

Immature Fruit on the Organic Church Vine

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My friend, Jeff Dwiggins, asked me to offer a critique of the organic church movement. He has offered his own critique on his blog, "[The Organic Church Movement – Reinvigorating the Church or Simply Going Rogue?](#)" I had not heard of the movement, so to learn about it I read their websites and two of their books. Obviously, my comments here don't involve an experience that I have had with an organic church. Those experiences might be different than the impression I get from the material that I have read. But I am fairly knowledgeable about theology, and I can critique the theology that is presented in their written literature. One of the books is *Reimagining Church* by Frank Viola.¹ The other is *Organic Church* by Neil Cole.²

One interesting fact to note at the beginning is that these books have two different definitions of "organic church." Viola says that a church is "organic" when its worship service is unplanned and allows open participation from all the members. On the other hand, Cole only briefly mentions the worship service of the church in his book. For Cole, "organic" refers to church planting. Churches are started wherever new converts are made. Rather than push a new convert to attend your church, encourage them to start a church in their home or some other convenient location where they live or work, and help them build it from the surrounding community.

Cole's Organic Church Planting

I find that Cole's emphasis is an exciting, timely, and largely biblical message. (To the extent that Cole shares Viola's views, my critique of Viola below will suffice to address those issues for Cole.) While a thorough understanding of God's word defines a mature Christian, the New Testament does not require expert theological credentials to be a founding member of a new church. Seminary degrees were not required in the book of Acts when the gospel spread throughout the known world. The Ethiopian eunuch was left to start a church in his home country only after a brief Bible lesson by Phillip (Acts 8). The apostle Paul started churches just as Cole says that we should today: Gain a convert in a new location and start a church in that person's home, as in

¹ Frank Viola, *Reimagining Church: Pursuing the Dream of Organic Christianity* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2008).

² Neil Cole, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005).

the case of Lydia (Acts 16). The apostle provides continuing training and guidance, but after some initial training, he allows it to be largely self-governing – not micromanaging the church. Those members learn to repeat the process, resulting in rapid replication.

Our God is an entrepreneurial God,³ and we are called to imitate Him in expanding His kingdom in any way we can, within the bounds of His word. Cole issues a rousing call to put aside business as usual and conquer the world for Christ, busting through the gates of hell, “for the devil to be back on his heels rather than the church.”⁴ And he is not all talk. Cole reports phenomenal results from his methods: “At the time of this writing, there have been close to 800 churches started in thirty-two states and twenty-three nations around the world, in only six years.”⁵

Requiring certification through lengthy educational programs before missionaries can plant and lead new churches has been a major hindrance to church growth in the past. Baptist churches spread the quickest in the American frontier because Baptist preachers were willing to go and makes disciples into new areas first. At this same time, in the early 1800’s, Presbyterians added the requirement of the three-year seminary to the four-year college requirement because the latter wasn’t doing its intended job of training ministers of the gospel.⁶ An old line is that “Baptists walked into the West, Methodists rode on horseback, Presbyterians went by steamboat, and Episcopalians waited for regularly scheduled train service.”⁷ The Baptists reaped the greatest harvest because they sent the most workers (Matt. 9:37-38). To this day, Baptist churches dominate that landscape.

But the Bible still requires church leaders to “be able to give instruction in sound doctrine” (Titus 1:9). Whether Cole’s church planting is a flash in the pan or not will depend on whether the new converts move on to spiritual maturity, which requires increased doctrinal knowledge (Heb. 5:11-14; 2 Tim. 2:15). Cole seems to understand this and has developed theological training materials that attempt to achieve the goals of being 1) received personally, 2) repeated easily, and 3) reproduced strategically.⁸ In line with that, he has developed a curriculum called “Truth Quest” that “is a system for training emerging leaders in systematic theology.”⁹ I haven’t examined the curriculum to see whether I agree with the theology, but if it accomplishes his three goals, it should

³ See Chris Ortiz, “God, The Entrepreneur” at <http://reigninlife.com/?p=177>.

⁴ Loc. 333. (I used the Amazon Kindle edition, so “location” is used rather than page numbers for citations.)

⁵ Loc. 521

⁶ The Puritans established Harvard University in 1636 “To advance *Learning* and perpetuate it to Posterity; dreading to leave an illiterate Ministry [sic] to the Churches...”

⁷ Gary North, “Editor’s Conclusion,” in *Theonomy: An Informed Response*, Gary North, ed. (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), pp. 333-34, online at http://www.garynorth.com/freebooks/docs/2112_47e.htm.

⁸ Loc. 1434

⁹ <http://www.cmaresources.org/truthquest>

be something that could be modified to efficiently transmit various theological viewpoints. Dr. Gary North argues that becoming an apprentice of a “master craftsman” and reading fifty books on your subject of interest will give you an education that is better than a degree from a traditional school because you learn in the actual environment that you will work, rather than the isolated environment of the classroom. This method can be used for new church leaders wanting advanced training.¹⁰ The internet should also make training leaders in the church much easier without sending them off to seminary. Third Millennium Ministries (ThirdMill.org) is in the process of putting a complete seminary education online for free.

I don't know what view of eschatology that Cole believes in, but one other suggestion for Cole and others in his movement is to back up the call for victory for the church with a systematic understanding of what the Bible teaches about the victory of God's kingdom on earth. The Great Commission is not a mission impossible. Christ intends to make disciples of all nations. It is a fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies about the reign of the Messiah – that He would subdue all the kingdoms of the earth (Psalm 2); that all nations would settle disputes by God's law and wars would end (Isa. 2:2-4); that “the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea (Isa. 11:9; cf. Hab. 2:14). Christ is now seated on David's throne, in the process of making His enemies His footstool (Acts 2:29-36). It's a very gradual growth, like the growth of the smallest seed into a great tree (Matt. 13:31-32), with plenty of pruning along the way (John 15:1-8), but eventually God's kingdom fills the whole earth (Dan. 2:35).

The goal is not just to preach to all nations (Matt. 24:14). That was accomplished within a generation of the apostles (Matt. 24:34; cf. Acts 2:5, Rom. 1:8, Col. 1:6). The goal is to disciple the nations. “Nations” in Matt. 28:19 does not refer to just political institutions nor isolated individuals. The Greek word translated “nations,” *ethnos*, refers to men in all their social relations.¹¹ All of culture is to become obedient to all of Christ's commandments. This view is called postmillennialism.¹²

Viola's Organic Church Service

Unfortunately, I have many problems with Frank Viola's arguments in *Reimagining Church*. First, whereas Cole is comfortable meeting in any building that will accommodate a church where new converts are found, Viola insists that homes are

¹⁰ Gary North, *Backward Christian Soldiers?: An Action Manual for Christian Reconstruction* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1984), pp. 168-69, online at http://www.garynorth.com/freebooks/docs/212e_47e.htm.

¹¹ Kenneth Gentry, *The Greatness of the Great Commission* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economic, 1993), p. 54, at http://www.garynorth.com/freebooks/docs/215a_47e.htm.

¹² Mike Warren, “The Coming of Christ's Kingdom: The End-Times and the Triumph of the Gospel,” at http://www.christianciv.com/eschatology_bs_TOC.htm.

the “normative” place for the normal church meeting.¹³ He also insists that the normal church meeting is supposed to be open-participatory, where every single person participates. And third, he insists that church officers are unbiblical. He blames the move toward a clergy/laity distinction and away from house churches in the third and fourth centuries for the rise of theological divisions in the church.¹⁴ Of course, this means that the return of house churches with no officers will considerably end divisions in the church. This shows a utopianism on Viola’s part. He is unrealistic.

Church history is instructive here. This is not the first time that such a doctrine has been proposed. The Anabaptists held to a similar view of church government – that it should be largely rejected.¹⁵ The modern-day Mennonites come from this movement. Roger Williams, often considered the founder of the American Baptist church, held such a view.¹⁶ He said, “There is no regularly constituted church of Christ on earth, nor any person qualified to administer any church ordinances; nor can there be until new apostles are sent by the Great Head of the Church for whose coming I am seeking.”¹⁷ In the 1800s, some of the Plymouth Brethren also rejected any hierarchy in the church. Viola often quotes the famous theologian F.F. Bruce, a Plymouth Brethren, in support of his views. Did any of these movements end theological divisions in the church? No, not even in their own congregations. Even though F.F. Bruce was a Plymouth Brethren, he rejected their Dispensational view of the end-times (as does Viola). And even if there were no theological disputes in their congregations, that would not necessarily be good. They could all hold to the same *false* doctrines. Paul says that, “when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized” (1 Cor. 11:18-19). If there were no “genuine” Christians among them to give rise to factions, that would be a problem. And the Corinthian church

¹³ “That the *normative* meeting place for the church was the home is, I believe, beyond dispute.” (Loc. 796, p. 94, emphasis in original) “Normative” can mean two things: 1) Statistically most common. Viola says that for over two centuries after Christianity began, churches met in homes. 2) An ethical standard. The quote above is Viola’s conclusion after listing several benefits of meeting in a home that are not met by other types of buildings. So he is using “normative” in both senses. Viola allows for church meetings in other types of buildings if for some other reason than an open-participatory meeting, like for apostolic instruction or an evangelism meeting. On his blog Viola says, “There’s nothing magical about meeting in a home. And the living room, while a great place to gather, should never be the Christian’s passion” (<http://frankviola.wordpress.com/2010/01/14/why-organic-church-is-not-exactly-a-movement-christianity-today-article/>). This is either a change of position, or he is saying that meeting in a home is necessary but not sufficient—you need open-participatory meetings and to get rid of church officers as well in order to achieve a healthy church.

¹⁴ Loc. 1056

¹⁵ Franklin H. Littell, *An Anabaptist View of the Church* (1958), pp.92-94, at

<http://books.google.com/books?id=GnPWYWUSuG4C&pg=PP1&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q=&f=false>

¹⁶ See Gary North, *Political Polytheism: The Myth of Pluralism* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), p. 539, at http://www.garynorth.com/freebooks/docs/21f2_47e.htm.

¹⁷ As quoted William Cullen Bryant in *Picturesque America* (1874), p. 502. Christ sending new apostles? As Gary North shows, Roger Williams was more of a screwball than most people realize.

supposedly, according to Viola, had no church officers and had open-participatory assemblies!

Of course, while church history is instructive, the Bible is the final authority. In addition to the quote above about factions in the Corinthian church, the Bible reveals many theological divisions in the first century church, and Viola even makes reference to them in his book, such as the division in the Corinthian church over boasting about who followed which apostle (1 Cor. 1:11-13).¹⁸ There were false apostles (2 Cor. 11) and antichrists (1 John 4) in their churches, and false teaching about the resurrection (2 Tim. 2:17-18) and the Mosaic law (Acts 15, Gal. 2, 1 Tim. 1:3-11), to name just a few.

There are counter-examples in the Scripture to Viola's only-house-churches thesis. He acknowledges that a church met at Solomon's Porch in the outer court of the temple (Acts 2:46; 5:12), but claims that this was just for special training seminars rather than regular worship assemblies.¹⁹ He offers no proof of this. He dismisses Paul's use of the hall of Tyrannus for two years as temporary for apostolic purposes of training rather than regular church service.²⁰ But two years is a long time if they needed to be meeting in a house. Furthermore, Viola presents apostolic training as primarily training on how to have open-participatory meetings in a house.²¹ Meeting in an assembly hall for two years to teach how to worship in a house would be counter-productive.

Two of Viola's primary arguments for homes being the norm for church meetings are: 1) The church is primarily described as a family in the New Testament, therefore it should meet in a family atmosphere; and 2) the New Testament teaches that worship services should be open-participatory, which is easily facilitated in a home, and not like most modern churches that elevate the preacher to be the focus of the service. He thinks that it is unbiblical to have services in which "a pastor preached a sermon and everyone else passively listened."²² Viola claims:

Nowhere in the New Testament do we find grounds for a church meeting that is dominated or directed by a human being. Neither do we find any biblical merit for a gathering that's centered on a pulpit and focused upon one man.²³

Making the church assembly more friendly and family-like is commendable, but didn't Jesus teach by giving lectures, sometimes lengthy (e.g. the Sermon on the

¹⁸ Loc. 1030

¹⁹ Loc. 800

²⁰ Loc. 805

²¹ Loc. 570. He says here that this is "one of the tasks of an apostolic worker," not the "primary" task. But he does not seem to place much importance in other areas of theology, like eschatology, for them to be a priority in his apostolic ministry (Loc. 1146).

²² Loc. 405

²³ Loc. 433.

Mount, the Olivet Discourse)? But maybe He had that privilege because He was the Son of God? But then we see that Paul used the same teaching method, and told Timothy that his primary duty was to “preach the word” (2 Tim. 4:2) at the Ephesian church. At Troas Paul talked until midnight, when one young man fell asleep, fell out of the second-story window and died. God answered Paul’s prayer to bring him back to life, and then Paul continued talking until dawn (Acts 20:7-12)!

Viola attempts to dismiss Paul’s example by making a distinction between the job of an apostle and the job of teachers in a church, who instruct in an open-participatory manner (1 Cor. 14:26). But why would the teachers in the church not follow Paul’s (and Jesus’) example of teaching method, even if they also instructed more briefly in an open-participatory time of fellowship? Learning styles would not have changed. If Paul used the lecture method effectively, so could others. Paul says, “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Tim. 2:2). Timothy was supposed to train others in the church to be able to teach the same things that Paul taught him. The same style of teaching would naturally be involved with transmitting the same material. If it was effective for Paul and Timothy, it would have been effective for others.

Viola does not like the elevation of the pastor as the ruler of a congregation. That’s a legitimate concern. Viola correctly observes that a plurality of elders are supposed to provide oversight in a church (Acts 14:23; 20:17; Phil. 1:1).²⁴ Although, contrary to Viola, not all will necessarily be teachers: “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17). And the examples of Peter (Acts 2) and James (Acts 15) show that one person can be the prominent teacher among the elders.

Does 1 Corinthians 14 really teach open participation of everyone present for all of the publicly-edifying gifts? Just prior to this, Paul has gone through a lengthy explanation that everyone does not have every spiritual gift. “Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?” (1 Cor. 12:29-30). “Each of you” in 1 Cor. 14:26, therefore, is not universal; it simply means that a number of different people contribute as they have been gifted. Furthermore, Paul limits the number of people who contribute for each gift: “two, or three at the most” (1 Cor. 14:27). Third, Paul excludes women from judging prophecy or teaching in a regular church service where their decisions would convey doctrinal authority (1 Cor. 14:33-35; 1 Tim. 2:11-14).²⁵ Fourth, James

²⁴ Loc. 1491.

²⁵ On his website, Viola offers an argument for allowing women to teach in the church despite these two verses: “Reimagining the Woman’s Role in the Church: An Open Letter,” at <http://www.ptmin.org/role.pdf>. He begins with rather brazen question begging, saying that the new covenant did away with all the distinctions between

restricts the number of people who will be qualified to teach the congregation with this warning: “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3:1). Everyone in a congregation is not qualified to be a teacher.

The spontaneity that Viola claims to find in 1 Corinthians 14 for everything that happens in a church assembly is highly questionable. His basis for this claim is Paul’s statement that “If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent” (v. 30). But receiving a revelation is by nature an event that does not occur according to a humanly planned timetable. On the other hand, bringing a hymn or a lesson can be humanly planned. There is no mention in the text of these being spontaneous.

Furthermore, Viola claims that “let the first be silent” means that anyone can interrupt anyone else who is speaking:

The Holy Spirit so governed the gathering that if a person received an insight while another was sharing, the second speaker was free to interject his or her thought (1 Cor. 14:29-30). Accordingly, interruptions were a common part of the gathering (1 Cor. 14:27-40). Such a meeting is unthinkable in today’s institutional church. (Just imagine what would happen if you interrupted the pastor with a word of insight while he was delivering his sermon.)²⁶

While applying “be silent” to teaching as well as prophesying as a Viola does is legitimate, the original context of prophesying shows that his interpretation that allows spontaneous interruptions does not make sense. It doesn’t make much sense for God to give the first person a revelation to declare to the congregation and not let him finish declaring it. Allowing a prophet to be interrupted just one second into his prophesying is also inconsistent with the stated goal of allowing all the prophets to prophesy: “you can all prophesy” (1 Cor. 14:31). And third, it is inconsistent with the goal that everything be done “decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:40) rather than with “confusion” (v. 33). Would

people commanded by the old covenant, and any text that seems to contradict this must be misinterpreted. He doesn’t want to be confused by the facts. He offers two possible arguments for what Paul is saying in 1 Cor. 14 about women keeping silent, both of which assume things that are not in the text: 1) women in that day were uneducated, so their speaking and asking questions during the service would cause too much confusion; or 2) the women in the church at that time had become followers of a Gnostic heresy, so their speaking and questioning in church introduced the confusion of this heresy. He makes up some “facts.” Viola even claims that “the Law” that Paul cites against women speaking (1 Cor. 14:34) is the Talmud (Jewish traditions), and Paul is rejecting the Talmud’s teachings that denigrate women. Yet, just a few sentences before, Paul cites “the Law,” and it’s a quote from Isaiah (v. 21), not the Talmud. These two explanations by Viola also contradict his praise of the spiritual wisdom of Christian women portrayed in the New Testament. Last, contrary to Viola’s claim, the view that Paul was forbidding women to teach in the regular church services does not contradict other New Testament passages. It still allows for women to pray and prophesy in the regular service (1 Cor. 11:4-5), and to teach outside the regular service (Acts 18:26).

²⁶ Loc. 429-432.

not allowing constant interruptions by anyone at any time be the epitome of disorder and confusion?

An interpretation that makes more sense is that “let the first be silent” means that the second prophet was supposed to *wait until the first one was silent* before he spoke. The restraint is on the second prophet, not the first. So Viola’s case for spontaneity fails here too. You shouldn’t interrupt someone else when you happen to get an insight during a church service. As your momma told you, “It’s rude to interrupt.”²⁷

Viola makes the assumption that a meeting with “flexible spontaneity” is one “where the Spirit of God [is] in utter control.”²⁸ He quotes T. Austin-Sparks’ contrast between following a “paper-pattern” with following the Holy Spirit and Christ:

Ours is to seek continually to see Him by the Spirit, and we shall know that He—not a paper-pattern—is the Pattern, the Order, the Form. It is all a Person who is the sum of all purpose and ways. Everything [in the early church] then was the free and spontaneous movement of the Holy Spirit, and He did it in full view of the Pattern—God’s Son.²⁹

But where did the instruction in our Bible come from? The Holy Spirit! (2 Peter 1:21) To follow God’s word is to follow Christ: “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word” (John 14:23). As Paul told the Corinthians, the spiritual person is the one that obeys the written word of God: “If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord” (1 Cor. 14:37). So conducting a worship service according to the written directions in God’s word is to follow the movement of the Holy Spirit to reflect the pattern of Christ. Ironically, the whole purpose of Viola’s book is to prove that his view of worship is what is taught by the “paper-pattern” of the Bible.

Another thing to keep in mind about 1 Corinthians 14 is that it is a description of and response to a problem in the church, and Paul tried to tone down their excesses within more reasonable limits. It’s not a systematic treatment of what is supposed to happen in a church assembly. Paul’s remedy is not necessarily how every church held their assemblies. He wants them to limit the number who prophecy to two or three, and presumably teachers would have had the same restriction. Even though Paul allows for

²⁷ For an interesting interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14 that played a significant role in the spread of Protestantism during the Reformation, see [The Exercise](#) and [Reforming Your Bible Study](#) by Roy Blackwood. Having a weeknight meeting in which two or three men were chosen to give an exposition of the same scriptural passage developed the exegetical skills of the teachers and mature church leadership, just the opposite effect of Viola’s interpretation of the passage.

²⁸ Loc. 428.

²⁹ Loc. 217.

up to three, other churches may have had just one. There is no command against it, and it would have strong precedence in the teaching styles of Jesus, Paul, and Timothy. A full understanding of how God is to be worshiped has to take the whole Bible into account.

Viola thinks that the job of an apostle is primarily to teach a congregation how to have open-participatory worship, and not worry about doctrines like “the millennium” and the “rapture.”³⁰ He reports that he spent a year and a half teaching one congregation how to have open-participatory meetings.³¹ Yet, the apostle Paul only directly addresses the procedures of a church assembly once, and that to correct a problem (1 Cor. 14). The concerns of Paul that he repeats over and over in his letters and wants passed on to others so that could carry on his instruction were things like the doctrine of salvation, the right and wrong use of the Law of Moses, turning away from godlessness to live holy lives, rejecting false doctrine, church discipline, charity to fellow believers in need, the appointment of qualified elders and deacons, and, yes, the rapture and other “end-time” events (1 Thess. 4-5, 2 Thess. 1-2, 1 Cor. 15, 1 Tim. 4). Mutual encouragement of Christians to maintain their faith is among Paul’s concerns, but Viola makes church assemblies all about encouragement, and he minimizes the importance of teaching many of the doctrines that often concerned Paul. Biblical doctrine is further minimized by making it a small part of the service by whomever sporadically wants to share a few lines of Scripture, regardless of that person’s spiritual maturity.

Despite Viola’s minimization of more difficult and controversial teachings of Scripture, the Bible teaches that understanding those types of teachings is necessary for spiritual maturity. In the middle of explaining the differences between Christ’s priesthood and the Aaronic priesthood, the author of Hebrews interrupts himself and says,

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity. . . .
(Hebrews 5:11-6:1)

³⁰ Loc. 1146.

³¹ Loc. 573.

Viola's prescription for church assemblies keeps the congregation at the level of spiritual infants. Viola himself reads a lot of theology, as his book demonstrates; but his view of church assemblies does not fit well with teaching Christians about difficult theological issues. Viola thinks that he will promote Christian unity by focusing on "the elementary teachings about Christ," but Paul taught that God wants a *mature* Christian unity. He says that God has appointed officers in the church for the purpose of raising God's people to maturity in Christian doctrine (and practice too, of course):

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. (Eph. 4:11-14)

In the Great Commission, Christ commands us to "teach them to obey everything I commanded" (Matt. 28:20), which is not just the words of Christ in red, but everything that He endorsed. This includes Old Testament teachings that are still valid under the New Covenant (Matt. 5:17-20; cf. 1 Tim. 1:8-11) and the teachings of the apostles that He commissioned (John 14:26). Jesus said that "man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4). Viola's anti-church officer, open-participatory doctrine of the church undermines the church's task of fulfilling the Great Commission by teaching the whole counsel of God.

Viola further promotes the immaturity of the church by demanding that churches stop making people feel uncomfortable about holding different doctrines than the leaders of the church do, beyond the most basic doctrines of Christianity:

[I]n order to be fully accepted by its members, you must hold to their view of spiritual gifts. You must also hold to their view of election and the second coming of Christ. If you happen to disagree with them on any of these points, you will be made to feel that you would be happier attending elsewhere.³²

He says that this is wrong because "the church is made up of all whom God has accepted."³³ I don't know of any evangelical church that would not accept someone as a member who believed in Christ. But if the church is going to become mature, it must teach what God's word says in areas beyond the basics. It's what Paul requires in

³² Loc. 1019

³³ Loc. 1010

Ephesians 4. It's what Hebrews requires. It is what the Great Commission requires: "teaching them to obey *everything* I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20). Some doctrines are more important than others, but none are unimportant, otherwise God would not have wasted His breath including them in His book.

Since a church is supposed to promote these mature doctrines when it believes that it has a firm grasp on them, a church cannot allow someone with significant disagreement about them to have voting rights or hold an office in the church. Liberals took over many denominations in the early twentieth century because of the failure of conservative churches to enforce their creeds.³⁴ Of course, the Bible is the final authority, and not the creeds, so creeds are always subject to revision. But neither should understanding the mature doctrines of the Bible be seen as an impossible task. God's word is not both yes and no (2 Cor. 1:18). It does not contradict itself. Just because modern Christians don't agree about the rapture does not mean that no view is right. The Holy Spirit is fully capable of accomplishing his goal of transmitting understandable information. The church just needs to diligently study God's word.

Viola claims that it is the preacher-centered church that creates spiritual immaturity in the congregation. And indeed there is a lot of immaturity and ignorance in traditionally-governed churches. But I am confident that if Viola were able to listen to sermons by a preacher who was deeply knowledgeable of God's word, like his favorite theologian F.F. Bruce, he would learn a lot. The problem is not the practice of just one person preaching a sermon in a church service. A big part of the problem is that many preachers don't know God's word nearly as well as they should. Most seminaries are not known for having an academic rigor equal to secular graduate programs. The preacher probably got A grades for C-level work in seminary. This is related to another problem: The pietistic view held by most evangelical churches – that the only important thing to learn from the Bible is how to be saved. This means that much of the Bible is treated as irrelevant. The result is that very little of the Bible gets taught in the church. To his credit, Viola says that he has rejected salvation as mere eternal "fire-insurance" and wants to emphasize that Christ is Lord and not just Savior;³⁵ but about the only doctrine that he seems to approve being taught beyond salvation is open-participatory worship in homes. The God of the Bible rules over all of life, so His word applies to all of life: economics, politics, education, science, etc. As Cornelius Van Til put it, "The Bible is thought of as authoritative on everything of which it speaks. Moreover, it speaks of everything."³⁶ What the Bible teaches in those falsely-called "secular" areas

³⁴ Gary North, *Crossed Fingers: How Liberals Captured the Presbyterian Church* (1996), at http://www.garynorth.com/freebooks/docs/243a_47e.htm.

³⁵ <http://frankviola.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/discipleship-mission-and-church-a-plea-to-learn-our-history/>

³⁶ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1976), p.2.

should be taught in the church. It's what the Great Commission requires. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: "All of the Bible for all of life."³⁷

Are there officers in the church?

As Jeff has cited, there are many New Testament verses that say that elders should oversee the church, and younger believers should "submit" (Heb. 13:17) and "be subject" to them (1 Peter 5:5). The elders are "over you" (1 Thess. 5:12), "watch over your souls" (Heb. 13:17), and are called "overseers" (1 Tim. 3:1-2; Titus 1:7). That sounds like hierarchy to me. How does Viola get around these seemingly clear teachings to come to the view that there should be no official positions in the church?

Viola quotes the following passage as his main support for denying the existence of church officers:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Matt. 20:25-28)

Superficially this may sound like it proves Viola's point, but that doesn't make sense on further reflection. Jesus uses Himself as an example, and did Jesus not have authority and leadership over his disciples? The point is to not "lord it over them;" that is, be servant leaders rather than self-aggrandizing tyrants. And, of course, a correct interpretation of this passage has to take into account all the New Testament passages that speak of church officers.

Another of Viola's arguments is that titles of "elder" and "deacon" were simply recognitions of functions that people were already expressing in the church fellowship: "Acknowledgment of elders by apostolic workers was no more than the public recognition of those who were already 'elder-ing' in the church."³⁸ On Viola's view, the laying on of hands in ordination is really nothing more than a pat on the back for being a big helper. However, the Bible does not support Viola's view. When deacons were first appointed in the church (Acts 6:1-6), it was because they needed more people to carry out the duty of serving the needy. If these men had already been serving in that capacity, there would not have been a problem to address. Likewise, when Paul lists the qualifications of an elder, one is that he has been able to manage his household, which is evidence that he will be able to manage the church (1 Tim. 3:4-5). Having managed the church already is not a qualification for being recognized as an elder, but

³⁷ www.chalcedon.edu

³⁸ Loc. 1528.

functioning well in family government is training to take on the *new* role of managing the church.

Another way that Viola argues against church officers is through the doctrine of the Trinity:

Look again at the triune God. And notice what's absent. There's an absence of command-style leadership. There's an absence of hierarchal structures. (Some have suggested that there is a graded hierarchy within the Trinity. But this is scripturally and historically untenable.)³⁹

He appeals to the views of several Marxist/feminist theologians that there is no hierarchy among the Persons of the Trinity.⁴⁰ The traditional view of women being subordinate to men in the leadership of the church and family has often been defended, and legitimately so, by pointing out that there is a hierarchy of command among the Persons of the Trinity, but no Person is lower in being ("ontology") than any other; therefore, the fact that men have authority over women does not mean that women are less of a being than men. The Marxist/feminists, who want complete egalitarianism, respond by claiming that there is no hierarchy of command in the Trinity. They claim that the subordination of the Son to the Father refers to Son's human nature that He has taken, but that there is no subordination of the Son to the Father in regard to the Son's divinity. However, the claim of the feminists that historically the church has rejected any subordinationism in the Trinity has been shown to be false.⁴¹ The traditional view is that among the Persons of the Trinity there is "ontological equality but economic subordination."⁴² Viola confuses the two. He cites the Athanasian Creed that "The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, yet there are not three gods, but one God,"⁴³ as if that refutes economic subordination, when it simply affirms ontological equality.

The error of the historical claim can easily be seen if we consider the third Person of the Trinity, rather than getting confused by the problem of the human nature of the second Person of the Trinity. One of the controversies that split the Eastern and Western Church was the *filioque* controversy. The Eastern church said that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father only. The Western church said that the Holy Spirit

³⁹ Loc. 269.

⁴⁰ Catherine LaCugna, Miroslav Volf, Stanley J. Grenz, Kevin Giles, Shirley Guthrie, and Gilbert Bilezikian.

⁴¹ Kovach, Stephen D, Schemm, Peter R Jr., "A Defense of the Doctrine of the Eternal Subordination of the Son," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Sep 1999, at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3817/is_199909/ai_n8858703/?tag=content;col1.

⁴² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p. 251.

⁴³ Loc. 233

proceeds from the Father and the Son (“*filioque*” is Latin for “and the Son”). Regardless of which side is right, both sides recognized that the Holy Spirit is subordinate to at least one other Person of the Trinity. As for the teaching the Scripture, you never read of the Holy Spirit or the Son giving the Father a command.

If Viola were consistent, he would claim that there is no hierarchy in the state or the church. Ben Witherington correctly observes that Viola “allows that God has set up such offices in the world, but in his view this is not at all how it ought to work in the church. What is interesting about this analysis is that he admits that both sorts or types of authority come from God (see e.g. Rom. 13.1ff.).”⁴⁴ Viola quotes the feminist theologians about how the Trinity is the basis for human community, but the feminist theologians are not comprehensive enough. The triune God rules over all of life. He has established three oath-bound institutions: Family, Church and State. They all have a hierarchy, which reflects the hierarchy within the Trinity. Granted there are differences in how authority is exercised in each of the three institutions. The civil ruler’s job is to restrain criminals with the threats and the use of violence, so his method of ruling will be harsher than the other two institutions. Viola is right to contend that elder’s in the church are mainly to use persuasion in their exercise of oversight.⁴⁵

Viola makes use of another feminist argument to undermine the validity of church offices when he says that “submit one to another” (Eph. 5:21) means that each individual Christian is supposed to submit to all other Christians. One way that Paul applies the command to “submit one to another” is by saying that a child should submit to a parent (Eph. 6:1), so Viola’s view would lead to the absurd position that the parent should submit to the child just as the child should submit to the parent. The fact is, Paul explains his statement about “submit to one another” by explaining which classes of people should submit to which other classes of people: Wives submit to husbands, children submit to parents, servants submit to masters. There is hierarchy all over God’s kingdom. When Peter says, “you who are younger, be subject to the elders” (1 Peter 5:5), would it make sense to say that the elders are to be subject to the elders in the same way? There is certainly no command like that in the New Testament. It makes no more sense than claiming that the requirement to submit to the king (1 Peter 2:13) also means that the king should be equally subject to private citizens.

Viola spills a lot of ink claiming that having church officers is contrary to the doctrine of the priesthood of believers. But as Ben Worthington points out, “If we look at the places where the language of the priesthood of all believers appears in the NT (e.g. in 1 Peter, in Revelation) the author in question is not even talking about leadership in

⁴⁴ <http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2008/09/reimagining-church-part-four.html>

⁴⁵ Loc. 1890

those passages.”⁴⁶ The priesthood of believers means that all believers have direct access to God through prayer; we can “approach the throne of grace with confidence” (Heb. 4:16) to pray for ourselves and on behalf of others. We don’t have to go through an earthly priest that makes sacrifices on our behalf because Jesus has offered a sufficient sacrifice through His own death.

We see the legitimacy of authoritative offices in the church in cases of disputes between Christians who cannot settle their differences between themselves. There is supposed to be a council of two or three wise brothers to act as judges and settle the disputes (1 Cor. 6:1-6; Matt. 18:15-20). This judicial process can lead to someone being excommunicated for unrepentant sin, with the council of elders having the authority of Jesus behind them (Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5:4-5).

Disputes within and between churches are supposed to be able to be appealed to a higher level of a regional church council (Acts 15). Not surprisingly, Viola is against this. He favors autonomous, congregational government (governed by 100% consensus building rather than majority vote). He claims that “Scriptural principle affirms that each church is independent in its decision-making and oversight.”⁴⁷ He falsely claims that the council at the Jerusalem church was decided by a consensus of the whole church. What the text explicitly says is that “The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter” (Acts 15:6) – not the whole congregation. The role of the “whole church” was only to elect elders to carry the letter that the apostles and elders had drafted to other churches (Acts 15:22). Viola also claims that this decision was from the Jerusalem church simply because that’s where the false doctrine had originated, not because the Jerusalem elders had authority over other churches. But it is very significant that the instructions carried by letter to other churches are called “decrees” in Acts 16:4. It’s the same word used for Caesar’s decree: “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered” (Luke 2:1). Viola does not even address Acts 16:4. It shows that the Jerusalem council had genuine authority over other churches.

There are three basic kinds of church government: 1) Congregational, in which each congregation is completely autonomous in its government, and the congregation votes on all important decisions. 2) Presbyterian, in which there is a general council over several churches that acts like an appeals court for the individual churches. Each church elects its own officers. 3) Episcopal, in which there is a general council that appoints officers for the local churches without an election.⁴⁸ (These correspond to the

⁴⁶ http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2008/09/frank-violas-reimagining-church-part_07.html

⁴⁷ Loc. 2022

⁴⁸ Dr. Greg Bahnsen, “For the Record: Church Government Briefly Considered,” *Antithesis* 1:1 (Jan./Feb., 1990), at <http://www.cmfnow.com/articles/pt084.htm>.

three basic types of civil government: Pure democracy, republicanism, and monarchy.) What we see in Acts is a presbyterian form of government. We just saw that, consistent with the presbyterian and episcopal views, there was a church council with authority over individual churches. But then, like congregational and presbyterian forms of government, Acts 6 shows that church officers were elected from the congregation, not merely imposed from above: “Brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute” (Acts 6:3). This follows the pattern of choosing civil officers for an appeals court system that Moses commanded in the Old Testament:

“Choose for your tribes wise, understanding, and experienced men, and I will appoint them as your heads. . . . So I took the heads of your tribes, wise and experienced men, and set them as heads over you, commanders of thousands, commanders of hundreds, commanders of fifties, commanders of tens, and officers, throughout your tribes And the case that is too hard for you, you shall bring to me, and I will hear it.’ (Deut. 1:13, 15, 17).

This form of government was continued after Moses had died and they settled in the Promised Land: Deut. 17:8-9.⁴⁹

Older presbyterian denominations have usually developed a large bureaucracy at the general session level, but the biblical model is that the general session only step in when it is needed to solve a dispute. It’s not supposed to be a bureaucracy that stifles the activities of local churches. Gary North observes,

How can Christians conduct an organized campaign of cultural conquest without becoming either a scattered occupation force or a top-down bureaucracy? Only by honoring the principle of decentralization, meaning local initiative with a bottom-up appeals court for settling disputes.⁵⁰

Whether you like it or not, that’s the system that God has ordained for the church, and He knows better than us what is most effective for carrying out His Great Commission.

One last issue of disagreement with Viola is his claim that full-time church officers are not supposed to receive a salary for their work. Paul could not have been much more specific when he said:

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, “You shall

⁴⁹ Given this, it shouldn’t be a surprise that presbyterians initiated republican civil government in America, which was adopted in the U.S. Constitution.

⁵⁰ Gary North, *Millennialism and Social Theory*, p. 325, at www.garynorth.com/freebooks.

not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages." (1 Tim. 5:17-18)

Viola claims that "honor" simply means "show respect."⁵¹ But the context is clear that the way such elders are to be shown respect is by financial compensation. Paul follows his statement by giving two examples of financial compensation, the ox and the human laborer, to show what he means. And immediately before this Paul says to "honor widows" who don't have a family to take care of them and who have been faithful servants to the church by enrolling them in the church's financial support program (1 Tim. 5:3-16). While Viola denies elders in a church the right to be paid a salary for their work, he says that Paul did have that right. But he claims that being an apostle was different. Yet, Paul uses the same example of the ox treading the grain in 1 Cor. 9 that he used in regard to church elders in 1 Tim. 5 to prove that he, as an apostle, has a right to "reap material things from you" (1 Cor. 9:11) rather than "working for a living" (v.6). He says that "the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:14). There is no reason to restrict this to apostles, as Viola attempts to do, rather than including full-time elders in the church, especially those who preach and teach (1 Tim. 5:17).

Conclusion

On his website, Viola offers a "A Magna Carta for Restoring the Supremacy of Jesus Christ a.k.a. A Jesus Manifesto for the 21st Century Church," and I agree with many of his points. But point "8" encapsulates my disagreements with him:

Jesus does not leave his disciples with CliffsNotes or a systematic theology. He leaves his disciples with breath and body.

Jesus does not leave his disciples with a coherent and clear belief system by which to love God and others. Jesus gives his disciples wounds to touch and hands to heal.

Jesus does not leave his disciples with intellectual belief or a "Christian worldview." He leaves his disciples with a relational faith.

Christians don't follow a book. Christians follow a person, and this library of divinely inspired books we call "The Holy Bible" best help us follow that person. The Written Word is a map that leads us to The Living Word. Or as Jesus himself put it, "All Scripture testifies of me." The Bible is not the destination; it's a compass that points to Christ, heaven's North Star.

⁵¹ Loc. 1549.

The Bible does not offer a plan or a blueprint for living. The “good news” was not a new set of laws, or a new set of ethical injunctions, or a new and better PLAN. The “good news” was the story of a person’s life, as reflected in The Apostle’s Creed. The Mystery of Faith proclaims this narrative: “Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again.” The meaning of Christianity does not come from allegiance to complex theological doctrines, but a passionate love for a way of living in the world that revolves around following Jesus, who taught that love is what makes life a success . . . not wealth or health or anything else: but love. And God *is* love.⁵²

Christianity is a relationship and not just a book, but following the book is an essential part of the relationship: “Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:19); “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). Even though some like Viola himself spend considerable time on their own studying theology, the overall thrust of his view of “organic church” is to minimize the teaching of all of God’s word, whereas the New Testament makes that one of the most important priorities of the church.

Viola says that the Bible is a “map” or “compass,” but he doesn’t want to pay detailed attention to large areas of the Bible map, like the “laws”, “ethical injunctions” or “complex theological doctrines of the Bible.” Rather than closely study the map, he wants to drive down the road of life, chit-chatting and singing happy songs with his Christian friends that he meets along the way, hoping that he’ll end up in the right place. It sounds like an adolescent’s dream – escaping the rigorous studies of school, escaping parental authority, and going on a spontaneous road trip with no particular destination in mind except to have an adventure with your friends. Many other spiritual adolescents have the same dream and will love to come along to be part of this “organic church.” But as anyone who has ever taken a long trip knows, not paying close attention to the map and compass is a good way to get lost, frustrated, and eventually broke. Viola wants the Spirit to lead him as he travels down life’s road, but the Spirit gave us the Bible (“men spoke for God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” – 1 Peter 1:21; “We know that the law is spiritual” – Romans 7:14). So by reading the Bible with a short attention span, he is failing to be guided by the Spirit. The Spirit-inspired Bible also commands elders to be ordained to teach and discipline the church in order for it to gain a mature understanding and practice of the faith (Eph. 4:11-14). The Spirit-inspired Bible offers systematic theology involving complex theological doctrines (e.g. the books

⁵² Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola, “A Magna Carta for Restoring the Supremacy of Jesus Christ a.k.a. A Jesus Manifesto for the 21st Century Church,” at <http://ajesusmanifesto.wordpress.com/>

of Romans and Hebrews). Taking a spontaneous road trip as a break from rigorous school work is fine. But eventually the adolescent needs to grow up and get a real job that involves hard work and obeying a boss if he is going to accomplish anything significant in life. The hard work will pay off with greater satisfaction and rewards, like dining on steak rather than baby's milk (Heb. 5:12-14). The word of God is a treasure chest of jewels of wisdom and knowledge (Prov. 3:13-15). The more you dig, the more treasures you find. Applying the knowledge of God involves the rewarding work of participating in a multigenerational project of building a Christian civilization that transforms every area of life in every part of the planet, in addition to gaining the rewards of the afterlife.