

The Current House Church Movement

Beware of wolves

There is a rise in new house churches, especially in America, where people are reacting against the formalism, apostasy and pomposity of extremely large, impersonal churches. All over the USA house churches are emerging and new denominations or associations of house churches are being initiated. At the end of the day Christians require fellowship with each other and the Lord in informal, simple surroundings. Even with small, unbiblical mid-week meetings this need is not fed. Neither does the highly organised, formal, professionalism of modern large congregations attract people for long; eventually they desire to be known in smaller circumstances based upon friendship.

Thus what goes around comes around. Evangelical churches throughout history have almost always been small; the 5,000-member congregation of the Metropolitan Tabernacle under Spurgeon is the exception. Instinctively, believers know that the apostolic precedent is a small home meeting and, despite being temporally persuaded by men to gather in large numbers, eventually they realise that this is not right.

Now, there is a very wide variety expressed in these new churches, as to be expected in a multiplicity of unorganised gatherings. This happened before in the House Church Movement in the early 1970s, which I was a part of. Home groups suddenly appeared all over England and there was a great disparity amongst them. I visited many; some were very good and based upon sound teaching under a godly elder; many others were extremely unsound, where 'anything goes' under poor, untrained leaders. Very often the nicest, humble leaders were most guilty of allowing any teaching to be foisted upon the congregation without discrimination.

Over time these churches began to form into groupings and then these began to associate with other churches under 'apostles' of one sort or another. This then led to the formal, large, Restoration Churches (New Churches) in the 80s which was initially called 'The House Church Movement' by some foolish historians; but this was a formal organisation, a new institution, based upon capturing former house churches.

It is inevitable, I suppose, that small groups of house churches will associate under new leaders but it does not have to be captured by men and it does not have to be unbiblical. Neither should it form into a formal organisation. However, what is happening now in America seems to be following the same pattern as 40 years ago.

What is of great concern is that these house churches appear to be centring under certain ministries and a few well-known leaders who are exerting a tremendous influence through books, audios and videos. My concern is that whatever good is in this movement (and it is very mixed) is already being taken over by false elements. I find it hard to find any modern house church group in America that appears to be absolutely Biblically based.

Therefore, I intend to examine the teaching of one of the most popular modern house church leaders, Frank Viola.

Frank Viola

Background

Who is he? Firstly, he is a writer that has sold millions of books; one of which sold 10 million copies and is reported as having been read by 30 million people (*Pagan Christianity*)¹. So, we can consider him as being perhaps the foremost American house church leader; he is not the first and he is not the best, but he is the most prominent.

Viola's website says very little about his history; in fact his biography is meagre. This is because his background is very suspect.

After 13 years in a multiplicity of different churches Viola got involved with Gene Edwards and was trained by him. He then led some small house churches.

During the Toronto Blessing he avidly visited places where God was said to be moving; saying, '*If I hear a report that God is uniquely at work in a given place, I will move heaven and earth to visit it*'. Thus he attended meetings led by heretic Randy Clark and others. As a result of these meetings he met Frank Valdez who taught him about contemplative prayer that was beyond Charismatic tongues. '*There is a Christian tradition that practices a form of prayer that employs no words. It's beyond speaking in tongues and deeper than the Toronto blessing. ... contemplative prayer is a prayer of interior silence that is beyond words.*'² This led further to being introduced to the Catholic mystics, something he considers fundamental to his Christian experience; '*Their writings have uncovered practical forms of spiritual communion that I've found to be of great profit personally.*'

All this, so far, leads one to question his theological understanding and his practical wisdom. He fails to see the dangers in this non-evangelical tradition, to say nothing of the heresies of the Toronto Blessing, which he has not rejected. Indeed, Viola subsequently promoted Meister Eckhart,³ Thomas Merton⁴ and Karl Barth.⁵ He also continued to follow Charismatic heretics like Randy Clark and Rodney Howard-Browne, plus lapsed Catholic priest Brennan Manning.

It is odd that Viola supports heretics, practices Roman Catholic mystical praying and is influenced by some forms of Eastern mysticism⁶ and yet tells Protestants that their tradition is pagan in his most popular book *Pagan Christianity*. Viola also allies with other suspects, such as Emerging Church leader Brian McLaren and Rick Warren.

Associations

Gene Edwards

I would like to acknowledge my indebtedness to Gene Edwards for inspiring and challenging me to create a holistic model of the early church.⁷

In the past Viola was closely involved with Gene Edwards, a man who is guilty of very serious errors of theology and church practice; too many to summarise here (Arminianism,

¹ Co-written with George Barna.

² April 2006 newsletter.

³ A 13th century Roman mystic.

⁴ A 20th century Roman priest influenced by eastern mysticism.

⁵ A Neo-Orthodox German theologian who rejected German liberalism but denied the literal inspiration of Scripture believing that only that which God subjectively inspired in the reader was divine.

⁶ Viola also supports M.B. Pennington & Bede Griffiths, both Catholic monks and propagators of eastern mysticism, monasticism, contemplative prayer and Transcendental Meditation.

⁷ Preface to Viola's book *The Untold Story*.

mysticism and authoritarianism being fundamental issues). He established a sectarian church movement based upon his personal authority. Viola was still defending Edwards up to, at least, 2002,⁸ despite many of his former friends contending against him. Whatever his position now, Viola clearly had very little discernment about the depth of Edward's errors and this bodes very badly for his qualities as a leader.

NT Wright

In getting to know Tom (N.T.) Wright, and in reading much of his work, he has become my favourite contemporary New Testament scholar. ... N.T. Wright is someone who is not afraid to challenge the status quo. In this regard, I both resonate with and support him.⁹

Wright is a bishop in the Anglican Church who initiated a recent heresy called, 'The New Perspective on Paul'.¹⁰ This leads him to re-define the doctrine of justification by faith in an unorthodox manner. This error led to the development of a different error in America called 'Federal Vision' which is damaging many Presbyterian churches and which effectively teaches works salvation. Wright also denies a literal catching up of believers with Christ at the Second Coming and supports Theistic Evolution.

Roman Catholics

Viola supports many Romanists, including Brennan Manning, many Catholic mystics and various popes. He claims to have learned many things from them and includes such authors in his favourite book lists. He also promotes the *Sacra Pagina* set of Catholic commentaries. One of these commentators that Viola personally recommended (Luke Timothy Johnson) is a liberal who promotes homosexuality and defended his daughter's lesbian marriage.

Another book promoted by Viola is *The Bible Made Impossible* by Christian Smith, who converted to Romanism while writing this work and then wrote a book telling evangelicals how to become Catholics. Smith challenges 'the Bible's exclusive authority, infallibility, clarity, self-sufficiency, internal consistency, self-evident meaning, and universal applicability.'¹¹

The Emergent Church

For those who are unaware, the Emergent Church is a recent movement seeking to reform the way church is practised. It is attractive in that it centres upon a more communal and informal style of church life, often associated with a Seeker-Sensitive ethos. However, it is deeply heretical being a liberal movement that downplays Scripture's relevance and advocates many unbiblical teachings and practices, such as feminism, denial of hell, denial of future judgment, evolutionary theory, and a downplaying (or even denial) of propitiation and the penal sacrifice of Jesus on the cross; while some even accept homosexuality and pagan religions. It is a very worldly sect.

Viola says that he supports some of its tenets and dislikes others, yet he has formed relationships with many of its leaders and worked together with one of them on a book.¹² In this work many heretics are warmly commended, such as Pope John Paul, Pope

⁸ This was after he had written two books on organic church.

⁹ *Viola's Blog*, 23 January 2012.

¹⁰ For more information see my paper, 'The erosion of justification'.

¹¹ Publisher's blurb; *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture*; (Brazos Press, 2011). Christian Smith is a sociologist of religion from the University of Notre Dame and the director of Notre Dame's Centre for Social Research and its Centre for the Study of Religion and Society.

¹² Leonard Sweet, *Restoring the Supremacy and Sovereignty of Jesus Christ*.

Benedict XV, and John Henry Newman. One endorsement on the cover is from Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury who is an ordained druid.¹³

Books by chief Emergent Church leaders also appeared on Viola's '100 Best Christian Books Ever Written' list.¹⁴

Character

Hubris

Viola clearly has a gift for self-promotion and uses many typical modern gimmicks to push his books. Much emphasis is given to lists of famous leaders who support him in some way plus lists of others that he has shared a platform with. None of this self-advertising is necessary or appropriate on a website based upon providing a resource to teach people.

One also forms the opinion, as he reads Viola's works, that the church drifted from pure practice soon after its establishment only to be restored by his own teachings. His dogmatic statements (not a word he would use), in *Pagan Christianity* at least, lead one to this conclusion. Yet the better parts of his observations about interdependent, communal church life were culled from many recent authors, such as T Austin Sparks, Watchman Nee and Robert Banks, to say nothing of many earlier Brethren authors (such as Samuel Ridout & George Goodman). However, I am certain that these authors would not share Viola's extreme views.

In fact, many throughout history have held these views but their churches were not highlighted in most church history books. Furthermore, most evangelical historians agree that the church degenerated after the apostles, becoming more formal and organised and that the fleshly downgrade escalated after Constantine; this is nothing new. Viola's hubris is shared by many modern restorationist cults who claim that the pure church starts with them.

This teaching is sometimes called 'restorationism' by church historians (as opposed to the Charismatic UK Restorationism, or Heavy Shepherding, of the 1980s). It is applied to those sects which claim to be the faithful restoration of NT church practices, such as Mormonism.

Questionable integrity

Ten years ago there were allegations against Viola's personal integrity. The allegations were from church members in Brandon (Florida), leadership colleagues and his former wife. The situation led to the church in Brandon being disbanded and resulted in many distraught people. It is unclear if Biblical discipline was enforced properly and the degree to which Viola was culpable (Gene Edwards was the chief overseer).

Now we all make mistakes and we must be careful about throwing stones. However, there is a difference between a man who makes a mistake, and then repents properly, with a man who tries to cover it up with deceit. It is alleged that the situation was handled improperly.

Since I am unable to talk to Viola face to face to get his side of the story, I have decided to avoid further mention of the matter.

¹³ Williams was inducted in a stone circle into the Gorsedd of the Bards at the National Eisteddfod in August 2002, otherwise known as The Eisteddfod druids. He is also known for his pro-evolution, pro-homosexual, pro-Islamic, pro-feminine stance.

¹⁴ Two books by Leonard Sweet and one by Brian McLaren. NB it also contains books by Romanists: three by Brennan Manning and two volumes by Pope Benedict XVI.

Being profligate with the truth

In the introduction to his book *Pagan Christianity*, he states that he could not find a book which documented the origins of modern church practices, thus he needed to write his own. This is, at least a twisting of the truth.

Viola worked with Gene Edwards for years and was trained by him. He must have read, or have been familiar, with the many books that Edwards put out preaching his radical church doctrine. These include several which document the origins of many church practices and lament the lack of Biblical practices. Such would include: ‘*When the Church was Young*’ by Ernest Loosley, and Edward’s many works, such as ‘*Revolution, the Story of the Early Church*’.

Indeed, in another work Viola says, ‘*I would like to acknowledge my indebtedness to Gene Edwards for inspiring and challenging me to create a holistic model of the early church. His pioneering research and keen insight into this all-too neglected field has laid a solid foundation for me and others to build upon.*’¹⁵ In fact, Viola’s work is thematically similar to Edward’s book *Beyond Radical*, but more comprehensive.

Sensationalism instead of critical judgment

Several critics have pointed out that Viola tends to sensationalist interpretations of his sources to the degree that they are sometimes savagely twisted to prove his point. Indeed, the very title of his book *Pagan Christianity* is sensationalist, not to say oxymoronic.¹⁶

One critic says of *Pagan Christianity*,

There are so many basic errors and abuses of citations that the book is rendered completely unreliable. Every now and then they may actually have a good point but it is lost amidst the rubble of distortions, falsehoods and double standards. There may yet be a good book making the case for house churches – this one is not that book. ... It may be they were relying on secondary sources misquoting these authors or they are just not very good researchers. But it is quite obvious that, at the very least, they have not done their homework. ... The charges Viola has made are a complete misrepresentation of Christian history. ... His presentation exaggerates the negatives and never even raises the issue of the many positive things that happened during those centuries. If one has to criticise, the criticism should be honest. On this point Viola and Barna have let the church down.¹⁷

An example of the misuse of sources is the quote from Frank Senn to support the argument that early Christians only met in simple (i.e. small) homes.¹⁸ But the passage cited clearly states that the churches of this period met in homes that had been converted into larger structures to accommodate the meeting.¹⁹ In fact the chapter they quote from is an argument about the close link between Christian liturgy developing out of former Jewish practice. This is contradictory to the arguments of Viola and Barna who seek to

¹⁵ Preface to his book *The Untold Story*.

¹⁶ This is a complex issue. How much is pagan and to what degree? What is acceptable pagan influence, such as the titles of the days of the week? Is a ‘Sunday meeting’ a pagan statement because ‘Sunday’ is a pagan denomination? With the wide variation in Christian expression, to call Christianity pagan would need to examine every form of expression in every denomination (and there are thousands of these) and prove that the vast majority have a majority of pagan based practices. Such a title is meaningless in reality. My church meeting is Christian but there is nothing pagan in what we do.

¹⁷ Albert McIlhenny (US Anglican), *The New Restorationism: A Critique of Frank Viola and George Barna’s ‘Pagan Christianity’*; p5-6, 9.

¹⁸ *Pagan Christianity*, p14, note 22.

¹⁹ Frank Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical*, Fortress Press, 1997, p53.

separate the early connection between churches and synagogues. They appear to deliberately misread Senn's whole argument.²⁰

Another example regards their description of the excavation of a home church at Dura Europos, which they describe as merely an ordinary house with a wall torn out. They fail to mention that the walls were covered in iconography, liturgical texts written in Hebrew and that a baptistery had been built in it with a pool.²¹

A final example regards the erection of dedicated church buildings in the third century, which attracted the criticism of the philosopher Porphyry for their ostentatious ornate decoration. Viola and Barna attribute this criticism to the churches built later under Constantine's influence. However, Porphyry died in 305, many years before Constantine came to power in the west (312) let alone the date of his 'pagan' church building programme, which began in 327.

Albert McIlhenny (a US Anglican) has written a whole book documenting the many factual errors in the writing of Viola on church history. Viola cannot be trusted as a scholar. Yes we are aware that he is writing a popular work and not writing for academics, (his normal cop out for errors) but what he writes must be accurate to have any purchase. Ben Witherington III (a Former US Methodist minister, now an academic) has also demonstrated a number of historical errors in Viola's works. My views on church are different from these scholars but I welcome their criticism. It is sad that I, as a believer in house church, have to condemn Viola's lack of credibility and his poorly sustained arguments. Viola has done us all a disservice.

Teaching errors

His motto

The motto on his website is,

Jesus Christ is ALL, everything else is commentary.

Viola constantly talks about the supremacy of Christ which he learned from his mentor T Austin Sparks²² without imbibing Sparks' more rigorous approach to Scripture.

At first this sound impressive (after all I too major on the pre-eminence of Christ). However, the problem is that, though it sounds reverent it is simplistic, mystical and facile.

Jesus himself tells us that we need to be guided into truth by the Holy Spirit and that we cannot live by bread alone but by every word of God. The Scriptures are the expression of the truth of Jesus in print and contain the final words of Christ to the apostles for the church, which must be a litmus test for all things.

The problem with this motto is that it can mean absolutely anything. A Roman Catholic would understand one thing by it and a Charismatic something else. At worst, it implies that whatever one believes Christ is saying in his heart must be followed with no objective test (such as referral to the Bible). Thus it becomes a mystical, subjective, irrational response to anything.

What you think Christ is saying and what I think Christ is saying may be opposites; who determines what is true? That is why we need Scripture. God's word must be the absolute

²⁰ With gratitude to Albert McIlhenny, *The New Restorationism*, p16ff. here and in the next two points.

²¹ FL Cross & EA Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, OUP, 1997, p517.

²² 'The centrality and supremacy of Jesus Christ' was a crucial theme for Austin Sparks, and the subject of at least one whole book with that title.

final word on what is sound, in theology and experience. Following Scripture properly is following Christ who supervised the inspiration of it by His Spirit.

This is indeed Viola's major failing; if this is wrong everything will be wrong. It is why he absorbs many liberal ideas and practices, advocates oriental and Roman mysticism and associates with heretics. By centring on a subjective view of Christ but avoiding a strict view of the absolute rule of Scripture (Christ's words), Viola strays into heresy.

Liberals, Catholics and even sectarian occultists can talk about the centrality of Christ and yet teach multiple contradictions of God's word. In the 60s Hippies spoke about 'Krishna Consciousness' and equated it with 'Christ Consciousness' and lived libertine lives that had no Christian content at all. Without commitment to literal Scripture there is no real knowledge of Christ. To be centred on Christ will involve confronting errors that Scripture condemns; Viola supports many of these errors.

Misinterpretation of history and Scripture

Viola makes much about being a historian and yet displays serious inaccuracies, such as stating something as Biblical history which actually contradicts the Biblical text. This has been noted by an author who says,

He has frequently commented that when Saul (Paul) came to Antioch he did not serve in leadership but as an organic member of the body. But it is clear from scripture that Saul was brought to Antioch by Barnabus to teach the Word of God (Acts 11:23-26, 30; 13:1).²³

Another example is when he states that Jesus had a negative view of the Jewish temple.²⁴ This is a misrepresentation since Jesus himself affirmed that the temple was his Father's house (Lk 2:49; Jn 2:16). The declaration that God does not live in temples made by hands (Acts 17:24) could only occur after the cross and ascension.²⁵ Furthermore, God commanded the building of both temples (1 Chron 22:9-10; Ezra 1:1-3). It is unscholarly to build a case on such mistaken sensationalism.

Viola also demonstrates an arbitrary use of historic interpretation; such as using his subjective dates of NT letters, his imagined sequence of NT books and using false extra-Biblical facts as a means of interpreting the text.²⁶ His criticism of the order of books in the NT is a blatant denial of the sovereignty of God in preserving the text of Scripture. It also fails to understand that Paul and the other apostles were behind the order (via their delegates), which was arranged for a spiritual purpose. It is sheer hubris for Viola to suggest a better order. God is the preserver of his own word.

His understanding of the Reformation is weak and flawed, being very one-sided, sounding more like recent jibes from Arminian headline grabbers.²⁷ The shortcomings of the Reformers are highlighted and their failure to deal with the foundational issues of church practice are also emphasised, showing a preference for Anabaptists.

²³ *Rethinking Frank Viola*; <http://www.paganchristianity.infinology.net/frankviola.html>

²⁴ *Pagan Christianity* p14.

²⁵ The purpose of the Tabernacle, and subsequent Temple, was that God dwelled in the midst above the Ark of the Covenant (Ex 25:22, 30:6; Lev 16:2).

²⁶ *Pagan Christianity*, p223-226.

²⁷ 'I stand with John Howard Yoder's critique when he said, "The whole concern of Reformation theology was to justify restructuring the organised church without shaking its foundations.'" Viola in an interview. The reformers have recently become whipping boys for not doing enough to reform church practice, ignoring the huge work that they did achieve. This view is facile and simplistic; advocates have been Jacob Prasch, Tom MacMahon and Dave Hunt. For a critique of this view see my book, *Was the Reformation Good News?*

This shows a real lack of understanding what actually happened in the Reformation and the huge work that was particularly required of Martin Luther. It is almost miraculous that Luther (one man against an empire) achieved what he did; something no previous reformer had managed to do – break with Rome. It reveals a lack of understanding the age in which the Reformation took place and the need to change only what could be changed without traumatising the public mind. The key purpose of the Reformation was the issue of truth; doctrinal truth and the publication of the Scriptures. This was a massive work, and one which was very successful. The doctrines of justification by faith and the priesthood of all believers were both immensely powerful in changing the world order on their own.

Arrogantly, Viola claims that his book *Pagan Christianity* seeks to do that which the reformers failed to do. His assessment of various church movements and leaders is also skewed, usually with a bias towards modern men and movements plus a serious lack of judgment regarding Roman Catholicism.

Ignorance of the early Jewish impact

Early church history is more complicated than everybody first thought. As well as a legalistic branch that developed into Ebionism, there was also a Jewish component of the early church that was godly, and this remained strong up to the 5th century. Note: '*Jewish Christianity had a large presence into the fifth century outside of Israel and Syria, and almost all of the New Testament was written by Jewish Christians*'.²⁸ Recent scholarly research has uncovered much about this. Viola denies or ignores this movement and makes the repeated point that even at the end of the 1st century the church was becoming more Gentile and more pagan. In fact it was diverse.

Ben Witherington²⁹ shows that the, '*idea that Christianity had become overwhelmingly Gentile and already was adopting numerous pagan practices in the last third of the first century A.D....is historically false*'.³⁰ In any case 'Gentile' does not equate to 'pagan'; Paul was the apostle to many Gentile churches that were far from pagan; indeed, his chief problem was Judaising not paganism.

Revelation

Viola teaches a mystical view of gaining knowledge of God. This is to be captured by revelation into the human spirit, in some vague, emotional, Higher-Life manner, rather than by objective and rational appreciation coupled with submission to God's Spirit. He appears to have gained this idea from Watchman Nee who taught something similar. Nee also taught that preaching without emotion had no spiritual power. All mystics confuse subjective emotional responses with spiritual apprehension.

His idea of revelation is 'spiritual insight', which is not really defined and is contrasted with intellectual knowledge, which Viola depreciates. However, in Scripture revelation is the revealing of actual knowledge to the mind by the Spirit (usually through mundane Scripture reading). Mental apprehension is not to be criticised and intellectual development is to be encouraged. The Biblical principle is: 'in thy light we see light';³¹ that is an enlightening in the heart associated with a rational, intellectual apprehension of God's word.

²⁸ *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Developments*.

²⁹ A former Methodist minister and now professor of New Testament Interpretation at Asbury Theological Seminary and also a historian and a prolific writer.

³⁰ Ben Witherington, *Pagan Christianity: by George Barna and Frank Viola: Part One of the Review*, <http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2008/06/pagan-christianity-by-george-barna-and.html>

³¹ Ps 36:9, 'For with You is the fountain of life; In Your light we see light'.

Typically, Viola is confused and hypocritical here since his books show an intellectual bent and his bibliographies are long and diverse. The clear link between his ideas on this with Nee's teaching shows that it did not come by divine revelation by-passing his mind but through intellectual reading of Nee's works.

The Trinity

Biblical orthodoxy rejects the eternal subordination of the Son of God.³²

Viola has a false view of the Trinity in that he fails to differentiate between functional and ontological subordination. This means that a subordination accepted for a working (such as the Second Person becoming a man) does not mean that this subordination affects the being of God (i.e. the Second Person is not inferior to the Father). The offices within the Trinity are eternal and voluntary. Without these offices there would be no distinction of persons in the Godhead and thus no Trinity at all. The Son has always been the Son, and not just in the incarnation (as claimed by Viola).

In the same way all Christians are equal in justification but some have functions or offices that imply authority, such as fathers in families or elders in the local church. This is also denied by Viola, who teaches against the idea of authority in church leaders and yet becomes authoritarian when he is one.

Viola's point is that if the Trinity does not contain a hierarchy of offices, then the church should not have a hierarchy of offices either. As Viola fails to understand the Trinity so he fails to understand church offices. I am as opposed to hierarchical tiers of leadership in church as he is but this does not avoid the fact that the office of eldership is a real office with authority, though this authority should be exercised like a shepherd or a father and not formally or institutionally. The other office of deacon is also a real office, but this carries no spiritual authority.

The point is that the Trinity is a community of love with voluntary subordination amongst the equal members.³³ This is to be the same in the church. Functions must be observed with their status – elders have overall spiritual authority; deacons have authority over the use of money and women have no authority over men; though all are equal as sons.

Hell

Viola is ambivalent about the doctrine of eternal judgment and appears to have not thought through such an important foundational matter,

Here's my concluding statement on hell: When I'm finished exploring and declaring the unsearchable riches of Jesus Christ with my brothers and sisters, I'll get around to dissecting the anatomy of hell.³⁴

How anyone can claim to be such an important teacher for the global church, one who is reforming the church itself, and not have considered basic doctrine is beyond me. Worse, however, is his support of Edward Fudge's book, *The Fire that Consumes*; the chief modern work on Annihilationalism. This position is contrary to fundamental confessional statements in all Reformed creeds. The standards of Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Anglicans and Baptists (and even Roman Catholics) agree on this issue.

Frequently, one finds in Viola that his claimed focus upon the supremacy of Christ leads him into positions which are opposed to the doctrine that Christ preached.³⁵

³² *Pagan Christianity*, p264.

³³ The Son is eternally generated by the Father and the Spirit proceeds from both the Son and the Father.

³⁴ Blog post in March 2011.

Lack of theological precision

Viola constantly harps on about practical matters in church combined with a subjective desire to centre upon Christ, all at the expense of the truth of God's word. His hatred of doctrinal clarity is expressed in his avoidance of doctrinal standards (i.e. creeds, confessions and catechisms). He says,

Contemporary theology cut its teeth on the abstractions of Greek philosophy. University academics adopted an Aristotelian model of thinking that centred on rational knowledge and logic. The dominating drive in scholastic theology was the assimilation and communication of knowledge. (For this reason the Western mind has always been fond of creedal formulations, doctrinal statements, and other bloodless abstractions.)³⁶

Using the term 'bloodless abstractions' with reference to standards is extremely odd;³⁷ it is also false. Does Viola (the self-proclaimed historian) know nothing of the many martyrs who died in defence of their confessions? Under Bloody Mary even women and children were drowned for simply refusing to attend mass on the basis that it was contrary to the truth of their confession. Scotland was filled with martyrs in the 'Killing Times' for their determination to follow the Solemn League and Covenant. Many standards were built on blood. Some composers of confessions were killed for their work, such as Guido de Brès, formulator of the *Belgic Confession*.

Viola prefers a very basic acceptance of rough truth commonly held by everyone ecumenically, such as that suggested by CS Lewis in *Mere Christianity*.³⁸ He believes it to be an advantage to church life where everyone knows nothing about what other members believe about eschatology.³⁹ Perhaps he has never read Paul's instruction for church members to 'think the same thing' and to 'speak the same thing'.⁴⁰

The refusal to accept any form of creed is the utmost folly imaginable. If people have no basic structure of theology to follow, they will follow any theology presented to them. One of the reasons for the current universal apostasy is that modern evangelicals, in the main, were never catechised. With no confession as a foundation, people form their own system (usually a very confused and contradictory one) from whatever they hear and read.

Clearly Viola's ability to adopt all sorts of theological inconsistencies derives from his lack of any precision of theological structure in his own mind. This also results in him using theological words but with false definitions of his own making.

False statements about church

While emphasising that the church is organic, and that it naturally develops in an ad hoc manner when structured correctly, Viola says that, '*the New Testament doesn't supply us with a detailed blueprint for church practice*'.⁴¹ Again, '*The term 'organic church' does not refer to a particular model of the church. (We believe no perfect model exists.)*'⁴²

My many papers on Biblical church show that this is untrue. Consider, would God allow his people to build churches for 2,000 years with no proper instructions?

³⁵ Here is an example: 'I will show you whom you should fear: fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell [Gehenna]; yes, I say to you, fear Him!' (Lk 12:5).

³⁶ *Pagan Christianity*, p204.

³⁷ Clearly a reference to the Anabaptist term, 'the trail of blood'.

³⁸ Viola, *Re-imagining Church*, p237.

³⁹ *Re-imagining Church*, p131.

⁴⁰ Rm 12:16; 1 Cor 1:10; Phil 2:2, 3:16, 4:2.

⁴¹ *Pagan Christianity*, p244.

⁴² *Ibid.*, XXI.

We know that the church meets primarily on Sunday; that it is centred upon the Lord's Supper and that a communal meal often precedes this. We know that it is led by a team of equal elders whose job is to oversee the spiritual education of the people and lead like fathers. We know that the church meets in a home and that every member has the right to minister his gift under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We could go on.

The logic of Viola's claim that there is no blueprint or model means that, in practice, any church can do anything it likes, as long as it is under his definition of 'organic'. As with other features of his ministry, this is an invitation for the authority of subjective feelings instead of Scripture. To offer no instruction on practice means that people will follow every wind of doctrine. What he really means is that there is no set liturgy dominated by a minister but there are a number of features that may arise – but his list of these is unbiblical and open-ended.

Viola contradicts himself by affirming that the NT gives no blueprint for church practice but then proceeds to write many books detailing what correct church practice is, according to him.

A final point here is that Viola's emphasis on no leaders having any authority means that there is no formal ability to effect the discipline of offenders. If all have the same authority and a squabble emerges between two brothers, who decides how to sort it out? Viola has no answer. He would merely say that it is a matter 'for the brothers'; but what if there are two equal and opposing camps? It is at times like this that elders must have authority.

Lack of understanding about inner corruption

This follows on from his adoption of mysticism. Mystics concentrate on the inner man; they are centred upon getting deep within and finding inner peace and thus union with God. This usually means various forms of discipline to strip back reason and logic, usually termed in 'dying to oneself' terminology. Thus the meditated ('contemplative') prayer discipline that Viola propagates based upon the experiences of historic mystics.

The Bible never teaches this at all. The reason is that the further you delve subjectively into your character, the more you will access the old nature. It is only in God's light that we see light. We are commanded to look unto Jesus, to look above, to set our eyes upon heaven (Col 3:1-3), and never told to look into ourselves for truth. Christianity is the opposite of mysticism. Thus even worship is based upon rationality and self-control (Rm 12:1-2; Gal 5:23). We must never seek abandonment; which is just an opportunity for the devil.

Now, firstly, this means that all Viola's posturing about mysticism is not only wrong but dangerous. However, he goes further. His teaching on church practice is equally mystical. His emphasis is that if we establish the church his way, everything just occurs naturally without any planning or attention. (Even common sense should tell you that this is nuts!) See when he says:

Because the church is organic, it has a natural expression- as all organisms do. For that reason, when a groups of Christians follow their spiritual DNA, they will gather in a way that matches the DNA of the triune God- for they posses the same life that God \himself possesses ... Consequently, the DNA of the church is marked by the very traits that we find in the triune God ... The DNA of the church produces certain identifiable features. ... It will spontaneously gather in a Biblical fashion. The church will be led of the Spirit to fulfil the apostolic tradition.⁴³

⁴³ *Pagan Christianity*, p263, 250.

Firstly, why speak in these meaningless terms about DNA? Why not speak Biblically about the role of the Holy Spirit in forming the church according to God's word?⁴⁴ But, secondly, this approach completely ignores the reality of the sinful nature in believers. Most of the problems that really troubled the NT apostles were not outside opposition but internal false ministry and a tendency of the body to go astray. Without faith, trust in the ministry of the Spirit and the work of elders in leading according to God's word, the natural tendency of churches is to go wrong. This was clearly evidenced in the first House Church Mvt. of the 1970s. Only those with sound teaching and good elders produced any good fruit. Ignoring the spiritual disciplines required by God's word, particularly good leading, will only result in chaos, not righteousness.

Furthermore, this completely ignores the work of the enemy in fighting against the development of sound churches, producing all sorts of temptations to ruin the body. It is not easy to build the church and the 'hands off' approach of Viola is doomed. But, this approach that he champions in writing is the opposite of what he actually did in practice, which was very 'hands on' (see later).

This sort of teaching follows that of the Anabaptist spiritualists, whom Viola has declared a fondness of. The worst of these degenerated into scandalous, libertine anarchists. These denied the problem of the old nature in believers, averring a sort of perfectionism and believed that the church would develop spiritually if it avoided the world ('world-flight'). Calvin said that their idea of the Spirit leading them was whatever came into their head.⁴⁵ This is similar to modern Charismania.

Viola, however, while denying Biblical ecclesiology, avers that the reason why churches go wrong is because they have adopted pagan ideas. Now while there is an undeniable case that some modern church practices arise from heathens, this was not the case in churches established by the apostles, which also fell into errors and aberrations (just note the Corinthian and Galatian churches alone). The real problem is unchecked human nature.

The church will not develop spiritually if it simply follows the DNA of believers (whatever that means); the strength of the church is never dependent upon what men do but what Jesus does in building it – and he demands that we obey his word and structure it according to apostolic teaching.

Worship – anything goes

Despite saying that we can only worship in the way that God prescribes, he has already stated that there is no church blueprint to follow. Thus specific instructions in the NT are not prescriptive but descriptive of that period. Churches can all do different things in different places at different times according to cultural norms. The NT condemns this attitude demanding that we do the things it commands that are at great variance to our cultural norms (such as being baptised in water). Viola contravenes the regulative principle.

The implication of Viola's books is that, in the end, the only person who can determine what is prescriptive and what is descriptive in the NT is Viola himself.

The Lord's Supper

In common with other House Church associations (such as the NTRF), Viola demands that the Supper should only be celebrated as part of a communal meal with no special

⁴⁴ Viola does mention the role of the Spirit but emphasises the natural development of the church when individual believers are doing it right, as this quote shows.

⁴⁵ *Treatises Against the Anabaptists and Against the Libertines*, p227.

independent significance. The bread and the wine are taken as part of a full, normal meal. I won't waste time denouncing this idea here as I have done so elsewhere in detail.⁴⁶ When you confront leaders who teach this they utterly fail to substantiate their teaching with evidence. In my view this idea, which leads to the bread and wine being eaten superficially whilst people are socialising, is a blasphemy.⁴⁷

The clear teaching on the Supper in the NT is that it is a memorial, not a social event; it is centred on Christ not satiating ourselves; it must be done with reverence and not superficially; and that if it is not done according to God's instructions, we will suffer.

Church leadership style

I have received emails from folk in America who were involved with Viola in previous churches. They speak about his 'heavy handedness', which led to abuse and people leaving in great hurt. The stories emanate particularly from 2002.

The following cultic traits have been observed regarding churches under Edwards' / Viola's leadership.

Authoritarianism:

- Members become totally reliant upon the leader and are told to obey him in every area of life.
- Questioning or criticising a leader is unacceptable.
- Members become insipid and weak.
- People are rebuked for actions that are not sinful but which differ from the leader's ideas.
- Discussion of church problems is forbidden.
- Leaders do not admit error in what they teach or receive correction from 'outsiders'.
- Members are told not to speak to one another about certain subjects.
- Leaders are not accountable to members.

Sectarianism and elitism:

- People become cut off from their old friends.
- Followers are told not to fellowship with those who have left the group (or even not to date outside of the group).
- Followers feel disconnected from believers outside the group.
- Churches can only be started by a worker (i.e. an apostle sent by Viola, previously Edwards).
- The group shows little compassion for those outside of it.
- Churches outside the group are stated to be wrong.

Selective teaching:

- Parts of scripture are emphasised that support their cultic ideas (such as regarding workers) while other concepts are ignored.
- In-house literature and tapes dominate the church.

Leadership character faults:

- Lying, deceit, anger when criticised.

⁴⁶ *Why do Evangelical Churches Fail to Submit to Biblical Teaching about The Lord's Supper?*

⁴⁷ You can find arguments for this in *Ecclesia*, ed. Steve Atkerson (NTRF).

These are typical features of a cult. There can be no doubt that the ministry of Viola is untrustworthy, no matter how much useful information is in his books.

Example: The need of apostles

If an assembly was not founded by a "worker," it should disband until it has one.
[Response by Viola to a question at *The 2001 Southern House Church Conference*, workshop, 'The Story of the Early Church.']

This appears to be an error based upon Gene Edwards' teaching. It poses loads of questions:

- Who defines what a 'worker' is?
- Why use this term for a ministry, why not use 'apostle' if that's what they mean.
- Who determines if this worker is bona fide?
- Sometimes churches are begun by someone other than an apostle (e.g. Samaria, Rome).
- This idea really aims to get churches under someone's authoritarian banner.
- In practice Edwards (and thus Viola) taught that unless they had started the church it was false. At one time Edwards actually publicly stated that only he was teaching the truth about radical church life.

Many of Edward's and Viola's ideas are comparable to the Charismatic Shepherding Movements of the 70s & 80s which seems to have passed them by at the time. They are repeating these mistakes with a different franchise of God's people. In fact one of Viola's early books was titled, '*Who is your Covering*', dealing with the need for apostolic authority and submission. He appears to have utterly failed to understand the deep controversy that was generated by the Restoration Movement (Shepherding Movement in the U.S.) in the early 1980s that was based on this same doctrine. In those days the idea of finding your covering was also prevalent until the movement was scandalised and dissipated into the Third Wave of John Wimber.

Interim conclusion

Viola's past written teaching was flawed in that it promoted cultic ideas centred on men, rather than Biblical truth centred on Christ (e.g. '*Who is your covering?*'). His current published teaching is severely compromised and riddled with factual errors (e.g. *Pagan Christianity*). His church leadership style, at least up to 2002, was authoritarian and cultic. His fundamental stance is mystical rather than spiritual and his writings display hubris.⁴⁸

If we summarise the problems with Viola's ministry we see the following:

- An unsound ambivalence towards Calvinism.
- An openness to almost anything; a lack of discernment.
- A denial any need for confessions and creeds.
- A display of a lack of theological clarity.
- A lack of due diligence in research and misrepresentation of citations.
- Support for Roman Catholic leaders.
- Support for Roman Catholic mystics.
- Practice of mystical disciplines.
- Supporter of NT Wright.

⁴⁸ Several reviewers of *Pagan Christianity* mention that Viola seems to be 'full of himself' (or words to that effect). See *Critique of Pagan Christianity*, Docent Research Group, Justin Holcomb [& BJ Stockman], 23 November 2009: '*The tone of the book itself is problematic, because the authors are so sure of themselves. When one finds that their biblical and historical claims, which were carried with such confidence, are not all historically and biblically viable, their certainties become almost comical.*'

- Formerly a close associate of Gene Edwards.
- Support for many (not all) of the errors of the Emerging Church; plus support for leaders in this movement.
- Supporter of the Toronto Blessing.
- Ambivalence about the doctrine of eternal punishment; plus support for key annihilationalists.
- Denial of the true value of the Reformation.
- Support for radical Anabaptist heretics (not all were heretics).
- Dangerous church practices, particularly authoritarianism.
- Teaches a false view of modern 'apostolic' authority.
- A false view of apostolic teaching on church practice.
- He teaches a false practice of the Lord's Supper.
- A false view of worship.
- He is confused about the Trinity.
- He has mystical views about revelation and knowledge.

Throughout this book we have referred to Viola's *Pagan Christianity* many times. A simple but important point is that his essential thesis⁴⁹ is deeply offensive to the universal family of Christians. He is saying that, with the exception of the earliest church, all church movements have been founded upon pagan culture in virtually every area and are at odds with God's will. It denies anything of value in them – and this is a judgment too far.

If we had time I am certain we could find even more problems with Viola's ministry, but we have taken too much space already. This should be sufficient to demonstrate that he is a wolf. It is a crying shame that he is taken as a chief representative of the house church movement.

Conclusion

Those of us who advocate meeting in a Biblical manner, in homes, are likely to get tarred with the broad brush of 'House Churchism'.⁵⁰ This means that we, who believe that the church should be small, based upon community and meeting in a house, need to be aware of the situation around us, especially in America. We need to understand the false views of those who claim to be leaders of a 'House Church Movement' so that we can distance ourselves from them.

It also means that believers who wish to meet in homes need to be very careful about their associations. Just because a group meets in a house it does not mean that they are sound. The situation today is similar to that in the early 1970s UK, there were many house churches but most were dubious, some were heretics while a few were cults.

In the UK at the moment there are several independent house churches and some house church streams comprising a number of churches. Most of these are either liberal, unbiblical (e.g. women leaders), similar to Viola's teaching or attached to some denomination or association, such as The Emerging Church or an offshoot of Anglicanism. Believers must beware.

⁴⁹ I know that the book is co-authored with Barna but the book was originally written and self-published by Viola and then 'souped up' later with Barna for a wider audience.

⁵⁰ This author has already been condemned by some in this manner, and for holding views he does not believe in.

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