined during the Dark Ages; large numbers were “barbarians.”

The preaching and teaching of the Word is a high and holy calling, to reduce it to mere “extemporaneous ministry” is doing a serious disservice to the flock. Let’s just look for a moment at the emphasis Paul places on the “**study of the Word**” in his letters to Timothy. He urges Timothy to “instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines” (1 Tim 1:3). He tells Timothy, “I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man” (1 Tim 2:12). He then writes, “If any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do – he must be above reproach, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, uncontentious, free from the love of money, not a new convert, and able to teach” (1 Tim 3:1-3). He goes on to say that the Church is “the pillar and support of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15). He enjoins Timothy to “teach these things” (everything he had addressed in his letters) to the congregation (1 Tim 4:11). He told Timothy to “give attention to the public *reading of Scripture*, to exhortation and teaching, and not neglect the spiritual gift he had received through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by

the presbytery” (1 Tim 4:13-14)... “pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things” (1 Tim 4:15-16). He goes on to say, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who ‘work hard’ at preaching and teaching. . . the laborer is worthy of his wages” (1 Tim 5:17-18). Paul writes, “Do not lay hands upon anyone too hastily and thus share responsibility for their sins; keep yourself free from sin” (1 Tim 5:22). “Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you” (1 Tim 6:20). Scripture offers this sober reminder to teachers: “Let not many of you be ‘teachers’ because you are going to incur a stricter judgment!” (cf. Jam 3:1). Thus, to encourage “everyone” in a worship service to stand up and preach or teach without serious preparation is really dangerous, yet that, at least in part, is what Frank Viola and George Barna seem to imply in their book “*Pagan Christianity?*”

In their book “Pagan Christianity?” Viola and Barna extrapolate from 1 Corinth 14:26-33, that worship throughout the early church was sporadic, extemporaneous and without rhetorical structure, and most often dialogical rather than monological. Since they emphatically hold this position, I thought it was important to examine this passage more carefully. The primary emphasis of verses 26-40 is this — due to the abuses that had entered the church in connection with the “*gift of tongues*,” it was necessary for the Spirit of God to set forth certain regulations to control the use of this gift (cf. vv. 26-28). What happened when the Corinthian church came together to worship is that their meetings, apparently, were very informal and free – there was liberty for the Spirit of God to use the various gifts which He had given to the church. Paul gives tacit approval to this “*open meeting*” where there was liberty for the Spirit of God to speak through different individuals. But having stated this, he sets forth the first control in the exercise of these gifts – everything must be done with a view to “*edification*,” that is, in order to be acceptable, ministry must have the effect of “building up the people of God;” apparently this was contrary to the confused way in which the Corinthian believers were doing things. Whether they had a psalm, a teaching, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation, they all wanted to participate at the same time. They were not interested in serving, or learning, or edifying, but only in self-expression and self-glory. Everyone vied for attention and preeminence. By the way, a *psalm* referred to reading, or perhaps singing one of the Old Testament psalms; a *teaching* probably indicates a favorite doctrine or pet subject that was presented and expounded; another member may have claimed he had received a *new revelation* from God; others may have spoken in a *tongue*, true or counterfeited, and still others would have given an *interpretation*. Except for the possibility of counterfeited tongues, all of those things were good and legitimate parts of worship. The problem was that they were all done at the same time. No one was left to listen, except for the few bewildered visitors, who no doubt would have thought the whole group was crazy (1 Cor 14:23). Furthermore, no one could benefit from such bedlam. In light of such confusion and disorder, Paul gives a clear command to “*let all things be done for edification*” (v. 26); that is, for the spiritual growth and maturing of believers.

Paul goes on to say that in any one meeting no more than “two or three” may speak in tongues; that is, there was to be no such thing as a meeting where a *multitude of people* would arise to show their proficiency in foreign languages. Next, all speaking should be done “*in turn*,” not at the same time (v. 27). And last, no one was to speak in tongues unless an “*interpreter*” was present (v. 27); obviously, if one was to speak in a foreign language, he first had to determine that there was someone present to interpret what he was about to say. If there was no interpreter, he was to keep silent (v. 28). Rules for governing the prophetic gift are set forth in verses 29-33 – again, only two or three were to *prophesy*, and the others were to pass judgment (v. 29). The important thing in all such speaking is that everyone might learn and be exhorted (v. 31). Paul goes on to say that in a meeting where confusion and disorder exists, you can be sure that the Spirit of God is not in control (v. 33). The primary responsibility of Christian leaders and fellow-believers to one another is that they “*build each other up*” (cf. Eph 4:11-12; 1 Th 5:11; Rom 15:2-3).

And believers are built up by only one thing – *the Word of God* – that is the tool with which all spiritual building is done (cf. Rom 10:17; Eph 4:11-12; 2 Tim 3:16-17; 1 Pet 2:2). In this First Corinthians passage, Paul is simply trying to “restore order” by saying, “IF one speaks in a tongue... or IF one has an interpretation... or IF one has a prophecy... or IF one has a revelation, let them be exercised ONE AT A TIME that all may learn and be exhorted” (vv. 27-31). Paul, here, is not describing the *normal worship service* of the early church as some charismatic churches contend. Though the “open meeting” in many first-century churches was informal and free for the Spirit of God to use the various “gifts” that were in operation at that time – but are no longer in operation as previously stated – it was important that “all speaking” by members of the body be done in “*orderly fashion*,” which was the responsibility of the bishop or pastor; obviously the leadership of the Corinthian church was not exercising the kind of control it needed to. The inference by Viola and Barna in their book “*Pagan Christianity?*” is that “*everyone*” had something to say in the typical first-century worship service is simply without merit – by definition, time constraints and the arguments presented above preclude “everyone” from speaking. It should be noted, when Scripture says “everyone” or “all” were doing a particular thing, it is a figure of speech meaning “*relatively speaking*,” rather than implying something “*absolutely*” (cf. Mt 8:34; Mk 1:33; Lk 9:43; 7:53; 13:17; Acts 2:43; 10:22; 13:44; 1 Cor 9:25; Phil 1:13). And one further note: when developing a theology of worship, it is critically important that one consider *everything* the Scriptures teach on that subject, and not just build a theology off of one particular passage. Believers frequently err in this regard when they form a theology of prayer; they find a few passages that say what they like, and then they construct their theology based on those passages; all the while disregarding what “other passages” teach on the matter of prayer.

Let’s look at what Paul writes concerning the teaching of the Word in his second letter to Timothy.

Timothy, “kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands” (2 Tim 1:6)... “Guard the treasure which has been entrusted to you” (2 Tim 1:14). Timothy, “the things which you have heard from me, these entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim 2:2). “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). “The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition” (2 Tim 2:24-25). “In the last days difficult times will come, for men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, unloving, haters of good, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God; holding to a form of godliness... avoid men such as these... they are always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim 3:1-7). “You, Timothy, continue in the things you have learned... knowing that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation... all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:14-17). Timothy, “I solemnly urge you to... preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth” (2 Tim 4:1-4). “Be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry” (2 Tim 4:5).

Preaching & Teaching are “hard work,” and demand a tremendous amount of preparation time.

If the vast majority of believers in the New Testament church were *illiterate*, it is highly unlikely that a wise overseer would have let “just anyone stand up and teach.” It is one thing to “give witness to something you have experienced” – every believer can share his testimony, and perhaps that was frequently done in their worship services – but it is quite another to study the Word and rightly explain it

enthusiastically and in the power of the Holy Spirit. If the typical “*House Church*” back in the first century had 30-40 attendees, that would probably have been the norm – due to the fact more than half of them would have been children and women, there would probably have only been a dozen men in attendance at the most. How many of them would have been spiritually qualified to “teach” (remember, they would also need to have been literate and able to spend time doing serious study)? Would there have been “five men” who were literate? three? All of those who were literate could have led in the reading of Scripture, and maybe the vast majority of them could have led in the singing of psalms and hymns, but it is highly unlikely that very many of them could have done the teaching. True, nearly all of them would have been Jewish and versed in Old Testament Scripture, but not too many of them would have been literate and truly knowledgeable in the teachings of Christ and the apostles. Remember, women were forbidden to speak in the assembly. By the way, most scholars believe there are somewhere between 15,000 and 20,000 House Churches in the United States today, and about 2,000 in Canada. It is quite common for “start-up churches” to begin in a home, and after outgrowing it to then move to a larger facility.

Let me address the issue of the “typical first-century church.” The early church worshiped in two different forums – they worshiped in *synagogues* and they worshiped in *homes* – no one disputes that. The “*small group concept*” has always been at the heart of the genuinely, growing, vibrant Christian community. And it still is to this day. Let’s use Grace Community Church here in Arizona as an example – in its heyday, Grace ran about 5,500 on Sunday mornings, and about 3,500 of those participated in something we called “*Sunday School*.” We had Sunday School classes for all ages – children, youth and adults – these classes ran anywhere from 10 people to about 250 people in size (our Career Life Class was the largest). In addition to this, we had a number of other small group ministries – discipleship groups, prayer groups, Bible study groups, home groups, cell groups, music ministry groups, outreach groups, various other ministry groups. We had a number of “small group ministries” in our Career Life Class (with a total of around 500 people altogether) – and most of them were student led. As I reflect back on the “overall ministry team” we had at Grace, there were approximately 1,800 who “served” in some official capacity; and of that amount 250 served in some kind of “teaching capacity” (that, of course, includes teachers at all grade levels, and those in all of our small group ministries). It has always been obvious to the genuine Christian world at large that “*small groups*” are vital to the spiritual growth and spiritual well-being of the believer. Without them, the church would either languish or die. It should be apparent from the foregoing that I am not defending churches that have abrogated their God-ordained responsibilities, and have misguided and abused their parishioners.

However, to disparage all of the “various developments” of the church throughout the centuries is simply without merit – be it social gatherings, libraries, mission projects, community centers, kids clubs, youth ministries, the Sunday School, singles ministries, women’s ministries, men’s ministries, sports programs, music ministries, Bible classes, Bible colleges, Seminaries, media ministries, mission outreaches, evangelistic crusades, camps and retreats, food centers, seminars and conferences, instrumentation, music writing, research centers, linguistic studies, academic institutions, books, magazines, radio and television, as well as the development of hospitals, sanitariums, orphanages, Bible translation, the development of charitable organizations, the development of democracies, the liberation of slaves and women, the Reformation, and on and on and on – all of these and scores of other ministries have been developed and used by God to impact our world for Christ, and to build up the body of Christ. Were they all of equal value? Probably not. But, Lord willing, they were all Spirit directed ministries, created with the goal of reaching the world for Christ and making ministry even more effective. Unless one can demonstrate that these things, in and of themselves, were “*inherently evil*,” then we should stop

this negative rhetoric and continue to develop strategies, programs, processes, ministries & technologies to build God's Kingdom. Obviously "nothing" humanity touches is absolutely pure and without stain – that's a given – but let's not have a "critical spirit" and just focus on the negatives.

I love the words of the apostle Paul: *"Though some even proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition and from impure motives... Christ is proclaimed, and in this I rejoice!"* (cf. Phil 1:17-18). To make a case for the "house church" – which is totally valid – and then decry "every ministry" that had not yet been fully developed by the first-century church is mindless. Rather than thanking God for these developments – many of which were no doubt God-inspired, and through which hundreds of millions have come to Christ – why are we criticizing them? We should neither criticize the *house church* nor the *institutional church*... unless they violate the spiritual principles of ministry that are outlined in Scripture. As the Church grew in numbers, territory, and languages, it developed a form of organization and government. And as it grew in its understanding of the truth, it issued carefully worded statements of beliefs. Though every "workman" in God's vineyard wasn't and isn't necessarily worth his weight in salt – many of them were and are... many of them gave their very lives for the sake of the gospel, working to the point of death (cf. Phil 2:25-30). By the way, over the past two millennia more than 43 million Christians have been martyred for their faith. This work we are about is a very demanding work – it isn't for wimps! (cf. 2 Tim 2:3-10; 4:5-8; Titus 1:5-9).

Is the workman worthy of being paid a wage? Let's let the Scriptures address that issue (cf. 1 Cor 9: 9-18; 1 Tim 5:17-18; 2 Tim 3:6). By the way, I never made much money in ministry – some may have, but I didn't. Those who have abused the church coffers will one day have to "give an account" – let's let God be the judge of that. Obviously, if I was into "making money" I would never have gone into the ministry (I have a BS in Finance); financially speaking, I have very few assets, and I'm not complaining about my financial lot in life. It is what it is. My prayer has always been the prayer of Agur in Proverbs 30 – "Lord, may I not be too rich that I deny You... too poor that I steal" (cf. Prov 30:8-9). Like any man, I can have too much or too little – and like any man, I am easily overcome in weakness (cf. 2 Cor 12:9-10). I find it hypocritical, however, that some would criticize hard working pastors because they receive a modest salary, when they themselves write books and speak at conferences, and teach in seminaries by the way! and are well-paid by the Christian community for their work! How can Barna claim seminaries are pagan in origin, and denounce them, and then teach in them! and take a stipend for it! That smacks of hypocrisy! Obviously they need to practice what they preach. It should also be noted that they are "teaching" through their books – all of us who write are – as such, we will incur a stricter judgment (cf. Jam 3:1).

Let's consider the "training" that Paul went through to prepare himself for his apostolic duties. God picked a man – just as He did Moses – who was "highly educated!" Why didn't God just pick a dumb? He could have! But He didn't! God chose a man with a great education and a great mind! The apostle Paul was a Roman citizen, thus placing him among the aristocracy of any provincial town; he was a Hebrew of Hebrews, and a Pharisee of renown; and he studied under Gamaliel, a very highly esteemed and distinguished teacher of the law in the first century (Acts 22:3). Initially after coming to Christ on the road to Damascus, he spent three years in Arabia & Damascus, in seclusion & meditation, before acquainting himself with Peter and James (the brother of Jesus) in Jerusalem (cf. Gal 1:15-19). Obviously, Paul spent considerable time studying the Scriptures to see where he had erred, and during those years developed his theology of the gospel of Christ and the Christian faith. Remember, he had already been well-steeped in the teachings of the Old Testament. After his visit with Peter and James, he spent time ministering in the regions of Syria and Cilicia – so much so that the churches of Judea did

not know him personally. Finally, fourteen years later he returned to Jerusalem, together with Barnabas and Titus (a Gentile converted through Paul's ministry – cf. Gal 2:1-2). While there, Paul communicated to the disciples the gospel he had received from the Lord and had preached among the Gentiles. Paul was concerned that the “leaders” of the Jerusalem church be fully convinced of the genuineness of his gospel; if they had any questions, he wanted to answer them at the outset. In that way he would then be able to go forth with the message of the gospel throughout the Gentile world with the full support of all the other apostles. Paul wisely went before the disciples to make sure they were “unified in their message,” and to make sure there was “no division” among the saints. If Paul was that “careful” with his message, surely all of us should show the same level of diligence in constructing the messages we preach and teach. Furthermore, Paul frequently spent “long periods of time” in certain cities to make sure the believing community in those cities was well-grounded in the faith. The Book of Acts tells us that he spent “two full years” preaching and teaching in Ephesus (Acts 28:30-31); though he probably “trained others to preach” and helped develop numerous “house churches” in that city, it is pretty clear that he also preached and taught numerous times himself each week.

The New Testament does not prescribe a particular pattern or form for church government, but it does provide us with some *general principles* for governing a church; therefore we can assume that God intended for there to be a lot of *organizational freedom* for a variety of operations and ministries. There are three titles that have been customarily used by churches to identify their leaders – elders, bishops (or overseers), and pastors. The term *elder* implies that the leader is not a novice; this title originated in the synagogue; the term *bishop* (overseer) describes one who possesses authority and gives oversight; while the term *pastor* is derived from the word “shepherd.” In the New Testament the words *elder* and *bishop* are used interchangeably, and their office or position is also described by the word *pastor*. The *pastor-bishop-elder* is responsible to the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ. The term *deacon* in the New Testament was used of individuals who assisted the bishop or pastor in his duties. Historically, three basic forms of church government have been used over the centuries:

1. **Episcopal** – Our English word “Episcopal” comes from the NT Greek word *episkopos*, which means “to look upon” or “care for.” Episcopacy calls its chief ministers *bishops* and lesser ones *presbyters* (or priests) and *deacons*. Churches using this type of government are Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Anglican, and Episcopalian.
2. **Presbyterian** – Our English word “Presbyterian” comes from the NT Greek word *presbuteros*, which literally means “an older man” or “elder.” In Presbyterianism, the governing power of a church resides in a group of leaders who form an assembly, synod, or presbytery; thus a plurality of presbyters (or elders) exercises general oversight over the church (cf. 1 Pet 5:1-3). Churches using this form of government are Presbyterian, Methodist, and the Reformed Church.
3. **Congregational** – Congregationalism tends to place the governing power in the hands of the entire congregation. Such churches are independent as far as authority and control from the denomination to which they belong. Congregationalists stress the priesthood of *all* believers. They also point out that the Scriptures teach that local churches were given the responsibility of protecting themselves against false teachers. Churches using this type of government are Congregational, Baptist, Assemblies of God, Nazarene, and independent churches. Incidentally, some congregations vary slightly in their congregational approach, by electing a board of directors or elders and giving them the authority to govern the church.

It should be noted that organization, form and structure have always been a part of God's ideal.

The “*levitical priesthood*” in the Old Testament was large and highly organized. The Lord Jesus selected out a group of “*twelve*” that He would train and send out into the world to build His Church. And He gave them “*methods*” with which to do the work, one of them was to work in “*groups of two*” at least, and not attempt the lone-ranger approach. Conversely, he “*modeled the strategy*” they were to use, and the “*preaching and teaching style*” they were to use – as such, the disciples themselves were also to *model and entrust* to others the same strategies, techniques and methodologies that He had taught them. I find it interesting that *Jesus never criticized the Roman architecture* of the Temple; though it obviously wasn't designed by believers, He still admired the structure. Furthermore, *He didn't criticize the language of the people* – Koine Greek – it wasn't the language of Hebrew, the holy language of the Bible... nor did He *criticize Roman dress, or Roman customs*. Yet, many in the church today seem to want to *criticize everything* that doesn't fit their idea of what is “holy” – be it the building, the windows, the pulpit, the pews, the décor, and so forth. Many in ministry today “*attack*” those they don't agree with, and “*disparage*” those things they find unacceptable. Jesus didn't even *criticize slavery* as it existed in that day – He could have, but He chose to focus on the most important – “*the gospel!*” and “*left those lesser things alone.*” The only time Jesus outwardly expressed His anger was “when His Father's name was profaned and His holiness sullied” (cf. Mt 21:12-13).

As believers, we should focus a lot more on “loving others” in this world, and a lot less on trying to “*politically legislate God's will in the world.*” If we would “love one another and love others” (Jn 13: 34-35; Mt 22:36-40), we would transform the world! But if we put all our energies into “legislating moral law” – trying to make ungodly people moral – we will end up accomplishing nothing. How can we expect the “world” to “act godly”? when in fact, we as believers don't even act godly! Remember, the entire law is fulfilled in one word – “LOVE.” I am reminded of the traditional story of the apostle John when he was an old man in his nineties, exiled on the Isle of Patmos – daily he had to be carried in and out of the assembly where numerous other believers would gather, and he always uttered these words to them: “Little children, let us love one another.” One day he was asked why he repeated that refrain so often. This was his reply – “If this alone be done, it is enough.” Really think about John's words.

Let me close by describing the events of history starting with the fourth century – When Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire in 313, the new public image of the Christians encouraged the building of splendid churches and the creation of longer and more colorful services. Rather than perpetuating the *simplicity* of early Christian worship, *form and ceremony* became the important thing; thus the way was prepared for the radical change of the Lord's Supper into the Roman Mass and a myriad of abuses in the medieval Roman Church. Originally the Roman Mass was a simple rite with two main divisions – the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Upper Room. Gradually, however, the Communion Table gave way to the Altar, and the officiating clergyman became a priest who went to the altar to offer a sacrifice for the people, which they themselves were not allowed to offer. By the year 400 the Lord's Supper was no longer a “*joyful service of thanksgiving*,” instead it became a *mysterious, awesome objective sacrifice of the body and blood of Christ*. The importance of this radical departure from NT teaching and practice cannot be overestimated – the worshipers became mere spectators observing the activity of the priest at the altar, and the proclamation of the gospel began to take a back seat. Doctrinal errors concerning the priesthood of all believers, transubstantiation, penance, and meritorious works all contributed to the decline of worship and the growing dissatisfaction of the worshipers, and these things became major factors in the Reformation. The Reformers placed far more emphasis on *doctrine* than *worship materials*, and most of them gave comparatively little attention

to the development of liturgy; thus a wide variety of worship services came into being, and the *preaching of the Word of God* became a predominant feature in the majority of Protestant churches.

Then came the Age of Enlightenment in the 18th century with its emphasis on “rationalism” – that served to undermine religious faith and brought about a subtle shift toward the *secularization* of society; *materialism* began to impact everything in life, and Sunday increasingly became “*the workers’ day off*” rather than a day of worship. As the scientific revolution and spiritual indifference began making inroads against Christianity during the 19th century, the scholarship that had developed in response to rationalism awakened a new spirit of investigation in the Church, and a number of strong theologians surfaced through whom the Scriptures and the doctrines of Christianity would become more widely studied and more intelligently understood. The entire Christian community went to work to counter the unbelieving forces of rationalism. By the dawn of the 20th century *Protestantism* had developed into a number of new denominations here in the United States, and with the world’s population growing at an exponential rate, “*Christian missionary work*” grew as never before. The Christian community worldwide has grown from 1.4 billion people in 1980 to more than 2.6 billion people today – that represents a growth rate of nearly *100,000 people per day!* If each church averages nearly 150 people, that means Christendom is building nearly 700 churches a day to accommodate them. The 20th century has witnessed massive changes unlike any other age in history. It has provided us with a quantum leap on technological and intellectual levels that has no parallel, and Christian organizations all over the world are developing state of the art electronic internet ministries to reach the entire globe with the gospel within the next twenty years, and that means the building of another “*five million churches*” (at 700 a day!). Though Christianity seems so complex in its history and practice, one can forget that at its core it is based on a very simple premise – human beings exist in a state of *alienation* from God because of sin, and this condition has been *healed* through the life and saving work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Meanwhile, as the ambassadors of Christ and workers in His vineyard, the Church continues to explore new ways of extending the message of God’s love to all humanity by being His hands, and feet, and eyes, and ears, and mouth in the world. Remember, winning people to Christ happens just “one person at a time” – focus your energies upon that “one person” God is laying upon your heart... rather than being “fruit inspectors” and criticizing others... and be about the King’s business!

HOW GOD SET THE STAGE FOR THE ADVENT OF CHRIST

The physical preparation for the Church – Scripture says, “*When the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son*” (cf. Gal 4:4). Such a statement is a clear indication that the world was prepared by God for the arrival of Jesus to do His redeeming work. In what way was it prepared? What were the conditions in the world when the New Testament Church began and when it first spread out from Jerusalem? Rome ruled the “world.” That this fact was of significance to the coming of Christ is evident from Luke’s frequent references to the historical events of the Empire. He makes such statements as: “There went out a decree from Caesar Augustus” and “In the fifteen year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar” (cf. Lk 2:1; 3:1). This great Empire prepared the physical scene for the spread of the Gospel, to a degree never before equaled, and unapproached in modern times, these vast territories, which embraced all that common men know of civilized life, were under the sway of a single type of culture. Outside its borders humanity only knew savagery, warfare, and semi-civilized tribalism. The Roman Empire gave peace in place of constant tribal warfare... it built a great network of roads and bridges that made travel possible

all over the then-known world... it cleared the sea of pirates so that trade by sea and travel by ship became common practice... it protected its citizens from robbers and rioting. All of these conditions favored the easy movement of the messengers of Christ so that along the many roads which Rome had set up for her military purposes the Gospel of peace went out to the world.

Christianity entered no empty world. Its advent found men's minds filled with conceptions of the universe, of religion, of sin, and of rewards and punishments, with which it had to reckon and to which it had to adjust itself. Christianity did not build on virgin soil. The conceptions which it found already existing formed much of the material with which it built its structure. Many of these ideas are no longer those of the modern world. Certain factors in the world of thought into which Christianity came, belong to universal ancient religion and are of aged antiquity. All men, except a few representatives of philosophical sophistication, believed in the existence of a power, or of powers, invisible, superhuman, and eternal, controlling human destiny, and to be worshipped or placated by prayer, ritual, or sacrifice. No conception of what is now called natural law had penetrated the popular mind; all the ongoing of nature were the work of invisible powers of good and evil, who ruled arbitrarily. Miracles were, therefore, to be regarded not merely as possible; they were to be expected whenever the higher forces would impress men with the important or the unusual. The world was the abode of innumerable spirits, righteous or malevolent, who touched human life in all its phases, and who even entered into such possession of men as to control their actions for good or ill. The varied forms of religious manifestation were evidences of the universal need of better relations with the spiritual and unseen, and of men's longing for help greater than any they could give one another.

Besides these general conceptions common to popular religion, the world into which Christianity came owed much to the specific influence of Greek thought. Hellenistic ideas dominated the intelligence of the Roman Empire. Greek philosophic speculation at first concerned itself with the explanation of the physical universe. To **Socrates** (450 BC) the explanation of man himself, not of the universe, was the prime object of thought. Man's conduct and his morals, was the most important theme of investigation. Right action, Socrates believed, is based on knowledge, and results in the four virtues of prudence, courage, self-control, and justice. By the way, the "Socratic method of teaching" has been practiced through the centuries, including in the early church. In Socrates' disciple **Plato** (400 BC), the early Greek mind reached its highest spiritual attainment. He is properly described as a man of mystical piety, as well as of the profoundest spiritual insight. To Plato knowledge of the truly permanent and real comes from our acquaintance with the "ideas" and changeless universal patterns which exist in the invisible spiritual world – the "intelligible world," since known by reason rather than by the senses. The soul, he believed, existed before the body, therefore must be independent of it, and not affected by its decay. This conception of immortality as an attribute of the soul was always influential in Greek thought. A clear perception of a personal God, however, was unlikely attained by Plato; but he certainly approached it closely. **Aristotle** (370 BC) was of a far less mystic spirit than Plato. To him the visible world was an unquestioned reality. He discarded Plato's sharp discrimination between "ideas" and phenomena; neither exist without the other, he felt. The world is eternal, and is the prime object of knowledge; thus, Aristotle in a true sense was a scientist. The various changes in the world demand the initiation of a "prime mover," who is Himself unmoved. Hence, Aristotle presents this celebrated argument for the existence of God. Man belongs to the world of substance, but in him there is also a "divine spark" (*a logos*) which he shares with God, and which is eternal. In morals Aristotle held that happiness, or well-being, is the aim, and is attained by a careful maintenance of the golden mean.

In the centuries that followed, philosophy had to be interpreted in terms of “individual life.”

How could the individual make the most of himself? Two great answers were given: Epicureanism & Stoicism. Epicurus (325 BC) taught that mental bliss is the highest aim of man; it is the absence of all that disturbs and annoys. The worst foes of mental happiness he taught are groundless fears. Of these the chief are dread of the anger of the gods and of death – both are baseless. The gods exist, but they did not create nor do they govern the world; the world was simply formed by chance – all is material, even the soul of man and the gods themselves. Death ends all, but is no evil, since in it there is no consciousness remaining. Hence, as far as it was a religion, Epicureanism was one of indifference. The other great answer was that of Stoicism (300 BC), the noblest type of ancient pagan ethical thought, and the nearest in some respects to Christianity, though very remote from it in others. Its leaders were Zeno and Cleanthes (300 BC), and Chrysippus (275 BC). It was powerfully represented in Tarsus during the early life of the apostle Paul. Stoicism was primarily a great ethical system, yet not without claims to be considered a religion. Its thought of the universe was curiously materialistic – all that is real is physical. The source of all, and the shaping, harmonizing influence in the universe, is the vital warmth, from which all has developed, which interpenetrates all things, and to which all will return. God, the life and wisdom of all is truly within us – we can “follow the God within.” The popular gods are simply names for the forces that stream out from God. Since only one wisdom exists in all the world, there is one natural law, and one rule of conduct for all men. All are morally free. Since all are from God, all men are brothers. Differences in station in life are accidental. To follow reason in the place in which one finds oneself is the highest duty, and is equally praiseworthy whether a man is an Emperor or a slave. So to obey reason (*the logos*) is the sole object of pursuit. Duty done brings a certain happiness as a by-product. The chief enemies of a perfect obedience are passions and lusts, which pervert the judgment; these must resolutely be put aside. In its highest representatives the creed and its results were noble. It was, however, too hard, narrow, and unsympathetic. And its spirit was too often one of pride; that of Christianity is one of humility. Still it produced remarkable effects.

The ancient systems of philosophy underwent some notable changes in the years prior to the advent of Christianity. One may say that the best educated thought in Rome and the provinces, by the time of Christ, inclined to the conception of “*God as good*,” in contrast to the non-moral character of the old Greek and Roman deities, to believe in a ruling divine providence, to the thought that true religion is not ceremonies but an imitation of the moral qualities of God, and toward a more human attitude to men. The common people, however, shared in few of these benefits – they lay in gross superstition, and believed in many gods; and if not observed, the gods would wreck vengeance in calamities – these popular ideas were not vigorously opposed by the learned, because they held that the old religions had a police value. They regarded the state ceremonies as a necessity for the common man. The philosopher Seneca put the philosophical opinion bluntly when he declared that “the wise man will observe all religious usages as commanded by the law, not as pleasing to the gods.” Christianity came “in the fullness of time” in a much larger sense than was formerly thought; and no one who believes in an overruling providence of God will deny the fundamental importance of this mighty preparation.

Not only did these physical conditions help the case of the new missionaries, but the spiritual and intellectual climate was also readied for their work. Greece had spread her culture throughout the Near East and had “conquered” the western world with her civilization. The Greek language had become the “world language,” one that would enable Paul to communicate with all his hearers in that part of the Roman Empire where he did most of his work. When Paul quoted the Old Testament to the Jews whom he met on his journeys, his quotations were from the *Septuagint*, a Greek version of the Old Testament made some 200 years before Christ. Greek philosophy had made many people doubt their gods whose

strange activities now began to fade into myth and legend. The Roman gods came into disrepute, and many officials of the Empire continued to encourage religion only because such belief served to curtail revolt among the common people. The Roman state religion was clearly a political affair that offered no peace of mind to a disturbed soul. All this left a moral vacuum that boded no good for the world. Under such conditions the Gospel came with its promise of peace, pardon from sin, rest for the heavy laden. Here was assurance, forgiveness, life, and salvation in Christ. This was the message that struck home, and the fullness of time made the rapid spread of this Word possible.

In the beginning the Church of Jerusalem was known for its spiritual beauty. The members were united by a spirit of love. This was shown in their sharing of material goods, their caring for the poor and afflicted, and their concern for the welfare of fellow members. They were of “one heart and of one soul” (cf. Acts 4:32). However, the young Church was also marred by corruption and dissension; selfish interest became a stumbling block. Factions, lawsuits, abuses of the Lord’s Supper, and other problems faced the Apostolic Church. The Jewish and Gentile Christians often found it very difficult to extend the hand of Christian brotherhood. In spite of human shortcomings, the Church is the body of Christ. For it God prepared the world... for it Christ gave Himself... for it the apostles labored and suffered. Now, with the blessing of the Holy Spirit, the stone cut from the mountain (cf. Dan 2:35) was about to fill the earth. When Jesus was born, everything was right for the coming of the Messiah.

First, the time was right “religiously” – During the Babylonian captivity, Israel had once and for all forsaken the *idolatry* into which she had so often fallen. Despite her many other sins and failures, including the national rejection of her own Messiah, no significant numbers of Jews has ever again turned to idolatry. Also during the Exile, Jews developed *synagogues*, which they used as places of worship, as schools, and as courts. In addition to that, they at last had the completed *Old Testament*, assembled by Ezra and others after the return from Babylon. Those features facilitated the proclaiming of the Messiah’s gospel among the people of Israel.

Second, the time was right “culturally.” Christians who propagated the gospel during the first several centuries had a common language with those to whom they witnessed and with whom they worshiped. Alexander the Great had thoroughly established *Greek culture and language* throughout the then-known world, and these continued their dominating influence long after Rome succeeded Greece as world ruler. The New Testament was written in the language of the day – Greek – not in the language of the Jewish people heretofore – Hebrew – as was the Old Testament. One of the strengths of the Greek language is its ability to say things with “incredible precision,” unlike that of the Hebrew language, which was a wonderful language for telling stories, poetry, and giving the historical narrative of the Old Testament. Hebrew is a “*picture language*,” every word paints a picture; Greek is a “*scientific language*,” you can split hairs to the nth degree in Greek; thus it was the perfect language for Paul to describe the theological intricacies of the Christian faith; without it, he would not have had that capacity. The “mood, voice, and tense structure” of the Greek verb made it the perfect language for presenting the theological arguments of the Christian faith. That God developed the Greek language and employed it for His purposes was no accident! Furthermore, the development of philosophical reasoning and logic by the Greeks, made it possible for Paul and others to give a rational presentation of Christian faith and theology.

Third, the time was right “politically.” Rome had instituted the *pax Romana* (Roman peace), which provided economic and political stability. The apostles and other early preachers and teachers could travel freely and safely throughout the empire and could do so on the magnificent system of roads built by the Romans. Each of these factors was in some unique way a key to the spread of the gospel. God’s

timing was perfect – in His sovereignty, He had prepared the world for His Son's coming – all of the foregoing took place according to the pre-determined plan of God. None of this was coincidental or accidental. To somehow “assume” that all these things were simply the developments of “godless unbelievers,” and as such were useless, is mindless. Just because an unbeliever develops something, doesn't make it worthless – God does have the ability to transcend man's sinfulness. We do worship an incredibly big God... not a weak little “Oh my, what am I going to do now, God!” By the way, He is the author of all things – all realities, all thought, all concepts, and all languages. Furthermore, He is absolutely sovereign and transcends everything – as He planned, so it happened! That is the God we worship. Amen. (cf. Rom 8:28; Eph 1:9-12; 3:11).