

## *House - Churchism: Panacea or Poison?*

which is contrary to Scripture.<sup>14</sup> He also makes a huge noise about how the New Testament letters are not in chronological order—as if these two things alone explain why the vast majority of church history is in opposition to his radical views.<sup>15</sup> His proposed solution is to look at the big picture of Scripture, in order to avoid looking too closely at the details: “We need to learn to view the New Testament panoramically, not microscopically.”<sup>16</sup> Our objection is that both are absolutely necessary and it is the details which collectively make up the big picture. If our understanding of any detail is wrong, the big picture will be distorted. The details do not stand independently. Together they illustrate the context and thereby interpret each other. But does Viola even follow his own advice in his interpretive practice?

The short answer is that he does not. In attempting to explain the shocking reality that most Christians today and throughout history have not come to his anti-institutional understanding of the church, he appeals to a difference in hermeneutics:

I think part of the reason is that evangelical Christians have built their theology mostly on Romans and Galatians. And many non-evangelical Christians have built it on the Gospels (particularly the Synoptics—Matthew, Mark, and Luke). And for both groups, Ephesians and Colossians have been but footnotes. But what if we began, not with the needs of humans, but with the intent and purpose of God? What if we took as our point of departure, not the earth after the fall, but the eternal activity in God Himself before the constraints of physical time? In other words, what if we built our theology on Ephesians and Colossians and allowed the other New Testament books to follow suit? Why Ephesians and Colossians? Because Ephesians and Colossians give us the closest look at Paul’s gospel with which Christ commissioned him. These

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<sup>14</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, pp. 222-223. He falsely attributes it to “Protestant scholastics” (Francis Turretin in particular) and rightly attributes it to dispensationalists following J. N. Darby.

<sup>15</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, pp. 226-228.

<sup>16</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 239.

two letters begin, not with the needs of postfall humans, but with God's timeless purpose before creation.<sup>17</sup>

He goes on to state that God's work of redemption is only a "recovery program" and "a parenthesis" in the eternal purpose of God,<sup>18</sup> and fills in some more interesting details of his false theology. As an aside, it is worth noting that Paul gives the fullest treatment of the gospel in his epistle to the Romans (both in terms of length and detail), including an exposition of the eternal purpose of God from before the creation. Additionally, it would be remiss not to note that Ephesians begins describing God's eternal purpose of the redemption of His people in Christ by describing how this redemption meets all their "postfall" needs. Colossians also begins with Paul's lengthy prayer for the "postfall" needs of these Christians to be met by God on the basis of their redemption in Christ according to the eternal purpose of God. It is altogether appropriate that we, as creatures bound by time, should begin to learn and understand from the works of God in time, rather than prying into God's eternal counsel, much of which includes "secret things" which He has not revealed (Deut. 29:29). From the outset, Viola has gone astray but our primary concern now is with his hermeneutics.

Is Viola really taking a panoramic view of Scripture? No, by his own admission, he is beginning his theological development by narrowing in on Ephesians and Colossians, and then elevating these letters to supersede the big picture of the rest of Scripture! But, in fact, his practice does not even match this: the primary passage to which he appeals in support of how he believes the church should meet together is not Ephesians or Colossians but I Corinthians 14:26. Everything is shoe-horned to fit his mistaken interpretation of that verse. Coupled with his anti-logic view of truth, he views the systematic interpretation of Scripture as a pagan error and presents the proper interpretation of the Bible as a matter of where to start reading.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Viola, *Reimagining Church*, p. 139.

<sup>18</sup> Viola, *Reimagining Church*, p. 140.

<sup>19</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 203. In his attack on theological education, Viola claims, "Origen was the first to organize key theological concepts into a systematic theology." What he is objecting to is the organization and systematization of theological concepts (we would rather criticize Origen for his allegorical method), which he sees as a key departure leading to the "error" of theological education.

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We do not begin our systematic theology by lifting Romans up in isolation, interpreting it and then trying to make the rest of Scripture fit with our findings. In fact, we recognize that it is impossible properly to understand Romans without also studying the rest of Scripture. For example, the epistle makes various references to the Old Testament, so how are we to understand Paul's references to Abraham, if we have no knowledge of Genesis? It is true that, in studying a particular topic, we must begin by looking at the places where Scripture is clearest on the subject (since some parts are more difficult than others; II Pet. 3:16), but this is only possible if we first study Scripture as a unified whole. When we begin by reading Genesis, we understand it far more deeply and significantly as we read through to Revelation. After the brilliant light of the New Testament gospel, which so illuminates the Old Testament, when we reach the difficult book of Revelation, God powerfully humbles us by it, so that we start over again continually, and study the Scriptures more deeply and thoroughly in order to understand further. We must reread over and over again, and each time make the necessary connections, more and more, closer and closer, to see how Scripture fits together in one whole single truth.

Viola also insists that Scripture must be not be viewed "microscopically." He scoffs at the careful analytical precision of the Puritans:

the Puritans centered all of their church services around highly structured, methodical, logical, verse-by-verse expositions of Scripture. They stress that Protestantism was a religion of "the Book." (Ironically, "the Book" knows nothing of this type of sermon.) ... Their dividing, subdividing, and analyzing of a biblical text raised the sermon to a fine science.<sup>20</sup>

In fact, even the smallest details in Scripture often have great significance and again apostolic example shows us that we must not only look at the big picture but also at the details. Paul proves that the salvation of believing Jews and Gentiles is not based on the law, but upon the promise given to Abraham and his seed, precisely because Scripture speaks of one "seed," not many (Gal. 3:16). Other examples could be given. Since we believe that every word of Scripture is inspired (verbal, plenary inspiration), we confess, "The words of the LORD are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven

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<sup>20</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 96.

times” (Ps. 12:6). And we take seriously Christ’s declaration that every “jot” and “tittle” of the law must be fulfilled (Matt. 5:18). And we require that ministers of the gospel must not avoid declaring any of the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:26-27) because all Scripture is profitable for us (II Tim. 3:16-17). Apostolic example even gives us examples of sermons which are expositions of verses in Scripture, such as Peter’s address at Pentecost in Acts 2, in which he explains and applies Joel 2:28-32, Psalm 16:8-11 and Psalm 110:1. Apostolic example also shows us that the broad scope of Scripture is to be used in sermons, such as in Stephen’s sermon in Acts 7 and Paul’s sermon in Acts 13. In the latter, the exposition and application of various verses also is provided: I Samuel 13:14, Psalm 2:7, Isaiah 55:3, Psalm 16:10 and Habakkuk 1:5.

By denying the rule of Scripture, the HCM attacks the authority of the Word of God. If the truth cannot be discerned from the lie (in which one is the contradiction of the other), then there can be no interpretation and systematization of the meaning of Scripture, and the words carry no authority. But God’s Word is always authoritative, whether men deny it or not. Scripture itself, as we have seen, demonstrates that the truth is not self-contradictory, that it interprets itself and that God has left man with a rational, natural light so that he will be inexcusable for denying this.

But what bearing does all this have on the doctrine of the church? Why is this a major issue in the HCM? First of all, Christ rules the church by His Word and Spirit, and, in fact, His Spirit does not work apart from the Word, so that the Word is called “the sword of the Spirit” (Eph. 6:17). The church’s ultimate authority is King Jesus and Holy Scripture is His Word. An attack on the logic of Scripture is, therefore, an attack on the rule of Christ over His church. Furthermore, the true church is “the pillar and ground of the truth” (I Tim. 3:15). A “house-church” is not a pillar and ground of the truth, not simply because it rejects the official preaching of the gospel, not simply because it rejects creeds but also, even more fundamentally, because it rejects the logical interpretation of Scripture.

## **Mystical Rebellion Against Scriptural Sufficiency**

Criticism of Viola’s “house-churchism” with regard to its radical rebellion

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against the authoritative foundations of the church would not be complete unless it also included criticism of his mysticism. Since he rejects Christ's authority in Scripture by rejecting the use of logic in its interpretation, he must set up an alternative authority. That authority is mystical experience. This is not surprising because, first, this is an integral part of the philosophy of postmodernism and, second, because he is a charismatic.<sup>21</sup>

For charismatics, the ultimate authority is their experience. This is why visible signs, miracles, feelings, emotions or even smells are greatly emphasized and sought after as true spirituality. In reality, this is carnality and there is nothing spiritual about it. Crowds sought after Jesus Christ for the miracles, yet remained impenitent and unbelieving. These tangible, sensational experiences are exactly contrary to the nature of faith. Faith is the certainty of things unseen (Heb. 11:1). The faithful do not need to see miracles to believe these things and, more importantly, what is signified by them. It is more sure for believers to read the Scriptures which record these things for us (II Pet. 1:19-21). Christ put these words in the mouth of Abraham in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man: "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead" (Luke 16:31).

Some more subtle charismatics, like Viola, profess to reject physical experiences as arbiters of truth and instead claim to have higher intangible "spiritual" experiences. These are, nevertheless, immediate revelations which come apart from understanding and believing Scripture, and are not subject to Scripture alone. Clear influences on Viola's thinking as regards mysticism are Watchman Nee (1903-1972), and A. W. Tozer (1897-1963). Notice how these quotations (cited by Viola with approval) deny that the knowledge of God is rational:

Divine truth is of the nature of spirit and for that reason can be received only by spiritual revelation ... God's thoughts belong to the world of spirit, man's to the world of intellect, and while spirit can embrace intellect, the human intellect can never comprehend spirit ... Man by reason cannot know God; he can only know about God ... Man's reason is a fine

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<sup>21</sup> Viola, *Reimagining Church*, pp. 265-266. Here Viola shows his favour towards "postmodern Christianity."

instrument and useful within its field. It was not given as an organ by which to know God.—A. W. Tozer.<sup>22</sup>

It is the heart which perceives God, and not the reason.—Blaise Pascal.<sup>23</sup>

Gordon Clark ascribes to romanticists like Goethe the attitude that the Logos of John 1 has nothing to do with reason.<sup>24</sup> He goes on to blame Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard for introducing this anti-intellectualism into Christianity. The idea that the knowledge of God is not rational is quite plainly pagan and one which directly contradicts the doctrine of Christ. Clark's reaction, however, goes too far when he reduces the entire Christian experience to an intellectual one.

The statements quoted by Viola are at least half-truths. It is not true that true knowledge of God is *merely* intellectual for true knowledge of God is eternal life (John 17:3). The knowledge of God may also be (and must be) conceived of more warmly, beautifully and deeply as a close personal relational knowledge of fellowship, which cannot be fathomed by our limited knowing (Eph. 3:17-19). Yet even this personal knowledge of love is not *opposed* or *contrary* to reason and cannot be described as irrational or self-contradictory since that would contradict the doctrine of the Word or Wisdom of God (*Logos*) in John 1. Even in physical things, there is knowledge of the senses which we cannot communicate precisely with our intellect and language. I could talk of the colour green or of a burning sensation but, if the person to whom I speak has no experience of, or point of reference for, these, they will not (fully) know to what my words refer.

In this way, we may rightly say that the rational knowledge of God in Christ is experienced by the saints in a deep way in the communion of the saints with one another, because the Spirit of God works the love of God in us, which is manifest in our fellowship together (I John 1:1-3; 4:7-13). Another example is our unique Christian experience and assurance as we walk in obedience and self-sacrifice, according to God's work of sanctification in us. In this life,

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<sup>22</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 206.

<sup>23</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 207.

<sup>24</sup> Clark, *The Johannine Logos*, p. 20.

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however, it is only experienced as the barest beginnings of the blessedness of covenant fellowship with God and His people in paradise (Eph. 1:14; *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. & A. 58).

This blessedness may not be reduced only to an intellectual experience, but neither may it be considered irrational or self-contradictory or as a knowledge which comes apart from a rational faith in Scripture alone. By a mystical revelation, we are referring to any knowledge or experience which does not have as its source our faith in Scripture alone worked in us by the Spirit of God. (In a subsequent article, God willing, we will examine Viola's claims that there are still today prophets and apostles speaking outside Scripture.) Such mysticism is then an attempt to approach God apart from the Mediator Jesus Christ who is the Word or *Logos*.<sup>25</sup>

Since the quotation from Tozer in Viola's book is somewhat limited, it is helpful to see Tozer's views represented more fully, as Clark quotes him. Discussing the division between fundamentalists and liberals, Tozer says,

So there is a division, but I don't think the warfare is over these matters any more. The battle has shifted to another more important field. The warfare and dividing line today is between evangelical rationalists and evangelical mystics ...

There is something behind the text that you've got to get through to ... Is the body of Christian truth enough? Or does truth have a soul as well as a body? The evangelical rationalist says that all talk about the soul of truth is poetic nonsense ... the book of John is a long, inspired, passionately outpoured book trying to save us from evangelical rationalism, the doctrine that says the text is enough.<sup>26</sup>

The fundamental idea of these mystics is that words by themselves are dead and lifeless. Many charismatics have little use for the Bible and heavily criticize those who look to it as their only authority. They will often say, "The letter killeth, the spirit giveth life," with no understanding regarding what

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<sup>25</sup> For a fuller treatment of this subject, see the chapter on Thomas á Kempis and the medieval mystics in Herman Hanko, *Contending for the Faith* (Grandville, MI: RFP, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Clark, *The Johannine Logos*, pp. 77, 79, 80.

those words mean.<sup>27</sup> This is actually a contrast between the law and the gospel or, more precisely, the written word as we read it without any power to obey, as opposed to reading with the power of the Spirit who takes away the veil by the light of the gospel (II Cor. 3:15-17). It is true in a sense that text by itself is dead. If I looked Arabic script, it would be lifeless to me, but that is only because I do not understand Arabic. The “life” of words is their meaning. Where the meaning is understood, they are not dead.

Of Christ’s words, this is all the more true, because His words truly are spirit and life to us (John 6:63). To seek something beyond the intended meaning of the words is to seek the knowledge of God apart from Christ as He is revealed in the Holy Scriptures. To seek this eternal life apart from Christ can only lead to death (John 14:6; 17:3). Mysticism is exactly this: seeking God apart from Jesus Christ in whom alone He is made manifest. Any search for God apart from the intended meaning of the words of the Holy Scriptures is an attempt to approach God outside of Jesus Christ. One may as well seek God in Hinduism or Islam or Judaism or Buddhism or anything as seek Him through extra-biblical revelations or trying to attain to some higher mystical knowledge beyond the meaning of the words of Scripture. One may as well not bother reading the actual words at all.

How is it that Christians know God? Are our words incapable of conveying spiritual truths, as Tozer imagines? The answer of Scripture is, “God forbid.” Essentially, this is a denial of God’s immanence, for the sake of pretending to exalt His transcendence. Jesus Christ’s incarnation and earthly ministry demonstrates how wrong this is. If God cannot convey spiritual truths to His people in a way that we can understand, then Christ’s coming is a failure. But the incarnation proves that God is able to reveal Himself to us (John 1:1-14).

It is true that the natural man cannot receive the spiritual truth (Rom. 8:7). Christ’s teaching is foolishness to him because he is carnal (I Cor. 1:18). But the church has received the Spirit of God, because the church is Christ’s body and the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ and the church, therefore, has the mind of Christ to know the things of God. The Spirit teaches the church

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<sup>27</sup> Viola, *Reimagining Church*, p. 312. Viola quotes this text when rejecting the regulative principle as “highly legalistic” in endnote 13.

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words to speak with meanings that convey spiritual truth to those who have the mind of Christ to discern it (I Cor. 2:12-16; I John 2:20-27).

To go beyond the meaning of the words which the Spirit Himself has breathed out in Scripture (II Tim. 3:16) is, therefore, to rush boldly into blind presumption and speculation. No wonder then that the allegorical hermeneutic is alive and well in the HCM, especially as it has been employed by the notorious Harold Camping (1921-2013) of Family Radio. The results of this doctrine of a “soul of truth” beyond the plainly intended meaning of the text are plain for all to see. It should be added too that, befitting the charismatic movement, this view lends itself to those who seek pre-eminence (III John 9).

By a good imagination, and bold claims of mystical experiences and revelations, those who seek pre-eminence can gain many disciples from the ranks of those who neglect, or even ignore, the plain meaning of Scripture by vainly trying to read between the lines of Scripture, instead of being content with what God has been pleased to reveal. Such people, not being grounded in the healthy, plain doctrines of Scripture, are easily tossed about by winds of false doctrine (Eph. 4:14) and are quick to rush to hear the latest fresh revelation from the self-proclaimed gurus who claim to see beyond what is written (II Tim. 4:3-4). Christ’s response to His enemies, even the devil, was ultimately: “It is written” (Matt. 4:1-11; 22:31). He did this because the plain meaning of what is written in Scripture is the end to all controversy. He also did this to teach *us* to esteem, and appeal to, the authority and clarity of the Scriptures in the same manner.

By its mysticism, the HCM rejects the authority in the Scriptures of Christ, the head of the church. In rebellion, the advocates of the HCM set up their own ideas, experiences and speculations about “truth” beyond the meaning of the text as authoritative. This disease infects all their theology and practice. When Viola criticizes instituted churches and recommends “house-churches,” he persistently appeals to subjective experience in order to bias the reader or even to try to seal the argument.<sup>28</sup> This tactic illustrates that Scripture alone is not the ultimate authority to which Viola appeals. He wants his readers to accept his alternative mystical authority.

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<sup>28</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, pp. 78-79, 98-100; Viola, *Reimagining Church*, pp. 11, 20-25, 46, 68-71, 80-81, 112-115, 132-133, 266. These are just a few pertinent examples.

Against Viola's comprehensive assault on the foundations of the church, the church stands secure because the Lord knows His own (II Tim. 2:19). Even "the gates of hell," much less Viola, cannot prevail against her (Matt. 16:18). Opponents of the church institute should beware. It is Christ who instituted the church. Against Viola, who refuses this foundation in trying to build his own "organic church," Scripture warns,

The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner. This is the LORD'S doing; it is marvellous in our eyes (Ps. 118:22-23).

Whosoever shall fall upon that stone shall be broken; but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder (Luke 20:18).

In the next article (DV), we will examine Viola's attack against church offices.