

# House-Churchism: An Ecclesiastical Panacea or Poison? (3)

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In my last article on this subject in *BRJ* 70, I examined the roots of the rejection of Christ's authority by house-churchism, specifically in its irrationalism, its unsystematic and selective interpretive methods, and its mysticism. We saw that, in this rejection of the authority of the truth, "house-churches" are not a "pillar and ground of the truth," and, therefore, not churches at all (I Tim. 3:15). While this is true of Frank Viola's brand of house-churchism (which I have been reviewing in particular), it could be argued that it is not necessarily true of all involved in house-churchism. What is characteristic, however, of all flavours of house-churchism is the rejection of Christ's authority in the offices of the church institute (and Viola is no exception). This rejection of church offices also demonstrates that "house-churches" are not churches at all, as we will see. It is not only the absence of offices which makes them unqualified to be considered churches but their *rejection* of offices.

In *Pagan Christianity*, Frank Viola presents his vision for house-churchism in which he denies and attacks the very idea of office-bearers in the church.<sup>1</sup> His presentation is largely negative apart from various hints and comments throughout, especially towards the end of the chapters. Admittedly, in other writings (*Reimagining Church*), he develops his ideas more positively.<sup>2</sup> Viola specifically takes issue with the special teaching office of pastor and, by implica-

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Viola and George Barna: "Up until the second century, the church had no official leadership. That it had leaders is without dispute. But leadership was unofficial in the sense that there were no religious 'offices' or sociological slots to fill. New Testament scholarship makes this abundantly clear ... See Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*. These sources demonstrate clearly that 'offices' have no analog in the Greek New Testament when referring to Christian leaders. We read these conventions of human sociological organization back into our New Testament" (*Pagan Christianity? Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices* [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2008], p. 109).

<sup>2</sup> Frank Viola, *Reimagining Church: Pursuing the Dream of Organic Christianity* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2008).

tion, also the special ruling office of elder. According to Viola, “Never would any first-century Christian have conceived of the contemporary pastoral office!”<sup>3</sup> Deacons get no special mention but their authority is jettisoned with the rest.<sup>4</sup> His main opponent is not directly Reformed churches but broadly mainstream evangelical churches especially in the USA which are often dominated by one pastor rather than having the Presbyterian system of a plurality of elders. Even if they have elders by name, often there is one “lead pastor” who effectively rules over them. This is certainly a miserable state of church government to be criticized and deplored, but Viola’s solution is to throw away the very idea of church offices entirely: “Ordination to office presupposes a static and definable church leadership role that did not exist in the apostolic churches.”<sup>5</sup>

His deconstruction method is to survey the historical development of the worst errors related to the legitimate offices (along with any illegitimate offices) and then claim they arose out of pagan influences while complaining that the Reformation did not go far enough as justification for throwing the whole baby out with the bath water.<sup>6</sup> For good measure, by his redefinition of “office,” he also denies that the recovery of the “priesthood of all believers” by the Reformation ought to be conceived of in terms of an *office* of every believer.

I do not intend to interact very much with his historical observations since as children of the Reformation we recognize that the offices began to be corrupted quite early in the church’s history and that the existence, legitimacy and nature of offices in the early church (as denied by Viola) may be proven easily from the New Testament itself. Rather, we may simply explain why this method of argument is fallacious and move on.

That a practice has something in common with a practice used by pagans (or because a similar practice was used by pagans before it was used by the church) does not by itself prove that the practice is not commanded by Scripture. Besides the fundamental association fallacy and genetic fallacy, most of

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<sup>3</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 107.

<sup>4</sup> Viola and Barna: “For the people who first used them, the titles of these offices can have meant little more than inspectors [i.e., bishops], older men [i.e., presbyters] and helpers [i.e., deacons] ... First-century shepherds were the local elders (presbyters) and overseers of the church. Their function was at odds with the contemporary pastoral role” (*Pagan Christianity*, p. 108).

<sup>5</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 107.

<sup>6</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, pp. 110-123.

Viola's noise is the *petitio principii* fallacy. He does not prove his assertions that these things originated from paganism.

In any case, hypocrites in the church or even genuine saints in their weakness are perfectly well able to come up with unscriptural inventions and corruptions from their own sinful hearts with or without the assistance of paganism. Viola's ecclesiology does not leave much room for this explanation since he has a wrong view of the Christian's spirituality. House-churchism also generally fails to acknowledge or grapple with the reality of hypocrites and weak believers in the church, as if we are all so super-spiritual at all times that it is easy to distinguish reliably between the sheep and the goats, the wheat and the tares.<sup>7</sup> House-churchism typically supposes that each person is a living member of Christ, so that if only the church is left to develop naturally according to its own spiritual "DNA" it will be free from all these corruptions.<sup>8</sup> Naturally then, Viola resorts to searching for pagan origins. However, Scripture alone, not what may or may not have some relation or similarity to paganism, is the touchstone by which all church practice must be judged.

## Poisoning the Well

In order to clear the floor of all church offices of any sort, Viola repeatedly characterizes the idea of the special offices as a clergy-laity distinction or as

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Fahy: "True churches only exist where Christ is present with the people. If this is rejected because it is not an objective sign then I say that that person reveals his immaturity. All genuine believers know when Christ is present or not in a meeting, or *even when they meet a believer for the first time*. The Spirit bears witness in our hearts when we meet other believers. ... The church is a gathering of converted believers ... It does not consist of non-believers" ("A Critique of 'Bound to Join'" [[www.understanding-ministries.com/docs/A%20critique%20of%20Bound%20To%20Join.pdf](http://www.understanding-ministries.com/docs/A%20critique%20of%20Bound%20To%20Join.pdf)], pp. 4-5; italics mine). Like all charismaticism and mysticism, this abominable and arrogant doctrine breaks the bruised reed and quenches the smoking flax (Isa. 42:3), while strengthening the hands of the hypocrites and necessarily producing an external proud show of religion. It cultivates the leaven of Pharisaism and overthrows the judgment of charity. The presence of Christ in a meeting is heard in faithful preaching and seen in the right administration of the sacraments. The presence of Christ in a Christian is not always so easily perceived but can be easily imitated.

<sup>8</sup> Viola and Barna: "... the church is really an organism. As such, it has DNA that will always produce these features if it is allowed to grow naturally" (*Pagan Christianity*, pp. xix-xx). This presents a development of the church which is not determined by God's sovereignty but can be frustrated by the will of man not allowing it to "grow naturally."

hierarchy.<sup>9</sup> “Clergy” refers to those with a special “lot” or “heritage” (like the Old Testament Levites), while “laity” refers to the rest of the people at large, according to the Greek origin of the terms. This means that, if we wanted to quibble about terms, we could legitimately object to this terminology since every New Testament believer has a special inheritance in Christ as a priest. For this reason, Malachi calls God’s people, “the sons of Levi” (Mal. 3:3). If we do not want to quibble about terms then we concede at least that there is a distinction between the special offices and the ordinary office of believer.

However, Viola’s own clergy-laity distinction simply refers to any who are ordained as opposed to others who are not: “The most important ministry is restricted to a few ‘special’ believers. Such an idea is as damaging as it is nonscriptural. The New Testament nowhere limits preaching, baptizing, or distributing the Lord’s Supper to the ‘ordained.’”<sup>10</sup> With this idea of a clergy-laity distinction, he complains, “the Reformers dramatically failed to put their finger on the nerve of the original problem: a clergy-led worship service attended by a passive laity.”<sup>11</sup>

In Viola’s world, the clergy-laity distinction *necessarily* implies the sacerdotal idea of some special caste being closer to God or through which others must come to God. He denounces pastors as a “clerical caste” and as “paid professionals” who divide the church and obstruct believers from coming to God themselves as priests.<sup>12</sup> We agree that this sacerdotal idea, foundational in the church of Rome, is abhorrent. It denies that Christ alone is our Mediator and rejects the priesthood of all believers. At the same time, we do not concede at all the notion that simply having distinctions between believers based upon

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<sup>9</sup> Viola and Barna: “The unscriptural clergy/laity distinction has done untold harm to the body of Christ. It has divided the believing community into first- and second-class Christians. The clergy/laity dichotomy perpetuates an awful falsehood—namely, that some Christians are more privileged than others to serve the Lord” (*Pagan Christianity*, p. 136).

<sup>10</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 127.

<sup>11</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 74. He throws Luther under the bus by name too: “Worse [than keeping Rome’s liturgy], although Luther talked much about the ‘priesthood of all believers,’ he never abandoned the practice of an ordained clergy” (p. 55).

<sup>12</sup> Viola and Barna: “Giving a salary to pastors elevates them above the rest of God’s people. It creates a clerical caste that turns the living body of Christ into a business. Since the pastor and his staff are compensated for ministry, they are the paid professionals. The rest of the church lapses into a state of passive dependence” (*Pagan Christianity*, p. 180).

different offices implies that some are closer to God. Viola assumes this implication to be necessary but nowhere attempts to prove it: “The modern-day pastoral office has overthrown the main thrust of the letter to the Hebrews—the ending of the old priesthood.”<sup>13</sup>

“Hierarchy” is from a Greek term meaning “holy prince.” Again, we could dispute this terminology because the church has only one such “holy prince,” our Lord Jesus Christ, though all His saints are kings in Him. The modern usage of the word refers to a ranking system according to status or authority. It is typically used to describe episcopalianism, such as in Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy and Anglicanism, all of which we reject as spurious and contrary to Scripture. We reject hierarchy in this sense. However, Viola’s own definition of hierarchy deliberately and unjustifiably includes not only Presbyterianism but any conception of one believer having any authority *over* another believer in the church.<sup>14</sup>

Viola claims,

The Christians themselves led the church under Christ’s direct headship. Leaders were organic, untitled, and were recognized by their service and spiritual maturity rather than by a title or an office. Among the flock were the elders (shepherds or overseers). These men all had equal standing. There was no hierarchy among them.<sup>15</sup>

An organic church is simply a church that is born out of spiritual life instead of constructed by human institutions and held together by religious programs. Organic churches are characterized by Spirit-led, open-participatory meetings and nonhierarchical leadership. This is in stark contrast to a clergy-led, institution-driven church.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 136.

<sup>14</sup> Viola and Barna: “Apostolic workers acknowledged local elders in some churches ... But these practices have few points of contact with modern ordination ceremonies, which elevate some Christians *above others*” (*Pagan Christianity*, p. 142; italics mine).

<sup>15</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 110.

<sup>16</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. xix.

Viola goes even further to claim that the very idea of one having authority over another is essentially pagan hierarchy.<sup>17</sup> If we allow Viola's thesis that hierarchy is essentially pagan, then even Christ having authority over His brethren in the church would be pagan hierarchy. It appears that he does not want to go so far, as he insists that Christ is the Head of the church but he nowhere attempts to explain the obvious contradiction or even to acknowledge it. For the sake of simplicity, we will use Viola's broad definition of hierarchy in this article which puts us in the otherwise bizarre position of defending hierarchy.

Utterly astounding in this connection are the claims Viola makes about the Reformation. Viola admits that the Reformers indeed recovered the biblical truth of the priesthood of all believers (though Viola's idea of what this doctrine means does not at all match that of the Reformers).<sup>18</sup> Yet he also claims that the Reformers were only really interested in reforming the doctrines of the church and cared little about church practice!<sup>19</sup> According to Viola, the Reformers essentially did nothing to put into practice the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and did nothing to reform church government. In contrast, he thinks the Anabaptists did reform church practice!

[The Reformers] were also theoreticians more than practitioners ... the so-called Reformation brought very little reform in the way of church practice ... The Protestant Reformation was mainly an intellectual movement. While the theology was radical compared to that of Roman Catholicism, it hardly

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<sup>17</sup> Viola: "What is the hierarchical form of leadership? It's the leadership style that's built on a chain-of-command structure. It's rooted in the idea that power and authority flow from the top down. Hierarchical leadership is rooted in a worldly concept of power ... In the Gentile world, authority is based on position and rank. ... the hierarchical leadership structure characterizes the spirit of the Gentiles" (*Reimagining Church*, p. 157).

<sup>18</sup> Viola and Barna: "[The Reformers] restored the doctrine of the believing priesthood soteriologically ... But they failed to restore it ecclesiologically ... (It was the Anabaptists who recovered this practice. Regrettably, this recovery was one of the reasons why Protestant and Catholic swords were red with Anabaptist blood)" (*Pagan Christianity*, p. 128).

<sup>19</sup> To see the absurdity of this farcical claim, read about Calvin's concern for church practice in his letter and defence of the Reformation to Charles V in 1543, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* ([www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/calvin\\_necessityreform.html](http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/calvin_necessityreform.html)). One may also learn of Calvin's concern for church practice in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. His own life-story is his sufferings to put this into practice in Geneva, yet Viola dismisses him as a "theoretician" or "arm-chair theologian."

touched ecclesiastical practice. Those who went further in their reforms, letting it touch their practice of the church, are referred to as the “Radical Reformation.”<sup>20</sup>

Viola may be excused for thinking that the Lutherans did not go far enough, since they do not hold to the regulative principle of worship, but he has nothing but sheer ignorance or else wilful deception to excuse him regarding the other Reformers. However, even in the case of the Lutherans, the notion that the Reformers cared nothing about church practice and did nothing to reform it is so patently false that Viola himself contradicts this claim when he quotes Luther’s words against the Anabaptist *Sitzrecht*, for example.<sup>21</sup> Considering the lengths to which he multiplies references in his footnotes and bibliography supposedly reflecting careful study of church history, is it plausible that he is simply ignorant of what he is criticizing or does he simply ignore any reforms of church practice that didn’t promote or institute the *Sitzrecht*?

## Obstacles to the Body

In the context of the Reformation, it is the Anabaptists for whom Viola has unmitigated praise. Not even a word of caution is mentioned about their most obvious excesses. In fact, Viola’s commitment to charismaticism places him very near the camp of the very worst examples of Anabaptists, such as the self-proclaimed prophets at Münster (one would hope, and charitably expect, that if asked, Viola would condemn many of their beliefs and practices). Why he does not comment on this, while praising the Anabaptists and criticizing the Reformers, would be mystifying if not for his obvious bias for the Anabaptist doctrines he is attempting to promote. What Viola particularly recommends is the Anabaptist concept of “the sitter’s right” (*Sitzrecht*). He claims that this idea of the congregational worship service involving people sharing some song or meditation or Scripture reading or poem or prophecy or almost anything

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<sup>20</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 61.

<sup>21</sup> Viola and Barna: “The Anabaptists believed it was every Christian’s right to stand up and speak in a meeting ... In Luther’s day, this practice was known as the *Sitzrecht*—‘the sitter’s right’ ... Luther announced that ‘the *Sitzrecht* was from the pit of hell’ and was a ‘perversion of public order ... undermining respect for authority’” (*Pagan Christianity*, p. 129). With Luther, we heartily agree but we will examine the house-church style meeting in a subsequent article.

at all, along with the members sharing their lives in various ways throughout the week, is the essential functioning of the body of Christ. Referring to I Corinthians 14, Viola insists,

This passage describes a gathering with open participation by every member to bring a teaching, a revelation, a song, an exhortation, etc (verse 26); interjections by the members while others are speaking (verse 30); and spontaneous prophesying by everyone (verses 24, 31).<sup>22</sup>

Some churches (e.g., Brethren or Pentecostal) are content to have a short period within their service for such an “open time” as they call it but Viola insists that this “open time” must characterize the entire service.<sup>23</sup> Viola asserts that

the ordinary, nominal meeting of first-century believers ... is the regular gathering of Christians that is marked by mutual functioning, open participation from every member, freedom and spontaneity under the headship of Jesus Christ.<sup>24</sup>

This sharing is supposedly spontaneous, i.e., at random or by what he claims is the leading of the Spirit. In Viola’s view, Christ’s headship is not in operation whenever a member may not participate in this way.<sup>25</sup> He believes that this style of “open-participatory meeting” is the ordinary and primary way

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<sup>22</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 80.

<sup>23</sup> Viola and Barna: “... in the garden-variety Pentecostal church, the pastor will sometimes ‘feel the Spirit moving.’ At such times he will suspend his sermon until the following week ... The way congregants describe these special services is fascinating. They typically say, ‘The Holy Spirit led our meeting this week. Pastor Cheswald did not get to preach.’ Whenever such a remark is made, it begs the question, Isn’t the Holy Spirit supposed to lead all of our church meetings?” (*Pagan Christianity*, p. 72).

<sup>24</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 59.

<sup>25</sup> Viola and Barna: “Let’s suppose the authors of this book attend your church service. And let’s suppose that the Lord Jesus Christ puts something on our hearts to share with the rest of His body. Would we have the freedom to do so spontaneously? Would everyone else have the freedom to do it? If not, then we would question whether your church service is under Christ’s headship ... This is the very argument of 1 Corinthians 12-14 ... if you were to attend an organic church gathering that met first-century style, you would have both the right and the privilege to share whatever the Lord laid on your heart in the manner in which the Spirit led you” (*Pagan Christianity*, p. 82).



in which the church members grow and are edified together.<sup>26</sup> “We grow by functioning, not by passively watching and listening,” says Viola.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, for Viola, this multi-member spontaneous sharing is the true manifestation of the body of Christ and the ultimate purpose of God for the church from eternity.<sup>28</sup>

As a natural consequence to this view, Viola identifies offices in general and pastors in particular as the primary obstacles to Christian growth in the church today, because they lead the service in a way that is ultimately incompatible with Viola’s idea of every member participation.

... the pastoral office has transformed us into stones that do not breathe ... We believe the pastoral office has stolen your right to function as a full member of Christ’s body ... It has made ineffectual the teaching of 1 Corinthians 12-14, that every member has both the right and the privilege to minister in a church meeting. It has voided the message of 1 Peter 2 that every brother and sister is a functioning priest.<sup>29</sup>

The contemporary pastorate rivals the functional headship of Christ in His church. It illegitimately holds the unique place of centrality and headship among God’s people, a place that is reserved for only one Person—the Lord Jesus.<sup>30</sup>

... not a strand of Scripture supports the existence of this office [of pastor] ... The Protestant pastor is nothing more than a slightly reformed Catholic priest.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Viola and Barna: “... the Christian family needs a restoration of the first-century practice of mutual exhortation and mutual ministry. For the New Testament hinges spiritual transformation upon these two things. Granted, the gift of teaching is present in the church. But teaching is to come from all the believers” (*Pagan Christianity*, p. 99).

<sup>27</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 77.

<sup>28</sup> Viola and Barna: “... nothing so hinders the fulfillment of God’s eternal purpose as does the present-day pastoral role. Why? Because that purpose is centered on making Christ’s headship visibly manifested in the church through the free, open, mutually participatory, every-member functioning of the body” (*Pagan Christianity*, p. 137).

<sup>29</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 136.

<sup>30</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 137.

<sup>31</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 141.

Rather than Christ's headship operating through the church offices, Viola believes that Christ's headship cannot operate through every member of the body (in the free-for-all style meeting) while these offices exist. He believes that they take for themselves what should belong to all Christians. Along with church offices, the typical Protestant sermon must be jettisoned as silencing the congregation and the fixed typical Protestant order of worship must be sacrificed in preference to the spontaneous free-for-all since it "actually hinders spiritual transformation."<sup>32</sup>

... the Protestant order of worship represses mutual participation and the growth of Christian community. It puts a choke hold on the functioning of the body of Christ by silencing its members. There is absolutely no room for anyone to give a word of exhortation, share an insight, start or introduce a song, or spontaneously lead a prayer. You are forced to be a muted, staid pewholder! You are prevented from being enriched by the other members of the body as well as being able to enrich them yourself.<sup>33</sup>

Preaching, in Viola's opinion, is a right which belongs to all believers alike, as does baptizing and administering the Lord's Supper.<sup>34</sup> Naturally then, the keys of the kingdom in all their operations are not exercised by the congregation through the office-bearers but should somehow be used directly by every member as the only rational conclusion of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.<sup>35</sup> In fact, Viola must go even further since, having found fault with the very idea of the sermon, he also finds fault with the very idea of preaching. He therefore redefines preaching to suit his own purposes, not as an authoritative proclamation and exposition of the Word of God, but instead a simple dialogue with interruptions, interaction, questions and comments.<sup>36</sup> Certainly it is not the polished product of careful exegesis of Scripture, according to the rule of Scripture, applied to the people of God in season in their peculiar trials and

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<sup>32</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 77.

<sup>33</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 75.

<sup>34</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 127.

<sup>35</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 132.

<sup>36</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 88.

struggles, arranged in clear, logical and memorable points and delivered in a lively manner with boldness, gravity and sobriety by a man with the natural and spiritual gifts, education, qualification, calling and appointment to do so under the supervision and authoritative oversight of elders. Viola wants nothing more than a dialogue that can be interrupted and in which everyone may be an actively speaking participant:

There is no room for interrupting or questioning the preacher while he is delivering his discourse. The sermon freezes and imprisons the functioning of the body of Christ. It fosters a docile priesthood by allowing pulpiteers to dominate the church gathering week after week ... the sermon often stalemates spiritual growth. Because it is a one-way affair, it encourages passivity. The sermon prevents the church from functioning as intended. It suffocates mutual ministry. It smothers open participation. This causes the spiritual growth of God's people to take a nosedive.<sup>37</sup>

## Merely Functional Roles

Instead of authoritative offices to which some are called and appointed, Viola conceives of the various words in Scripture for the New Testament offices as being mere descriptors for informal functional roles that certain believers naturally carry out at certain times.<sup>38</sup> Viola believes that people in the church simply and organically begin to emerge and fulfil these roles, as a natural development in house-churches where the obstacles have been removed.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 97.

<sup>38</sup> Viola and Barna: "Pastor, then, is a metaphor to describe a particular function in the church. It is not an office or a title ... Therefore, Ephesians 4:11 does not envision a pastoral office, but merely one of many functions in the church" (*Pagan Christianity*, p. 107; italics Viola's).

<sup>39</sup> Viola and Barna: "After beginning a church, the apostolic workers (church planters) of the first century would revisit that body after a period of time. In some of those churches, the workers would publicly acknowledge elders. In every case, the elders were already 'in place' before they were publicly endorsed. Elders naturally emerged in a church through the process of time. They were not appointed to an external office. Instead they were recognized by virtue of their seniority and spiritual service to the church. According to the New Testament, recognition of certain gifted members is something that is instinctive and organic" (*Pagan Christianity*, pp. 123-124).

These roles are carried out without an office, title, position or “sociological slot.” In Viola’s reimagined wonderland church, there is no official calling, no prior education and no exercise of authority by these roles. There is no official ordination, no required financial support and presumably in the end little to no accountability or even responsibility.

Since Viola rejects offices, he must reject any official ordination and, therefore, he must redefine what the Bible means when it speaks of ordination.<sup>40</sup> Instead of an official and authoritative appointment to office, Viola sees ordination as merely an informal public recognition, acknowledgement or endorsement of gifted members of the church who are *already* carrying out these functions or roles:

First-century elders were merely endorsed publicly by traveling apostolic workers as being those who cared for the church. Such acknowledgement was simply the recognition of a function. It did not confer special powers. Nor was it a permanent possession.<sup>41</sup>

He identifies various functions or roles which he says are described in Scripture, which may receive public endorsement, but he outright rejects a minister of the Word and sacraments (i.e., teaching pastor) while allowing some kind of shepherding role.<sup>42</sup> All the offices must be redefined since for Viola there can be nothing official or authoritative involved. Of course, following through his charismaticism, he allows a form of the miraculous or revelatory offices such as prophet, though again, not as an actual office or with any real authority.

His redefinition of apostle is especially noteworthy and in many ways central to his entire reimagined ecclesiastical system (which could be described as a

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<sup>40</sup> Viola and Barna: “The word *ordain* (KJV) in these passages [i.e., Acts 14:23; I Tim. 3:1ff.; Titus 1:5ff.] does not mean to place into office. It rather carries the idea of endorsing, affirming, and showing forth what has already been happening. It also conveys the thought of blessing ... In the first century, the laying on of hands merely meant the endorsement or affirmation of a function, not the installment into an office or the giving of special status ... the apostles laid hands on those whom the majority of the church deemed were already functioning as overseers among them” (*Pagan Christianity*, p. 124; italics Viola’s).

<sup>41</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 127.

<sup>42</sup> Viola and Barna: “We agree that there are teachers, preachers, prophets, apostles, evangelists, and even shepherds in the church of Jesus Christ” (*Pagan Christianity*, p. 142).

kind of facilitated anarchy).<sup>43</sup> Contrary to a special temporary office of men especially and directly appointed by Jesus Christ to be official witnesses of His resurrection as the foundation of the entire catholic church, working miracles as confirming signs of their new revelation, encompassing all the authority and functions of pastor, elder, deacon, prophet and evangelist, with authority and rights over all the churches in these areas, Viola presents his “apostolic” itinerant church-planters. These are the exception to almost every other principle he sets forth. For these itinerant church-planters, there may be special meetings in which the main focus is on their preaching of long monologue sermons or what he calls the churches being “submerged ... in a revelation of Jesus Christ” which apparently is something quite different.<sup>44</sup>

The first century church planters had a deep and profound revelation (or insight) of Jesus Christ. They knew Him, and they knew Him well. He was their life, their breath, and their reason for living. They, in turn, imparted that same revelation to the churches they planted ... Paul of Tarsus preached ... This ... affected how they gathered together and what they did in those gatherings. Furthermore, Paul typically spent several months with these new converts and then left them on their own for long periods of time, sometimes years ... What kind of gospel did he preach to cause this kind of remarkable effect? He called it “the unsearchable riches of Christ” (Ephesians 3:8, NIV). To put it another way, he submerged them in a revelation of Jesus Christ.<sup>45</sup>

These itinerant church-planters are supposedly not obstacles but serve to equip the churches to function independently.<sup>46</sup> They stay with a church for a time, teaching, supervising and equipping in the ways of running a good house-church, though apparently still not exercising any control or authority

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<sup>43</sup> Viola and Barna: “Every church in the first century had at its disposal an itinerant apostolic worker who helped it navigate through common problems” (*Pagan Christianity*, p. 80).

<sup>44</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, pp. 98-99.

<sup>45</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 103.

<sup>46</sup> Viola and Barna: “... preaching the Word of God is part of the apostolic call. Timothy certainly did this, just as Paul did when he preached in the marketplace in Athens and in the hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus. Those were apostolic meetings designed for equipping the church and for building the community by converting people to Christ” (*Pagan Christianity*, p. 102).

over them.<sup>47</sup> Then they move on, eventually to come back later to review how things are going, to help solve any problems that have arisen and to publicly endorse or acknowledge specific members who have taken it upon themselves to carry out certain functions or roles. Viola recounts with approval from his own experience: “[The apostolic worker] then left them on their own, and he probably will not return for months ... This is essentially New Testament apostolic ministry.”<sup>48</sup>

Apparently these itinerant church-planters do not have authority above others and are not a separate special caste or paid professionals. Apparently their multi-church conferences led by a single person do not obstruct Christ’s headship or repress the every-member functioning of the body. Apparently they have no oversight and are accountable to no one (except perhaps other itinerant church-planters) with no fixed charge from any particular church. Despite all this, conveniently, these itinerant church-planters may still lay claim to the right of financial support in distinction from all others.<sup>49</sup> Most conveniently of all, of course, Viola himself is one such church-planter or more accurately we should say he functions as one, since it is not an office or “sociological slot” (according to Viola). No doubt, since he was not officially appointed by anyone, he simply, naturally and organically emerged (i.e., took it upon himself) to begin functioning as an “apostolic” church-planter. It is worth recalling at this point that we have been warned against those who transform themselves into apostles but we hope to examine Viola’s claims of apostleship more fully later (II Cor. 11:13).

## Source and Necessity of Authority

Is Viola correct in his estimation that any authority exercised by one over another in the church is necessarily “lording it over” them?<sup>50</sup> Does the very

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<sup>47</sup> Viola and Barna: “By contrast [with a sermon preached by an ordained pastor], New Testament-styled preaching and teaching [i.e., by apostolic workers only] equips the church so that it can function without the presence of a clergyman” (*Pagan Christianity*, p. 98).

<sup>48</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 99.

<sup>49</sup> Viola and Barna: “Paul was an itinerant apostolic worker. Therefore, he had a legitimate right to receive full financial support from the Lord’s people (see 1 Corinthians 9)” (*Pagan Christianity*, p. 185).

<sup>50</sup> Viola, *Reimagining Church*, p. 157.

idea of an authoritative office as an official appointment imply that some are a “special caste of revered religious leaders” as mediators besides Christ to bring people to God?<sup>51</sup> Are elders and deacons merely roles in which some within the church just organically begin to function? Is ordination simply the acknowledgement that people have already taken up these particular functions by themselves? Is the office of pastor really without any scriptural basis? Were the apostles merely some kind of itinerant church-planters with no authority in the church? These ideas, promoted by those who demand house-churches, are all not only *completely* wrong but constitute wholesale rebellion against the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ in the church which He exercises through His office-bearers. Like all rebellion, practising these ideas is self-destructive. Perhaps the simplest way to demonstrate this is briefly to survey examples of authority throughout Scripture.

Authority can be very simply defined as the right to carry out some activity. Authority, in its very nature, can only be derived from God because the very idea of authority comes from God’s own nature. That is, authority in its very nature is “top down.” God has the right within Himself and of Himself to do all the activities which He is pleased to do. He has the authority to do what He does simply by virtue of the fact that He is the One who does it. This is the meaning of God’s sovereignty and part of the significance of the name “God.” He Himself is the standard by which all exercise of authority must be judged and He alone can be judged by no-one. Authority ought to be carefully distinguished from might, though God has all of both. The ability to perform some activity does not confer the right to perform it.

For example, all might is given by God yet the wicked abuse their might contrary to God’s law which they have no right to do and for which they will, therefore, be judged. God’s omnipotence is His mighty ability to do all that He is pleased to do, whereas His sovereignty is His incontestable right and freedom to do all that He is pleased to do. The fact that one must have a right to do some activity is necessarily implied by the reality of God’s justice. God’s perfect justice means that He is and must be the supreme Judge, including judging whether an activity has been done with the proper authority. This is adamantly repeated throughout Scripture (Gen. 18:25; Ps. 7:8-9; John 5:22,

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<sup>51</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 108.

27). As absolutely sovereign and King above all, God has the absolute right to do all that pleases Him and He cannot be judged (Job 33:12-13; 40:2-8; Ecc. 8:4; Jer. 18:6; Dan. 4:35; Rom. 9:19-21).

Since authority is essential to God's nature, it cannot be found in the personal relations between the three Persons of the Trinity. The names "Father" and "Son" imply the personal relation that the Father begets the Son and the Son is eternally begotten of the Father. They do not imply that the Son must be subordinate to the authority of the Father as in an earthly human relationship. The Father has the authority of God and the Son has the very same authority of God because the Son is begotten of the Father in such a way that the Son is "very God of very God" as our *Nicene Creed* teaches us (our *Athanasian Creed* is even more detailed in its condemnation of the heresy of subordinationism).

With this understanding of the basics, we can consider whether authority is necessary to carry out certain functions, especially certain functions which are prescribed by God to be done within the church. To give a simple example, can a king issue a law to govern the citizens of his kingdom without the right to issue this law? If a private citizen attempts to issue a new law, the other citizens, along with the police, lawyers and judges may simply ignore this law. To have the new law recognized as binding by others, they will need to know that it was issued with the proper authority to which they are bound by God's authority to submit. People are not required to submit to that which has no authority, but people are bound to submit to proper authority and will be held accountable for rebellion against it. Only God submits to no-one because only God has all authority.

Further, in this scenario, if the private citizen claims that people ought to submit to his law, he is taking to himself a supposed authority which God has not given him. God did not make him king, yet he presumes to exercise a function which only the king has authority to carry out. This self-appointment to carry out functions for which one has not been given authority is *usurpation*. There is no usurpation in Viola's world. Such supposed authority is illegitimate and we may well imagine that the king would punish this private citizen for usurping his rightful place. Viola condemns these simple concepts as being derived from the Gentile world and secular culture, which have no place in the church. He imagines that leadership in the church does not involve being



appointed to a position or having authority *above* or *over* another (which he calls “positional” or “hierarchical” respectively).

## Authority in Creation

The first examples of authority in Scripture may be understood from what was instituted by God in creation. Considering the angels, we see that God, not pagan culture, has exactly instituted positional and hierarchical forms of authority. If this one point is understood, it should be sufficient to disregard everything that Viola has said about authority as totally wrong at the very outset. If there can be “positional” and “hierarchical” authority among the angels, then why should it be considered inappropriate in the church and condemned as pagan? There are at least two righteous angels named in Scripture, Gabriel and Michael. These two are only mentioned in Daniel in the Old Testament (Dan. 8:16; 9:21; 10:12, 21; 12:1). Both are mentioned a few times again in the New Testament. Gabriel announced the news of the birth of John the Baptist to Zacharias and the birth of Christ to Mary (Luke 1:19, 26). Michael is recorded as having disputed with the devil concerning the body of Moses (Jude 9), and as fighting against the devil after the birth of Christ and prevailing so that the evil angels were cast out of heaven (Rev. 12:7). Daniel further predicts that Michael will do battle on behalf of God’s people during Satan’s “little season” in the final days of the Antichrist (Dan. 12:1).

So great is this Michael that many have thought that it was another name for Christ since Christ is also referred to as the angel of Jehovah in the sense of being God’s great messenger. Jude, however, clearly distinguishes between Michael, a mere angel, and the Lord Jesus Christ the incarnate Son of God, who did not take upon Himself the nature of angels (Heb. 2:16). Michael is described as “the great prince,” even the prince of God’s people who stands for them, and an “archangel” but he is only “one of the chief princes,” whereas the Lord Jesus alone is the Prince of all princes (Dan. 8:25; Rev. 17:14). It is Gabriel, not Michael, who actually appeared and spoke to Daniel, and who was helped in battle against opposing evil angels by Michael. While Michael’s role appears especially to be contending and battling with the devil and his hosts, Gabriel’s role (insofar as it is revealed to us) is announcing good news to God’s people about the future concerning Christ in order to give understanding and comfort.

Notice first of all, that Michael is described as a “prince” which is a title and a position, not merely a function or role. The most general meaning is one who has authority over others. The prefix in the term “archangel” has basically the same meaning and is used as the word for “prince” in the Septuagint (*archon*). Michael is then a prince of angels. As one of the “chief” princes, Michael has a position of preeminence even among princes. Michael has a position therefore in a “hierarchy,” i.e., in which there are princes over others and even chief princes over these. Yet, as one of the chief princes, Michael does not have authority over the other chief princes, which explains the manner in which he contended with the devil.

There is no doubt that the devil was one of these chief princes before being cast out from his place in heaven. Where these princes are called “stars,” the devil (pictured as the king of Babylon) is referred to as Lucifer, the morning star, which is brighter than all others who yet proudly desired to exalt himself beyond his position (Isa. 14:9-15). Again, the devil (pictured as the king of Tyre) is described as the anointed cherub (a high order of angel) who was “set” in his exalted position with kingly authority above others by God (Eze. 28:13-17). Even now, Paul calls the devil the “prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2:2; 6:12). In deference to the devil’s position, despite his evident wickedness, even Michael the archangel does not take upon himself the authority to rebuke the devil but only calls upon the Lord to rebuke him. This is why Michael, in battling with the devil, could not prevail until Christ came (Rev. 12:7). Not considering the example of the angels, even those of the highest positions of authority such as Michael, Viola despises dominion as if it were a pagan concept rather than instituted by God. The penultimate book of the Bible specifically refers to this instance with Michael to expose this evil of despising authority (Jude 8-9).

One might argue that positions of authority among angels have nothing to do with human interactions, but then what about the relation of husband and wife in marriage as an ordinance created by God (Gen. 2:20-24)? The godly Sarah is commended for honouring her husband with the title “Lord” in submissive acknowledgement of his authority over her (I Pet. 3:5-6). This passage is significant because it especially treats the case in which a wife has an unbelieving husband. Her calling to be subject to him is not predicated

upon him fulfilling a functional role as a godly husband. Her calling is even in a sense higher and more urgent if he remains disobedient to God's Word (vv. 1-2). It is the painful experience of many godly women that the submission and honour due to their husbands on account of their position is not abrogated by their husbands' refusal to function as loving husbands.<sup>52</sup> Both words used to describe Sarah's submission and obedience to Abraham, as an example for all Christian wives, include a positional prefix indicating that the woman is *positionally under* her husband with respect to his authority *above* her directly because of their marriage covenant.

For Adam, as for all husbands, this was not a mere secular authority. The husband is the *spiritual* head of his wife as a type of Christ being the spiritual head of the church, even as a divinely appointed illustration of the relation between Christ and the church, including (but not limited to) Christ's spiritual authority *over* the church (Eph. 5:22-33). In the same way that the church is subject to Christ, so Christian wives must be subject to their husbands and reverence them. This is *positional* and even *hierarchical* insofar as the woman is subject to the man (i.e., her husband) who is subject to Christ who is subject to God (I Cor. 11:3).

We may note in passing and as further illustration of Viola's error that, in the context of I Corinthians 11, Paul is teaching as a universal practice of the churches that the woman ought to have this authority (*exousia*) *over* (*epi*) her own head (v. 10). That is, this authority is *signified* by a covering *upon* (*katakalupto*) her head in public worship or else she dishonours her marital head (v. 5). Without this, it would be as shameful as if she were without the natural propriety and beauty of her long hair as a "covering" (*peri-ballo*, lit., thrown around) so that she may as well also have the shame of shorn hair or a shaved head (v. 6). Paul teaches that women according to the universal custom of all churches ought to have this sign of authority upon their heads because of the angels, who, as we have seen, are especially good examples of propriety regarding authority (vv. 4-16).<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> A husband's lack of love does, however, diminish her own culpability for lack of submission and as a matter of fact ordinarily provokes insubordination for which he is primarily to blame. An unloving brute has no business demanding or expecting submission from his wife (Matt. 7:3-5).

<sup>53</sup> This does not mean that churches may disregard this apostolic command based on the current

Viola has no such scruples, however, since his claim is that for anyone in the church to be the head of another is to be an obstacle to Christ's headship. Apostolic instruction regarding women and marriage indicates there is no such inherent obstacle. The prepositions, "over" and "under," emphasize the *positional* character of this authority. Paul uses the same prepositions when speaking about Christ's headship *over* all things and His headship over the church as His body (Eph. 1:21-22). Even the figure of a head and a body conveys this positional relationship. Because this visible sign of positional authority in the church is obviously absent from Viola's practice, it is worth noting from these prepositions and their objects that the idea of "covering" in I Corinthians 11 is not that of a veil in front of one's face. The idea of "covering" is not that of the veil (*kaluma/periballo*) of Moses (II Cor. 3:13) or of Tamar, who was thought to be a prostitute because of her face-covering (Gen. 38:15), but of having something over/on one's head (*kata kephale echo*, lit., to have [something] against/upon [one's] head).<sup>54</sup> This sign of authority may not cover the woman's face (as no Christian's face ought to be veiled in public worship; II Cor. 3:18) but is *over* and *upon* the woman's head as she is *under* authority. There is no place for such a sign of authority in Viola's house-churchism. Viola, purportedly a great reformer of public worship, has a lot to say about I Corinthians 12 and 14, but is silent on the apostolic instruction for public worship in chapter 11!

Closely connected to the institute of marriage is that of the family, and here again some have authority and are owed honour on account of their position (even spiritual authority within the church). Both father and mother are mentioned specifically in the fifth commandment as being owed honour by their children, which honour includes obedience and reverence, and which commandment (as all the moral law) is binding on all Christians, including

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worldly culture or the tradition of other modern churches. It means that they ought to conform to the custom of the churches to which Paul directed the Corinthians.

<sup>54</sup> See also the consistent usage of the same expression by Josephus and Plutarch in reference to something resting upon one's head, and the usage of *katakalyptis* to refer to a *mitra* (i.e., a mitre or turban, the same word used in the Septuagint to refer to priestly hats) in the Shepherd of Hermas. The direction of gravity also teaches us that to have something *against* (*kata*) one's head is ordinarily and most simply to have something *upon* one's head. If the object of the "covering" were the *face* rather than the *head*, there might be some grounds for the specious claim that a full-facial veil is intended, though even if this was the intention it would not be an excuse for ignoring this apostolic injunction.

Christian children (Ex. 20:12). Contrary to the individualistic imagination of the Baptists, this commandment is proof that there are not only Christian children in the church but also Christian families (Eph. 6:1-4). The apostolic interpretation of this commandment is that children *obey* and highly esteem their parents in the Lord. Again, the headship of parents *over* their children, even in the church, does not obstruct Christ's headship. Rather Christ exercises His headship through the parents. Godly admonition given by fathers and mothers is the Lord's admonition (Prov. 1:8-9; 6:20-23). Furthermore, without this God-given position of authority over the children, by what right could parents chastise or instruct their children (Heb. 12:5-10)? Viola's assault against the nature of authority is an antinomian assault against the fifth commandment.

The authority structure within families is also the basis for the civil state, even as governors and princes were naturally (in the wisdom of God) first the fathers and elders within families and tribes as in the days of the patriarchs, until kings with more far-reaching dominion arose (e.g., Num. 1:16). Yet the authority of these kings, emperors, governors and magistrates, even the most wicked of them, was appointed by God. Paul tells us there are "higher" powers (*exousia*) to which we must be subject since all these powers were ordained by God (Rom. 13:1-7). The context has especially in view civil rulers, even the wicked Roman emperor at that time. They did not invent positional (even hierarchical) authority over others but they were given it by God so that to resist them, to refuse to submit in rebellion or refusal to acknowledge and honour their authority, is to rebel against the divine Majesty. Because God appointed them to their higher positions of authority (in many cases, much higher), we must render due honour, tribute and submission for conscience's sake or else face condemnation from God. Peter specifically mentions a hierarchy ordained by God to which we must submit, to the king as supreme (i.e., with a higher position and honour) and also to governors under the king but above us (I Pet. 2:13-14). Viola may object at this point that this authority is not spiritual authority within the church but the point remains that the idea of authority above others (what Viola calls hierarchy) and authority based upon one's position or office is not derived from pagan imagination but from the divine Wisdom (Prov. 8:14-16). We may add that lesser civil authorities, such as that of a master over his slaves or servants, do not abdicate their positions due to

membership in the church, any more than a father or a husband. Rather the calling of servants to submit to their masters in the church is reinforced and emphasized (Eph. 6:5-9). There was nothing incompatible between this civil authority relationship and being brothers together in Christ (Phile. 10-16).

One final significant example should suffice to expose the falsity of Viola's rejection of "positional authority" as pagan. At the time of Christ's earthly ministry, there was a Roman centurion, an honourable God-fearing Gentile, who had a dear servant who was dying (Luke 7:2). Others pleaded on his behalf for Christ to heal his servant but the centurion objected to Christ troubling Himself to come (vv. 3-7). His reasoning was that he knew what it was both to be under the authority of others and to have those under his own authority. He understood that Christ was the same, so that Christ need not come bodily but only speak the command and it would be done (v. 8). Christ then neither criticizes his position within an authority structure as pagan nor objects to the analogy made between His own authority and the centurion's as if the centurion's authority was pagan hierarchy or sinful domineering. He does not rebuke the centurion whatsoever but commends him most highly for this insight as evidence of the unparalleled greatness of the centurion's faith above all Israel (v. 9). From this we can conclude that even the civil authority of the Gentile centurion in the Roman army, described by positional language as himself being *under* some and others being *under* him, was not at all an inherently pagan authority but rather a good analogy of Christ's own authority and position under God and over all creation.

Having described Viola's opposition to offices and demolished his most radical objection to authority as if it were inherently pagan or necessarily an obstacle to Christ's headship in the church, we must deal with his more specific arguments about positions of authority within the church. To do this we will next discover and survey specific offices in the Old Testament and New Testament over against Viola's contentions. In doing so, we will pay special attention to the warnings against those who oppose these offices and expose Viola and house-churchism to Scripture's own judgment in this important area of ecclesiology.