

Rethinking Frank Viola

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Frank Viola is certainly one of the main influences and voices in the midst of the growing house church and simple church movements of North America. He has used the term ‘Organic Church’ to explain and distinguish those who hold to his own unique views within the house church movement. Although he claims that T. Austin-Sparks coined this term, Austin-Sparks in fact would have major problems with a number of points in Viola’s understanding and practical outworking of this truth in the life of the local church. Another man who has used and understood this term for many decades in a more Biblical fashion and in a similar way to Austin-Sparks and who in fact knew Austin-Sparks, is Lance Lambert, but again Lambert would not draw the same conclusions as Viola. For those who are well read the term 'organic' in reference to spiritual subjects is not new. A number of Evangelical authors in the 19th and 20th centuries used the term in solid biblical writings.

Christian “Journey”

He came to Christ at a young age after which he spent most of his early Christian life in Pentecostal and Charismatic circles. The following statement by him makes clear that in the 13 years following his conversion until 1988 he followed a zealous but erratic pathway of moving around various church groups:

“I spent thirteen years in the institutional church, traversing many different denominations. I think I counted 13 different brands of church, from CMA, Southern Baptist, Independent Baptist, Presbyterian, Church of Christ, Episcopalian,

Mennonite, AOG, COG, to virtually every stripe and flavor of charismatic Christianity. Add to that 5 parachurch organizations and dozens of church-sponsored Bible studies. I was intensely involved in many of the above. And as I say in the book, I owe my salvation and my baptism to the institutional church. God has used it in my life as He has in the lives of countless others...I was hungry for Jesus Christ, I was bored with church services, and I had grown weary of much of what I had seen in the churches I was a part of.”

After this rollercoaster chase of 13 years he left the “institutional church” altogether. He then (it would seem in April 1992) “stumbled into an experience of church life” meaning the type of practice and doctrine he now promotes in his books and ministry.

The man considered to be the father of the American House Church Movement, Gene Edwards, was to become the moulding and decisive influence upon Viola’s life in succeeding years. When you compare the writings of Edwards and Viola there can be no doubt as to where Viola gained his foundational theology. He acknowledges this in the preface to his book *The Untold Story*:

“I would like to acknowledge my indebtedness to Gene Edwards for inspiring and challenging me to create a holistic model of the early church. His pioneering research and keen insight into this all-too neglected field has laid a solid foundation for me and others to build upon.”

Viola was one of several men trained and taught by Edwards. After leaving the “institutional” church he went on to spend the next twenty years in two different “organic churches.” After a period of six years under the initial instruction of Edwards he was sent out with another brother to pioneer a

house church in Brandon, Florida, in April 1998. By 2002 this house church of 45 people had reached a crisis point. Several people including his wife and a co-worker were deeply concerned about his ministry and manner of leadership. This resulted in him inviting those who were not 100% behind him to leave. This was a time of division, hurt and of divorce for Viola after years of marital problems.

Other well respected house church leaders, such as Jon Zens, gave strong warnings to Viola at this time concerning his connection with Edwards, his unbiblical teaching and practise of how a church planter operates, and his own mode of operation in the Brandon house church. Viola frequently speaks of the quality, depth and reality of the "organic" expression of church life which he had thoroughly experienced for many years. However the facts would seem to reveal something else less attractive. We are only skimming the facts and accusations made against him during this period.

Not only is the initial history of the Organic Church theory and practise under Gene Edwards and Frank Viola not idealic, it is riddled with confusion, division, conflict and secrecy. As we look at the fruit of these men in their localized ministry in communities the typical growth through conversion by house churches and organic churches, is relatively small. Unlike the church planters in the New Testament who raised up churches through powerful evangelistic ministry, in unevangelized areas, the Organic church planters have thus far focused on those who have already been believers in towns and cities which already have expressions of the body of Christ.

Viola would later admit that **“I don't see much more real spiritual growth in many house churches than I do in many institutional churches.”** Although he tries to distinguish and distance himself from the house church movement by using

the term “Organic Church” to outsiders or observers there is little difference.

Extra-biblical Experience & Catholic Mysticism

In was the South African Rodney Howard-Browne who brought the laughing revival to the US in 1993. It was later to become known as the Toronto Blessing when Randy Clarke, a pastor from St. Louis, Oklahoma, who had been at Browne's meetings carried the laughing revival to a Vineyard church in Toronto, Canada, which was pastored by John Arnott. Rodney Howard-Browne also took this laughing revival to the Carpenter's Home Church in Lakeland, Florida. In 1994 upon hearing of this new revival at Lakeland, Frank Viola attended those meetings. In 1995 he also attended a meeting in Melbourne, Florida, where Randy Clark ministered. Viola states: “Ever since I've been a Christian, I've had an insatiable hunger to know my Lord more deeply. If I hear a report that God is uniquely at work in a given place, I will move heaven and earth to visit it. This is what prompted me to check out those early meetings in Lakeland and Melbourne.”

This year of 1995 marked an important, decisive and life changing point in his Christian life. Not because of his spiritual encounters with the “Toronto Blessing” but as ‘a result of it.’ During that year he met up with Frank Valdez whom he had first met some three years earlier. In his April 2006 newsletter, Viola shares the conversation he had with Valdez. Over lunch Viola shared with him about the Toronto meetings he had just attended. Viola goes on to explain:

“This led into an invaluable discussion that marked a turning point in my life. Frank said to me, ‘There is a Christian tradition that practices a form of prayer that employs no

words. It's beyond speaking in tongues and deeper than the Toronto blessing. He had my attention.”

“As I quizzed him about his comment, Frank began to share with me about the contemplative prayer tradition. He spoke about centering prayer, *lectio divina*, and other ancient spiritual practices that were unfamiliar to me at the time. He also used a word that I wasn't too keen on. I've since learned that this word has been historically used to honor people...and with equal rigor, it has been used to damn them. Frank introduced me to the Christian 'mystics.’

“Paranthenetically, to offer some overly-simplistic definitions, contemplative prayer is a prayer of interior silence that is beyond words.”

“Centering prayer is a silent gazing upon the Lord that employs the use of a 'sacred word' like 'Lord' or 'Jesus' to center one's attention upon Him when the mind begins to wander.”

“*Lectio Divina* is a form of spiritual communion where the Scriptures are turned into prayer.”

“None of these practices are new to the Christian faith. They are all quite ancient. Only very recently have they been getting air-play in evangelical circles.”

“Back to the story. As we sat at lunch, Frank gave me a brief history of the Christian 'mystics,' as they came to be known. These were Christians who sought experiential union with their God. They had a fervent love for the Lord that had landed them into hot water. That love caused them to think and experiment 'outside the box' of traditional religion. In their desperation to know the Lord intimately, *some of them*

discovered ways of communing with God that went beyond petition-prayer, Bible-reading, and speaking in tongues.”

“In short, I was intrigued by what Frank shared with me that day. I then launched into a quest to read the writings that were part of this tradition. More importantly, I began to implement some of their discoveries into my own devotional life. As the years passed, I met others who were on this same journey. They too had gleaned from the same writings that had helped me so much.”

“I later discovered that there were some in this same tradition who are my contemporaries. Most of them, however, are outside the evangelical tradition. Rather, they are part of high church denominations like Catholic, Episcopal, and Anglican. Their writings have uncovered practical forms of spiritual communion that I've found to be of great profit personally.”

In 1995, Frank Valdez introduced three men to Viola. These three men were then promoted by Viola in his newsletter in April 2006. They were: Meister Eckhart, a 13th century Catholic mystic, Thomas Merton (1915-68) a Catholic priest heavily involved in eastern mysticism and, Karl Barth, who rejected German liberalism yet was strongly liberal in that he did not believe in the historic accuracy of the biblical account, and rather emphasized the centrality of Christ at the expense of the authority of Scripture.

Viola has happily followed popular *manifestation ministries* like that of Rodney Howard-Browne and Randy Clark, and he has practised forms of mystical, Catholic prayer, (which have been rejected by Evangelicals as unbiblical and unspiritual) all the while he has specifically targeted many fundamental and biblical practises amongst Protestants and within the Evangelical church, calling them pagan.

In more recent years, other men with whom Viola has associated and supported, and who have been heavily involved in these new practices and their promotion, are Rick Warren, Leonard Sweet, Dan Kimball, Brennan Manning and Brian McLaren to name a few. It is shocking that this growing contemporary tide of which Viola is a part promotes types of prayer and devotion which have their origins in Eastern religions as well as Catholic, mystical occultism.

However on July 2nd 2012 Viola sent out a news letter entitled *On Mysticism*. He begins by stating concerning this term: “I don’t like the term at all. One of the reasons is because it’s associated with the new age movement, Buddhism, and Hinduism, all of which run contrary to orthodox Christianity as embodied in the Scriptures, the creeds, and the historical Christian faith...Another reason I don’t like the word is because it’s associated with people and movements who deny the authority and reliability of the Scriptures...something which I fiercely believe in and defend.”

It’s amazing that he waited six years to tell us such in print. It’s also amazing that it came six months after this present bio went viral online. He also stated in this same newsletter that he believed that using terms like ‘mysticism’ and ‘mystical’ in describing a deep, intimate relationship with the Lord were poor. He then gave quotes by A.W. Tozer, T. Austin-Sparks and F.F. Bruce in order to separate himself from his previous public comments in the April 2006 Newsletter. When quizzed on this by one person on his blog he responded by saying that it was an old outdated article: “that was misinterpreted and read into” by those who do not know him personally. He also stated: “I only recall using the term ‘contemplative prayer’ once or twice in my life. And at the time, I had no idea that some Christians were using it in ways I don’t agree with at all...I don’t subscribe to the kind of contemplative prayer that

Jessie Penn Lewis warned about...Nor do I hold to chants which are parcel to Eastern mysticism. I never have. I've not read enough of Meister Eckhart to know his theology...I've never held him up to be model for anything...I've always believed what I've written in this post...I see those practices as going deeper than traditional prayer (asking God for things) and traditional Bible study (studying for knowledge)...that's what I meant by those terms. Lectio Divina, the way some of the Reformers practiced it, is simply reading the Bible and talking to God about what one reads.” This is certainly a very careful bit of back peddling without apology. I will leave it to the reader to decide if he believes that such a student, scholar, author and internet buff could be that ignorant of terminology and then take six years to correct the mistake. This is another clear example of Viola's practise of double speak in which he hides amidst the confusion of words, terminology and professed ignorance.

As it happens however, the Reformers rejected practices like Lectio Divina. Luther fully practised this Catholic form and was thoroughly trained in it. But as a result of the light of the Gospel shinning on his mind and justification by faith coming to his heart he utterly rejected the practice of the Lectio Divina as contrary to Scripture. It is strange that Viola will claim support for this from the Reformers but criticises them on every other front!

Author

It was Viola's contact and association with Gene Edwards that first brought him to public notice. He wrote articles which were read by people because of this association. In the 1990s, Viola self published books, which would eventually be republished, and read across the world. His mentor, Edwards, had learnt the secret of writing simple, easy-read books which

are witty, sarcastic, challenging, and carefully worded to play upon people's emotions, fears, doubts and genuine concerns.

Viola worked on his book *Pagan Christianity?* for a period of four years. It is similar in theme to Edwards book *Beyond Radical* but far more comprehensive, with quotes and research from hundreds of other books and sources. He first published it in 2002. In 2004 he published *The Untold Story of the New Testament*. Then as a result of a phone call from George Barna he re-released *Pagan Christianity?* in January 2008 with Barna as a co-author. With such help and marketing, it has since resulted in 100,000 copies in print. This brought him to national and international prominence and notice. Who was George Barna? He was the main influence during the 1990's who travelled the nation promoting user-friendly churches, business techniques and the practise of marketing the church.

This book deals with numbers of things which would generally be considered typical in Evangelical circles such as: the use of pulpits, sitting in rows, dressing up for church, textual preaching, altar calls, centrality of preaching in the local gathering, the use of cup and bread for communion, and many other things. All of these are seen by Viola as a departure from early Christianity and more the product of paganism and man-made traditions than biblical doctrine. Viola puts these aspects in the firing line whilst behind the scenes he is practising and promoting real pagan and Catholic ritual. In *Pagan Christianity?*, the Reformers, Puritans and Revivalists (like Moody) are blackened and stereotyped but in his own personal ministry, Catholic Mystics are promoted and their teachings followed.

The re-release of *Pagan Christianity?*, was followed quickly by *Reimagining Church* in August 2008, *From Eternity to Here* in March 2009, *Finding Organic Church* in September

2009, *Jesus Manifesto* in June 2010, *Revise Us Again* in April 2011, and *Jesus: A Theography* in October 2012. “His books and articles have been translated into Spanish, Korean, Japanese, Chinese, Dutch, German, French, Swedish, Portuguese, Romanian, and Russian.” He has written another book called *God's Favorite Place On Earth* which is due out in May 2013.

His books are popular and in many ways compelling. His repeated emphasis on the person of Christ, the centrality of Christ and the headship of Christ in the local body is enough to stir, challenge, draw and impress any genuine believers who are hungry for the reality of Jesus Christ. His emphasize on organic life as a product of the indwelling life of Christ and of the function and operation of every member in the local body is indeed impressive.

Viola has been impacted in his style of writing by a number of authors: “Brennan Manning is an incredible writer. I once (very literally) sat at his feet and asked him while he was seated: ‘As a more seasoned writer giving advice to a less seasoned writer, what is the most important piece of advice you can give me?’ His answer — ‘If it doesn’t move you, throw it in the trash can. If it moves you, write it!’”

Who was Brennan Manning (1934-2013)? He was a lapsed Catholic priest (although a regular attendee at daily Mass) who attended a week long Jesuit retreat each year. He is a likeable, down-to-earth preacher and author who held regular seminars around the US. He birthed his successful writing career after a divorce and bout of alcoholism. He was also a big proponent of men like M.B. Pennington who wrote *Centering Prayer* as well as Bede Griffiths both of whom were Catholic monks as well as students and propagators of eastern mysticism, monasticism, contemplative prayer, TM

and other prayer practices. It is not surprising then that in his book *The Signature of Jesus*, Manning wrote a chapter on contemplative prayer. To say the least, it is strange that such an author so impresses Viola.

The renewal of contemplative prayer in Christian circles at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century owes much to the efforts of these men. It is not so much traditional or ancient Catholic practice as it is traditional eastern practice. Sadly it is the new contemporary movements with which Viola associates that are promoting a mixture of eastern and Catholic practises within Evangelicalism.

Blogger

Frank Viola has undoubtedly benefited beyond imagination from this technical, cyber-social-networking age as much as any man I know of. His blog is promoted as one of the most popular Christian blogs on the web today. Under the ministry banner of Present Testimony Ministry, his various websites and blogs have international coverage and appeal. Viola can truly be called the first of a generation of bloggers.

Who can doubt that the spread, availability and use of the internet, has had a profound influence upon the church world. It has opened a unique opportunity for those who were quick enough, technical enough and wise enough to use it. In past generations a ministry generally came to be known through public preaching, pioneering churches and multiple lives changed. Now through modern technology this has been turned on its head. Someone can now be well known across a nation or the world as a result of sitting at their computer in their own home. As a result of this a ministry may be birthed. The internet is the market place of the 21st century. However there are preachers who have crisscrossed the world in recent

decades leaving a trail of tens of thousands of new converts, churches and leaders behind them yet they are virtually unknown in the internet world of the contemporary church.

Viola has called his blog *Beyond Evangelical*. He is quick however to be careful in defining what he means by Beyond Evangelical. “First, ‘beyond evangelical’ doesn’t mean ‘non-evangelical’...Second, ‘beyond evangelical’ doesn’t mean ‘post-evangelical.’” At every opportunity he states that he is Evangelical. He is able to articulate clearly, precisely and accurately simple statements concerning his personal beliefs and convictions which sound thoroughly orthodox.

In the same article on his blog where he defines what he means by Beyond Evangelical he explains that today’s Evangelical movement is made up of “shifting movements.” He goes on to make Evangelical a vague term which cannot be easily defined and which means different things to different people. He also makes it a broad term that covers everything from heretics to the most noted Fundamentalists of our day. He places men like Rob Bell and John MacArthur under the same banner of Evangelicalism. Viola calls this middle road that draws all together on a higher plane the “third way.” Traditionally amongst Evangelicals this has been called compromise!

While he is emphatic that he is not departing from true orthodox Evangelicalism or going beyond Scripture the fact is that as we skim over his associations, what he says and what he does not say, what he promotes and what he does not promote, who he promotes and who he does not promote, it is very clear that he tolerates and promotes things that the great Evangelicals of the past 500 years would never tolerate.

Viola differentiates between traditional Evangelicalism and his new brand by stating that the traditional form was Bible-centred, whereas Beyond Evangelicalism is Christ-centred. Actually that could not be further from the truth. Evangelicalism has always been Bible-based and as a result of that Christ-centred. Evangelicalism has constantly given rise to leaders and movements who were Christ-centred but Viola thinks otherwise. He attempts to plant and promote the idea that his ministry is unique because it promotes the centrality of Christ. It is hard to believe that he can be serious in promoting this idea but it is harder still to believe that others receive it.

Although on his blogs and sites Viola states that his aim and purpose is the promotion of “the centrality, supremacy, and all-sufficiency of Jesus Christ, the deepening of the spiritual life, Christian community, church planting, God's eternal purpose, mission, and church renewal” it would seem obvious at this point in time that he is not just deepening, strengthening, enlarging and reforming a decrepit, backslidden Evangelicalism but is actually redefining the term Evangelical. He is part of a growing tide of contemporary Christians who are redefining the term Evangelical to their own liking. By the time they finish with it, it will no longer mean what it did for five centuries.

Although commended as a prophetic voice to the church Viola does not deal with the sin, errors or compromises that have crept into Evangelicalism. There can be no doubt that his blog is a key factor in promoting a movement which is taking a middle road between the worst heresies on one side and the most traditional and orthodox form of evangelicalism on the other. This blog, with its affiliated sites, is promoting a forward move called “Beyond” in which heretical and sound forms of Evangelicalism will merge and gather around the person of Christ without dealing with heresy or sin. Beyond

Evangelicalism is not traditional Evangelicalism. **It is revamped old-fashioned Liberalism and Ecumenism.**

Historian & Scholar

“I’m a student of history.” As a historian he talks of historic movements in a manner that is inaccurate and which lacks a fullness of understanding and expression which church historians have always been noted for. But setting this aside for the moment (maybe for another article) let’s deal with a few generalities. He creates a historic narrative of the early church which goes beyond the boundaries of the written history of the infallible text of Scripture itself; setting forth dates, sequence of books and extra biblical facts. While these things are not wrong in themselves, to make them authoritative as a means of interpreting the Bible is dangerous. He then, in his various writings, presents this historical narrative as the means to interpret and understand scripture. This is of course the wrong use of history in relation to Scripture.¹

When he does deal with Scripture he uses his proposed means of interpretation: in restating certain facts from biblical history, often in a dogmatic way, he repeatedly states something as biblical history which actually contradicts the Biblical text. Let me give you a small example. He has frequently commented that when Saul (Paul) came to Antioch he did not serve in leadership but as an organic member of the body. But it is clear from scripture that Saul was brought to Antioch by Barnabas to teach the Word of God (Acts 11:23-26, 30; 13:1).

When we come to the Reformation in his writings and interviews we meet constant generalities which are strongly

¹ See article on the *Order of Paul’s Letters* by K. Malcomson

one-sided. He notes multiple weakness and shortcomings without accurately noting its strengths and the spiritual impact it made right down to our own day. His statements reveal he has no real, or at least deep, understanding of the history of the Reformation. He states in one interview: “I stand with John Howard Yoder’s critique when he said, ‘The whole concern of Reformation theology was to justify restructuring the organized church without shaking its foundations.’ *Pagan Christianity* seeks to shake some of its foundations.” As it happens the whole thrust of the Reformation dealt with the deepest understanding of justification by faith, forgiveness of sins and with a true relationship with God through Christ manifest in an obedient walk whereas *Pagan Christianity* does not deal with such foundational issues but only issues relating to restructuring the church. It is sad to see his willingness to stand against the work of the Reformation but to be influenced by the thinking and writings of a man like Yoder (1927-97) who was a seminary professor with a record of two decades of sexual misconduct.

For a historian to miss this foundational historic fact is at best surprising but to be doing the very thing he accuses the Reformation of doing is inexcusable. We could also mention his views, statements and misunderstanding of Puritanism, Brethrenism and Pentecostalism as well as such godly characters as D.L. Moody and others. However when he comes to the contemporary Christian scene or to Catholicism he uses very different means of calculation, judgement and consideration. He is ruthless when looking at Protestant/Evangelical movements and their leaders but sympathetic when dealing with erroneous groups. He also promotes an acceptance of contemporary movements and their leaders without the same scrutiny, challenge, and without revealing their errors. In fact he dismisses queries about his

association with contemporary heretics by saying he has not looked into what they believe.

So what's the difference? We recognize that these past movements had shortcomings, weakness and things that needed further reform in order to conform to Scripture, but on the issue of true salvation and the fundamentals of the faith, they were solid. That is not so with these contemporary movements. Their views on Scripture, salvation, justification, the atonement, works and creation are faulty. His utter ignorance concerning the reason for the Reformation and the continuing error in the fundamental doctrines of Catholicism is worrying. This reveals a terrible bias in his scholarship against traditional Protestantism, yet favour for Catholicism.

Viola is not only hailed as a historian but as a scholar as well. One thing frequently mentioned about *Pagan Christianity*, is the scholarship involved; the quotes, the references and the bibliography. It is common to read: 'he must be right' or 'he seems to know what he is talking about.' People are impressed with his 'scholarship' only because they neglect to examine its accuracy.

The central core and emphasis of his theology is Ecclesiology. This is his teaching concerning the doctrine of the church. In his teachings, his blog and his books it is church order, structure and function that is central. He believes that an emphasis on the centrality of the church in his theology sets him apart or beyond the typical Evangelical position. He places an importance upon this above many fundamentals of the faith. Please note that his Ecclesiology does not primarily deal with the purity of the church but the structure of the church. He teaches that the pastoral office (which he calls the clergy system) is the single biggest problem of our day. Meanwhile he bypasses the popular heresies and compromises

of a number of men with whom he associates who are leading the growing apostasy of this hour.

He longs to make the liberal, modernist and post-modern disputes of the past an old hat issue with new Evangelicals (Beyond Evangelicals) moving on from contending against or being concerned with such disputes. They have moved on from contending for the faith which started with Paul opposing the Judaizers and Jude writing his Epistle and which has continued for nineteen centuries. He believes this new form of Evangelicalism can move beyond such unnecessary disputes.

His doctrine of the church is again seen to take precedence over the vital issues of salvation and separation from error when he says, “Both high churches and house churches strongly emphasize the importance of Christian community in their theology.” He considers that both are closer in agreement than meets the natural eye: “There’s one common feature that is central to both: Their strong emphasis on community.”

His form of scholarship is also revealed by his response to the dispute on Hell. In his post in March 2011 he was clear in stating “I am not a universalist” however he did not state where he did stand on the issue: “Here’s my concluding statement on hell: When I’m finished exploring and declaring the unsearchable riches of Jesus Christ with my brothers and sisters, I’ll get around to dissecting the anatomy of hell.”

But in Scripture the same Christ who was quick to show love for sinners was quick to speak of His judgement upon unrepentant sinners. Just read the epistles of Paul, Peter, John or Jude and you find no such one-sided scholarship as is here portrayed by Viola. Each of these men spoke in the most clear, open, forceful and unapologetic manner about God’s

judgement; both temporal and eternal. You cannot separate preaching Christ from preaching on His punishment of sinners or His coming judgement. To preach clearly in warning saints and sinners alike about an eternal Hell is not a departure from preaching the centrality and supremacy of Christ; it is a vital biblical part of it.

In January 2012, Viola went on to promote the book *Christ Minimized: A Response to Rob Bell's Love Wins* by his good friend Jon Zens. The forward was written by Edward Fudge who is one of the most prominent promoters of Annihilationism. He also went on to promote Fudge's book on the blog responses *The Fire that Consumes*. Both of these books present and promote the Annihilationist view which rejects the orthodox Evangelical and biblical view of eternal punishment.

It seems that Viola is willing to use his focus on proclaiming Christ as a means of disarming those of a contrary view on Hell only to then promote his own views and convictions.

Emergent Church

In 2005 Viola began to take note of the emergent church and to read their material in order to gain an understanding and insight concerning them. Those who represent the emergent church trends like to call it a "conversation." A new more popular name for it is "missional." As a result of Viola's research he wrote an article called *Will the Emergent Church Fully Emerge?*

In it he states: "The following are themes within the emerging church phenomenon that I wholeheartedly applaud and am thankful for:" He then went on to list 8 marks which he termed "Major Strengths." For the sake of brevity let me give four of

the headings: “1. The emerging church phenomenon is exploring fresh ways to revamp and recontextualize the gospel message to postmodern people...3. The emerging church phenomenon has placed an emphasis on rethinking the modern church...its methods, its programs, its traditions, and its structure...7. The emerging church phenomenon has dumped the modern penchant to always be certain in answering every spiritual question under the sun...8. The emerging church phenomenon has re-ignited a healthy interest in the Christian mystics who emphasized spiritual encounter over against mere academic knowledge of God and the Bible.”

He admitted that he had much to “glean” from this movement in these areas. He then went on to list the “Serious Weaknesses” of this movement, all of which related to what Viola certainly considers his own strengths. Some of the things he listed were the promotion of the “clergy system” (role of the local pastor) as a big negative, the neglect of the role of the itinerant church planter, a lack in emphasizing narrative or the story behind the New Testament text as the means to interpret the text, and the most alarming, a neglect of the person of Jesus Christ and His centrality. Of this he states: “I remember reading a few emerging church articles not too long ago, and I actually counted how many times the Lord was mentioned. In one article, which was quite lengthy, He was mentioned once. In another, He was never mentioned at all!”

This article led to heated discussion between the organic and emergent movements. Discussion led to dialogue and eventually mutual respect. But sadly Viola never addressed the real error in this movement and still has not, even though being able to state: “Many of the leaders in the emerging church are good friends of mine. I agree with certain elements of it; others I do not.”

The emergent church leadership is riddled with liberalism, secularism, feminism, anti-literalism and eastern contemplative practices. They deny a literal historic creation by God and promote evolutionary theories and tendencies. They deny the reality of a literal and eternal Hell. They make light of the Flood as an act of God's judgement upon sinners and they also reject the truth of a coming day of judgement. As a result some promote homosexual relationships (as long of course as the individuals concerned do not have intercourse!). They also promote the goodness and acceptability of other pagan religions. Worst of all they mock and reject the doctrine of atonement and propitiation, the precious teaching that Christ had to suffer and be judged in our place for our sins. Amongst them there is such an utter absence of mention or emphasis on the Blood of Jesus which is the only means of peace with God.

Much of the Emergent movement is just a repackaged liberalism. It is not at all new in its theology. Their whole theology undermines the authority, inspiration and reliability of the written Scriptures yet they can talk of knowing Christ or being a seeker after Him. While all those who profess to belong to this movement may not believe all or even any of these points the fact is that a great many of the key leaders, authors and voices amongst them most certainly do.

In August of 2008 Viola began emailing back and forward with Leonard Sweet who is a key leader in the emergent church who co-authored a book with Brian McLaren in 2003 called the *Language of the Emerging Church*. In April 2009 Viola and Sweet had the joint idea of writing a book on the epistle of Colossians but could not get past the first chapter. As a compromise they produced a *Magna Carta: A Jesus Manifesto* which had the subtitle *Restoring the Supremacy and Sovereignty of Jesus Christ*. They wrote it in eighteen days

and then published it as an online document of 2,300 words. It was later expanded and released as a 200 page book in June 2010. He again co-authored a book with Sweet called *Jesus: A Theography* in October 2012.

Although ‘Jesus Christ is the professed subject of the book and the theme of each page’ it is noticeable that Viola and Sweet happily quote such men as Pope John Paul, Pope Benedict XV, and John Henry Newman. Newman was a 19th century English minister who was involved in the Jesuitical plot to restore the Anglican Church to Rome by initially promoting his *via media* (the middle road). Of course they quote from many great, godly and spiritual saints as well. But it is this growing mixture that is so deeply disturbing about Viola’s ministry.

Ironic as it all seems, one of those whose endorsement is found in the front of this book, is Dr Rowan Williams, who was Archbishop of Canterbury (Anglican Church) at that time. Maybe Mr Viola does not realise it, but Dr Williams was inducted in a stone circle into the Gorsedd of the Bards at the National Eisteddfod in August 2002, otherwise known as The Eisteddfod druids. Edward Williams who founded this group in 1792 said: “A man is no less a Christian for being a Druid, or a Druid for being a Christian.” Dr. Williams was also well known for his pro-evolution, pro-homosexual, pro-Islamic stance and statements by Evangelicals across the British Isles who were not at all happy with him.

This just shows that a supposed proclamation of Christ without any biblical definition and explanation can accommodate all and any. Liberalism has for years talked of the centrality and supremacy of Christ without holding to the fundamental truth of Christ as set forth clearly in Scripture. A true proclamation of the centrality, sovereignty, supremacy,

sufficiency, uniqueness and loveliness of Christ will never sit easy with the tares which lead the old traditional and new contemporary apostate systems of our day.

A vague repeated usage of the term “the centrality of Christ” is not sufficient and never has been. To think that we or anyone else, is truly preaching the centrality of Christ while remaining silent in correcting the terrible confusion which is so very evident in the Church of our day, is delusion. Every man of God in Church history who affected his generation for Christ could not remain silent. Each of them reluctantly had to contend for the faith in order to preserve, protect and promote the centrality of Christ in the Church.

Book Lists

In July of 2011 Viola released a list of ‘*100 Best Christian Books Ever Written*’ and in August ‘*The Best 100 Academic Christian Books.*’ Amongst these 200 books there are those written by authors such as T. Austin-Sparks, Watchman Nee, A.W. Tozer, Lloyd-Jones and books like the *Pilgrim Church* by Broadbent. But also in these lists are two books by Leonard Sweet, one by Brian McLaren and three by Brennen Manning. But saddest of all is two volumes by Pope Benedict XVI on *Jesus of Nazareth*.

While he does state: “Just because a book or a commentary appears on this list doesn't mean that I agree with every word of it. Nor does it mean that I agree with everything the author has ever said or done”, we would however expect that he would at least promote books by those who are born-again. I'm shocked, surprised and disturbed that an author who has written so strongly against tradition, paganism, legalism and ritual in the church would then place two books by the Pope in this list. Again he writes: “I consider these books to be the

best Christian works ever written in the 20th and 21st centuries. (I didn't list older books in order to keep the list to 100).” Actually he only lists one book which is from an earlier period, the 18th century, and that is Madam Guyon the Catholic Mystic.

Viola strongly promotes the writings of N.T. Wright, an English Anglican, who he calls one of the best Biblical scholars and theologian of this generation. Wright denies a literal rapture of the Church. He believes that references concerning believers being caught up to meet Christ in the air are: “not to be understood as literal truth.” He is also involved in controversy in redefining ‘justification by faith’ in a manner unknown to Evangelicals for 500 years. Several key authors including N.T. Write and Scot McKnight who Viola strongly and consistently promotes believe that Darwinian Evolution is compatible with Evangelical Christianity. One site that Wright supports has this to say: "We believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, but we also believe that evolution, properly understood, best describes God's work of creation." These contemporary theologians do not believe in a literal interpretation of Genesis and this of course is why there is a challenge to a literal interpretation of the Bible from within Frank Viola's growing camp.

In March 2011 Viola first promoted *The Sacra Pagina* a new set of Catholic commentaries on the books of the Bible suggesting that Christ can be found within them. He especially noted the writings of Luke Timothy Johnson (*Luke* and *Acts*). Johnson has written more than 20 books on Jesus and the Scriptures. He is a mix of traditional Catholic and liberal scholar who promotes homosexual, same-sex relationships. He rejects the authority of the clear commands of scripture and exalts personal experience in its place. He has publicly defended and supported his daughter's lesbian marriage. Sadly

Viola promotes such material while ignoring known trustworthy greats like Matthew Henry's Commentary.

Another book which Viola promotes is called *The Bible Made Impossible* by Christian Smith (Aug. 2011). Viola states about this book that it is "one of the best books on how Christians should approach the Bible." It is worth noting that Smith converted to Roman Catholicism in the middle of writing it! In June 2011 Smith published his book *How to Go from Being a Good Evangelical to a Committed Catholic in Ninety-Five Difficult Steps*. In *The Bible Made Impossible* which carries the subtitle *Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* Smith challenges "the Bible's exclusive authority, infallibility, clarity, self-sufficiency, internal consistency, self-evident meaning, and universal applicability."²

The convictions and doubts aired by Smith took him to Rome which is one of the most apostate, compromised, immoral and heretical forms of Christianity on the earth today. Sadly that does not matter to Viola as the issue of Evangelicals believing in the perfection, reliability, sufficiency and simplicity of the written Word of God is more of a problem. This reveals the sort of teaching and scholarship that Viola is impressed with and the direction he is taking many in as he promotes his form of Beyond Evangelical.

Conclusion

When I first wrote responses to various teachings within Frank Viola's book *Pagan Christianity?* I knew little or nothing about the above associations and promotions with which he

² To read a simple, Biblical and Christ-centred way of approaching Scripture read *CHRIST: The Key to the Written Scriptures* by K. Malcomson

was involved. Although I initially just disagreed with certain things that I thought were vital to the health of the Church and which I thought would be used to eventually bring in widespread abuse, I would not have put a question mark over his motive or agenda. But now as I view his duplicity and double-speak, I greatly fear for those whom he will lead progressively in a direction of error.

His manner of being all things to all men is noticeable. To the emergent he is emergent, to evangelicals he is evangelical, to the organic he is organic, and to the contemplative he is contemplative. When dealing with or dialoguing with any particular group or movement he will address himself to them as being one of them yet separate from them.

In case you think I am nit picking please remember this is the man who has scrutinised evangelical Protestantism up and down, frequently misrepresenting, making light of serious things, making much of things nowhere condemned in Scripture and commanding things nowhere commanded in Scripture. This is the man who has accused biblical Evangelicalism of being more pagan than pure yet has turned a blind eye to the most paganised Christian movements of our day.

Mr Viola is certainly leading people somewhere but it is not into a deeper richer revelation and experience of Christ and true Church-life. There is indeed a third way beyond Evangelicalism being forged which is taking the wide rocky road to Mysticism, Romanism, Liberalism and Ecumenism, or at least joining hands with it, which while being called Evangelical is actually a departure from Biblical Christianity and the Christ preached by the Apostles.

In the past six months I have received reports from churches and leaders in several different countries where the teachings of the Organic and Simple church movement have caused serious problems. Just as Peter, Jude and John in their latter days warned, preached and contended against the Cain movement, the Balaam Movement and the Jezebel Movement which had infiltrated the church so must we against this encroaching compromise, heresy and apostasy. I would encourage all faithful local church leaders to give themselves to prayer, fasting and the study and preaching of the Word of God in order to protect and guard the flock of God which has been entrusted to them.

NOTE: It is of great interest that Frank Viola regularly and persistently responds to questions by stating that he is just misrepresented, misquoted, misread, misinterpreted and misunderstood. This is a poor response, defence and shield against those who have deep concerns over his teachings, statements and promotions.