



We are excited to announce the publishing of a new book in Russian - *Reimagining the Church* by Frank Viola. The book will be available in April, but until then we would like to share with you some excerpts to give you a taste of the book.

Open-participatory meetings do not preclude the idea of planning. Nor do they have to be disorderly. In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul formulates a number of broad guidelines designed to keep the meeting running in an orderly fashion.

In Paul's thought, there's no tension between an *open*-participatory meeting and an *orderly* one that edifies the church. The order of the meeting is organic. It's the by-product of each member seeking to edify the whole.

As far as content goes, the meetings were centered on Christ. Every word shared shed light on Him. Every song sung brought glory to Him. Every prayer offered brought Him into view. All the arrows of the meetings pointed to Him. As they experienced the indwelling life of Christ during the week, the early Christians came together to share that life with one another. In this respect, the early church meeting served as an outlet. It was the venue in which the excess and overflow of spiritual life was shared and released.

Have you ever received an insight about the Lord or had an encounter with Him that filled you spiritually to the point where you felt you were going to burst if you didn't share it with others? If

so, just imagine an entire church experiencing this. Therein lies a central feature of the church gathering: to allow that spiritual life to break loose whereby all could be blessed.

Just as the members of the triune God selflessly pour Their life into one another, so the members of the church do the same in their gatherings. In this regard, participating in a New Testament church meeting meant giving more than receiving. Unlike today's popular practice, the early Christians didn't attend "services" to receive from a class of religious specialists called the "clergy." They met to *serve* their sisters and brothers by ministering something of the Lord's life to them. In so doing, they sought to build up the church (Rom. 12:1–8; 1 Cor. 14:26; Heb. 10:24–25).

In the typical institutional church, the religious machinery of the church program is the force that fuels and propels the church service. Consequently, if the Spirit of God were ever to leave a typical institutional church, His absence would go unnoticed. The "business-as-usual" program would forge ahead. The worship program would be unaffected. The liturgy would march on uninterrupted. The sermon would be preached, and the doxology would be sung. Like Samson of old, the congregation would go right along with the religious program, not knowing "that the Lord had departed" (Judg. 16:20 nasb).

By contrast, the only sustaining force of the early church gathering was the life of the Holy Spirit. The early Christians were clergyless, liturgyless, programless, and ritualless. They relied entirely on the spiritual life of the individual members to maintain the church's existence and the quality of their gatherings.

Thus if the spiritual life of the church was at a low ebb, everyone would notice it in the gathering. They couldn't overlook the cold chill of silence. What is more, if the Spirit of God left the meetings for good, the church would collapse altogether. Stated simply, the first-century church knew no sustaining influence other than the life of the Holy Spirit. It didn't rely on a clergy-led, manprogrammed, humanly planned, institutionally fueled system to preserve its momentum.

The tabernacle of Moses perfectly mirrors those churches that are held together by an institution rather than the life of God. When God's presence left the holy tent, the tent became nothing more than a hollow shell accompanied by an impressive exterior. Even though the Lord's glory had departed, worshippers continued to offer their sacrifices at the empty tabernacle, never noticing that God wasn't there (1 Chron. 16:39–40; 2 Chron. 1:3–5; Jer. 7:12–14).

In this way, the vice of the institutional church lies in its reliance upon a humanly devised, program-driven religious system that serves to scaffold the “church” structure when the Spirit of God is absent. This moss-laden system betrays the fact that when the spontaneous life of Jesus Christ has ebbed away in a Christian assembly, that assembly ceases to be operating as a church in any biblical sense—even though it may preserve the outward form.

While the New Testament envisions the early church meetings as open, participatory, and spontaneous, many modern clergy refuse to approve of such meetings today. Clerical thinking on the subject frequently goes something like this: “If I allowed my congregation to exercise its gifts in an open meeting, there would be sheer chaos. I have no choice but to control the services—lest the people spin out of control.” Others have confessed, “I tried to have open meetings with *my* people once. And it just doesn’t work.”

These objections betray a gross misunderstanding of God’s ecclesiology. First, the notion that a clergyman has the authority to “allow” or “forbid” his fellow brethren to function in a gathering of God’s people is built on a skewed understanding of authority. (We will explore this aspect further in part 2.) No human has the right to permit or prohibit the believing priesthood in the exercise of its Spirit-endowed gifts. In addition, no one has the right to refer to God’s people as “my people.”

Second, the assumption that chaos would ensue if clerical control were removed betrays a lack of confidence in the Holy Spirit. It also reveals a lack of trust in God’s people, something that violates the New Testament outlook (Rom. 15:14; 2 Cor. 2:3; 7:6; 8:22; Gal. 5:10; 2 Thess. 3:4; Philem. 21; Heb. 6:9).

Third, the idea that the church meeting would turn into a tumultuous free-for-all is simply not true. But it hinges upon a very important ingredient: *God’s people must be properly equipped to function under Christ’s headship*

Having said that, I’ll make a candid observation: If a pastor decides to implement open meetings in his church, I can well understand why it wouldn’t work. The reason is simple—he probably hasn’t equipped God’s people to function under the headship of Jesus Christ.

Christians do not become equipped by listening to sermons week after week while sitting muted in a pew. Instead, God's people are equipped by Christian workers who are able to teach them *how* to fellowship with the Lord and how to function in a group setting. Such workers equip the saints (Eph. 4:11–16). And then they do something that few contemporary pastors would ever dare — *they leave the church on its own* (Acts 13—20).

Granted, open-participatory meetings may not always be as prim and proper as the traditional church service that runs flawlessly according to what is published in the weekly church bulletin. Nevertheless, they reveal much more of the fullness of Christ than any human arrangement could manufacture. In a first-century-styled meeting, there will be times when some may bring unprofitable ministry. This is particularly true in the infancy stages of a church's life. But the antidote for this is not to put a lid on open participation.

Those who over-function and give unedifying ministry should be given instruction. In the foundational stage, this largely falls on the shoulders of those who are planting the church. It will later shift to those who are older and more seasoned in the assembly. Recall what happened when Paul faced the frenzied morass in Corinth. The apostle didn't shut down the meetings and hand out aliturgy. Nor did he introduce human officiation. Instead, he supplied his fellow brethren with a number of broad guidelines to facilitate order and edification in the gatherings (1 Cor. 14:1ff.). What is more, Paul was confident that the church would adhere to those guidelines. This sets forth an important principle. Every church in the first century had at its disposal an itinerant apostolic worker who helped navigate it through common problems. Sometimes the worker's help came in the form of letters. At other times, it came during personal visits from the worker himself.

Present-day workers give similar guidelines to churches that are having difficulties in their meetings. And those guidelines are designed to put the meetings back into the hands of the Holy Spirit rather than under the domain of strong personalities.

When such guidelines are given and heeded, there's no need for human officiation, fixed liturgies, or scripted services. Again, the tendency to reject the first-century-styled church meeting unearths a lack of trust in the Holy Spirit.

Forgive the personal illustration, but in all the years that I've worked with organic churches, I

never once felt compelled to resort to liturgy, ritual, or human officiation. A large part of my ministry has been to equip God's people to function. That would include helping those who overparticipate to step back a bit and emboldening those who underparticipate to function more often.

In Numbers 11, we have the first appearance of clericalism in the Bible. Two servants of the Lord, Eldad and Medad, received God's Spirit and began to prophesy (vv. 26–27). In hasty response, a young zealot urged Moses to “restrain them” (v. 28 nasb). Moses reproved the young suppressor, saying that *all* God's people should receive the Spirit and prophesy. Moses' desire was fulfilled at Pentecost (Acts 2:17–18). And it continued to find fulfillment throughout the first century (Acts 2:38–39; 1 Cor. 14:1,31). Unfortunately, the kingdom of God does not lack those who wish to again restrain Eldad and Medad from ministering in the Lord's house.