

# HOUSE-CHURCHISM: AN ECCLESIASTICAL PANACEA OR POISON? (1)

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## Introduction: An Anabaptist Ecclesiology

### The Need for an Antithetical Review

The House Church Movement (HCM) is a dynamic and diverse social movement of professing Christians characterized by opposition to traditional church practices and promotion of the view that Christians should withdraw from churches and instead have small informal meetings together in their houses like a family in a home. The aim of this series of articles is to demonstrate that the HCM is the exact opposite of the panacea it claims to be. This will be achieved by means of a detailed review of one of the key pieces of literature in the HCM, *Pagan Christianity* by Frank Viola and George Barna.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, this series of articles will defend the system of ecclesiastical practice in the Reformed tradition, which, while not being a panacea for all the problems of God's people, is nevertheless biblical. In case it is unclear to anyone at the very outset, this will also underscore the fact that biblical and Reformed ecclesiology is so far from this "house-churchism," that the two are not simply different and incompatible, but also wholly opposed to each other. The former represents the way in which Christ has graciously ordered His holy temple as a pillar and ground of the truth (I Tim. 3:15). The latter is really an Anabaptist ecclesiology.<sup>2</sup> It represents a devastating strategy of Satan to tear that temple asunder and bury the truth in a mass of confusion, ambiguity, imprecision, arrogant apathy, and careless love of novelty. Since this is what Satan aims to achieve, it should not be surprising that Viola levels his attacks

<sup>1</sup> Frank Viola and George Barna, *Pagan Christianity?: Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Despite their short introductory caveat, this really shows how inexcusable it was for Tyndale House to publish such a doctrinally-rotten book. They have provided a platform for the HCM to propagate their heresies, in order to prey on the ignorant, and thereby sow dissension and strife to destroy churches and lead many astray into ruin.

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centrally against the preaching and the rule of elders. This should be enough for Reformed believers to reject the entire movement outright, without any further analysis. Sadly, in our day, many even in Reformed churches have lost the high view of preaching and elders which is the heritage of the Reformation that brought us out of apostate Rome. This is what Viola calls the “sacred cow” of Protestantism.<sup>3</sup>

The book may be summarized very briefly. It comprises a list of criticisms of traditions and practices in the modern church world, based upon the premise that these practices come not from Scripture, but from pagan culture (hence, the title). It is described as a revolutionary book on radical church restoration. These three words, “revolutionary,” “radical,” and “restoration,” identify the book with Anabaptist philosophy. In each criticism, the author aims to trace the historical roots of the practice to its supposedly pagan origins. Amidst all this, there are legitimate criticisms, but this only serves as the perfect pretext from which to attack scriptural practices in order to promote the old Anabaptist fanaticism.

One gets the impression that Viola's targeted audience is people in old compromising mainline denominations (perhaps, in order to gain recruits and support for the HCM). Viola also writes as if he were the first one really to have studied and analysed the historical practices of the church. His introductory note laments that after he first left the church institute, he could not find a book which documents the origins of modern church practices. It is this, the church institute, under which every criticism is subsumed—not particular church institutes, but the *very idea* of the church in its institutional form—which he claims is totally at odds with the nature of the church.

Viola is well able to make use of the weaknesses of modern Protestant churches in general. He knows very well that most so-called “Reformed” churches today have long neglected proper ecclesiology, have grown hardened in many errors, and have even inherited certain firmly held traditions which are now empty, unhelpful, misunderstood, and archaic. Consider the proliferation of women ministers and “worship bands” as examples of ecclesiological weakness. In addition, and most significantly, many of those who still have

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<sup>3</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan*, p. 85.

correct church practices have utterly neglected to preach and insist on these things on the basis of Reformed theology and many very simple transparent instructions and patterns in Scripture. More than thoroughly refuting Viola's house-churchism, this series of articles will therefore endeavour to detail proper Reformed ecclesiology, and display clearly its foundations. In the process, Viola's house-churchism can only be left shattered, because the truth shines brightly to expose the lie.

In this way it is hoped that this series of articles will be much more helpful and constructive than if it were nothing more than a lengthy criticism of *Pagan Christianity*. Careful refutations of falsehood are important in themselves alone, in helping to keep people from wandering astray down a crooked path when they can see more clearly where it leads. Even better, however, is to set forth positively the true way in which we should walk in contrast to the false way. This is why the Bible throughout teaches us antithetically. It sets forth the good always in contrast with the evil, the truth against the lie. Notice the first Psalm for example, "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly ... But his delight is in the law of the LORD." Consider also how God prepared Gideon to be a judge. First Gideon was instructed to tear down his father's altar of Baal and the grove with it. In its place he was to build an altar to the LORD his God, and even use the wood from the grove to offer a burnt sacrifice (Judg. 6:25-32). Both of these are essential in the work of reforming the church. It is not enough simply to destroy and cast out the idols and everything that is wrong. Otherwise, as Christ taught, the latter state will be worse than the first (Luke 11:24-26). The proper worship of the true God must be set up in its place. This illustrates the folly of Tyndale House in publishing *Pagan Christianity*.

At the time of the sixteenth-century Reformation of the church, even the most blind could see plainly many of the pestilent abuses and errors in the church practice of Rome. Clear comparisons could be made between Rome then and the spiritually impoverished "Protestant" church world today. Some, like Erasmus, sought to reform these practices from within by exposing and criticising them. The Anabaptists levelled even heavier criticisms against Rome, and sought to establish their own counter-practices. Such was their unrestrained zeal for their own wild ideas, they rejected completely also much which was

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good and proper, even though greatly corrupted and abused. This is much the same way in which Viola criticizes the so-called “Protestant” church world today. In the style of the Anabaptists, Viola down-plays theological precision, while making innumerable details about practical matters paramount. Viola’s criticism of Western theology demonstrates this in his apparent distaste for creeds and logic:

Contemporary theology cut its teeth on the abstractions of Greek philosophy. University academics adopted an Aristotelian model of thinking that centered on rational knowledge and logic. The dominating drive in scholastic theology was the assimilation and communication of knowledge. (For this reason, the Western mind has always been fond of creedal formulations, doctrinal statements, and other bloodless abstractions.)<sup>4</sup>

This is like putting the cart of practice before the horse of theology (then again, this illogical order is presumably not troubling to one who dislikes or disregards logic), but to be more precise, it is like constructing with great care and concern, while deliberately not using a blueprint. In fact, Viola claims, “the New Testament doesn’t supply us with a detailed blueprint for church practice”<sup>5</sup> and this is, according to Viola, because the church is organic. For someone who makes these claims, he seems to have very many ideas about which church practices are right and especially which are wrong! In reality, Viola contradicts himself by constantly trying to argue for his practices logically. He also bases his arguments on what seems very much like a blueprint: his own imprecise brand of theology, which, as one would expect, attempts to emulate correct theology by using the same vocabulary, but with different and obscure definitions.

The approach of the Protestant Reformers was different. They understood from Scripture that rotten practice in the church is the result of rotten doctrine at the root. For this reason, the Reformation was first of all a doctrinal Reformation and a revival of expository preaching. Even though this is the key

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 244.

reason that the Reformation had such a profound effect on the church world, these are the very things for which the authors of *Pagan Christianity* criticize the Reformation. Therefore, this series of articles will also endeavour to be first solidly doctrinal, and seek to expose the roots of these practical errors (both those espoused in Pagan Christianity and many that it also criticizes). These roots will not be sought in the bare practices of historical paganism or heathendom where Viola seeks them, but in the most destructive tool of the enemy: false doctrine within the church.

### **Anabaptist World Flight and Hyper-Spirituality**

False doctrine is described by Scripture as a canker or gangrene which if left unchecked grows and spreads, for which the only solution is amputation (II Tim. 2:17). The church does not need to find the roots of its errors in pagan culture, because its own members are fully capable in themselves of producing all manner of corruption. Not even hypocrites who are always present in the church are absolutely required for this. Even the godliest saint, regenerated by the Spirit of God with a new nature, and endowed with the mind of Christ, and many spiritual gifts, can still commit the most horrendous sins according to the total depravity of his own original sinful nature which he carries with him. While the world does present very serious dangers to the church, the most devastating attacks have always come from within (Acts 20:29-30; Gal. 2:4; II Pet. 2:1; Jude 4). The approach of *Pagan Christianity* therefore leads one into the old world flight error which is characteristic of the Anabaptists: falsely presuming that the safety of the church relies upon physically fleeing the world and its influence entirely. In fact, this article demonstrates that the entire book is characteristically Anabaptist—a point admitted by the authors themselves.<sup>6</sup>

Rev. Daniel Kleyn, in a speech regarding the Reformed doctrine of the antithesis (which stands exactly against both the errors of common grace and world flight), gave the following insights:

Something very important is forgotten by those who think that the calling of Christians is to isolate themselves physically

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 264-265, 128-129.

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from the world. What I refer to is the fact that even the child of God has the world within his own heart. Every person in the world, even the regenerated believer, takes the world with him wherever he goes, within his own heart, and in his sinful flesh. It is impossible, therefore, for anyone to isolate himself from the world and all its sin. Clearly, therefore, the antithesis is to be understood as being spiritual enmity, and therefore spiritual separation from the world. We could put it this way: not world flight, but world fight. That is the antithesis.<sup>7</sup>

As already mentioned, and as this quote also demonstrates, this error of world flight rests upon a disregard for or a disbelief in the total depravity of mankind and in particular of the sinfulness of the church's members. Viola's own peculiar view about the nature of the church as an organism reflects this:

And because the church is organic, it has a natural expression—as all organisms do. For that reason, when a group of Christians follow their spiritual DNA, they will gather in a way that matches the DNA of the triune God—for they possess the same life that God Himself possesses ... Consequently, the DNA of the church is marked by the very traits that we find in the triune God ... The DNA of the church produces certain identifiable features ... the seed of the gospel will naturally produce these particular features ...<sup>8</sup>

This completely ignores the reality that not only is the principle of the divine life at work in the church, but also the principle of the sinful nature of humanity (Rom. 7:14-25; Gal. 5:17)! Elsewhere Viola pays only a certain lip-service to the “fallibility” of church members. Also the sinfulness of the saints of the past and present outside the HCM is given far more attention than of those in the HCM. The explanation he gives is simple: Only those whose church practices are in line with the HCM are spiritual.

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<sup>7</sup> Daniel Kleyn, “Living Antithetically in a Technological Age” in Daniel Kleyn, Garry J. Eriks and Herman C. Hanko, “The Antithesis: Godly Living in Ungodly Times” (Zeeland, MI: Evangelism Committee of the First Protestant Reformed Church of Holland, MI, 2008), pp. 6-7.

<sup>8</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan*, p. 263.

... when the Holy Spirit has His sovereign<sup>9</sup> way in birthing a church, it will spontaneously gather in a biblical fashion. The church will be led of the Spirit to fulfil the apostolic tradition. As Paul said, those who follow the Spirit (those who are “spiritual”) will adhere to the apostolic tradition regarding church practice (I Cor. 14:37).<sup>10</sup>

The old Anabaptists held these same false views, believing that they had a kind of hyper-spirituality,<sup>11</sup> even explicitly denying human depravity, at least in Christians. Knowing that this is the case with the justified people of God who are yet sinners, the situation of the church looks bleak, and one wonders how it could possibly survive; but the church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ, her Saviour. This series of articles is therefore based upon assumptions which run totally contrary to the foundational assumptions of *Pagan Christianity*: errors in church practice need not to be explained as a result of the influence of the ungodly “pagan” world upon the church (which would supposedly develop normally if only it was isolated from this world), and that Jesus Christ, being the foundation of the church, preserves her throughout all ages. The preservation of the church does not ultimately rest upon Christians “follow[ing] their spiritual DNA.” That would be Arminian ecclesiology.

Calvin’s proposed remedy for us to be safe-guarded against the errors of the

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<sup>9</sup> Let the reader not be dazzled by this word. It is quite apparent that, for Viola, all this nevertheless depends ultimately on the church “following” the Spirit’s leading. For Viola, the Spirit does not always get His way. And he is a charismatic; when he says, led of the Spirit, he does not necessarily mean by Scripture, especially when he uses the word “spontaneously.”

<sup>10</sup> Frank Viola, *Reimagining Church: Pursuing the Dream of Organic Christianity* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2008), p. 250.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin describes a certain sect of the Anabaptists thus: “Furthermore, it should be noted that in their confused application of the word ‘Spirit’ to whatever comes into their head, not only do they confound their hearers’ understanding by confusing matters that ought to be held distinct, but they also cajole them into believing that they are completely ‘spiritual’ and ‘divine’ and are almost as holy as angels” (*Treatises Against the Anabaptists and Against the Libertines*, trans. and ed. Benjamin W. Farley [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1982], p. 227). Without a shadow of a doubt this is analogous to our modern-day scourge of “charismatics” (which is the very same as calling themselves “spirituals” as many Anabaptists did, only they try to impress with a word which sounds closer to the Greek). It reflects strongly on his house-churchism, that Viola admits that he is a charismatic in *Reimagining Church* (pp. 111, 132-133).

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“spirituals” is appropriate to quote here in length, as it serves equally well to defend us from being taken in by the hyper-spiritual charismatics with their house-churchism:

Since our Lord has promised to manifest Himself to those who seek Him in fear and humility, if we want to come to Him, then let us take this route. Let us strive to come to the knowledge of our Lord Jesus, not by presuming to mount so high by our own understanding, but by praying Him to render us capable of growing in His teaching. For we cannot do this if we have not renounced the presumption of wanting to be wise beyond measure.

Let us desire nothing save to know one sole God through our Lord Jesus, and to aspire to no other goal—as in truth God does not teach us any other knowledge by His Word. Let us not have so quarrelsome a spirit, or such sensitive ears, that we cannot consent to this simple and pure truth in which the infinite treasures of God are enclosed.

Let us not profane the Word of God by changing it into a vain and unfruitful knowledge, or by using it in any other way than to edify. Let us not receive it in vain by scorning either the threats of God's judgment that it contains or His grace which is presented to us in it.

In brief, let us realise the end for which the gospel has been given to us, and let us receive it as God intends us to do. Let us consider what our disposition ought to be, and pray to God to create such within us.<sup>12</sup>

We see therefore that fundamental to Reformed ecclesiology are first of all genuine humility and wisdom cultivated by the sound doctrine of total depravity.

There is no absolute cure for the church's problems except the sovereign grace of God. No church practice or anything else that God's people do can be a substitute for this. We must be aware that the hand of the Almighty

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<sup>12</sup> Calvin, *Treatises Against the Anabaptists*, p. 211.



cannot be forced by our efforts! Nevertheless, God uses the means that He has appointed; not house-churchism, but the way of Reformation (and, in particular, the official preaching of His Word in the work of Reformation). This God-ordained way of Reformation, as embodied still in the practice of some Reformed churches today, is what will be presented and defended in this series of articles.

### **Anabaptist Restorationism**

The general thrust of *Pagan Christianity* leaves one with the distinct impression that the New Testament church from its birth fundamentally departed from proper church practice and never returned until the teachings of Frank Viola some 2,000 years later. In other words, the “gates of hell” prevailed against her for almost 2,000 years. Therefore the underlying attitude of the book is restorationist, which was the same attitude taken by the Anabaptists, of most modern Pentecostal groups, and also of many groups almost universally regarded as cults. Some groups hold this outlook on church history implicitly, while others are far more explicit in teaching this, even giving various pseudo-theological reasons for claiming that the church was perhaps effectively “dead” or “asleep” for 2,000 years (e.g., Mormonism).

The doctrine of the catholicity of the church exposes this view as false, as does Christ’s teaching, “... and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). In explaining the earliest Christian creed, *Heidelberg Catechism* A. 54 teaches concerning the “holy catholic church” of Christ (the scriptural references are important to note):

That the Son of God, from the beginning to the end of the world [John 10:11; Gen. 26:4], gathers [Rom. 9:24; Eph. 1:10], defends and preserves to Himself [John 10:16] by His Spirit and Word [Isa. 59:21], out of the whole human race [Deut. 10:14-15], a church chosen to everlasting life [Acts 13:48], agreeing in true faith; and that I am, and for ever shall remain, a living member thereof [I Cor. 1:8-9; Rom. 8:35ff.].

That Christ gathers a church to Himself out of the whole human race means that elect people from every generation throughout history have been gathered

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by His Word and Spirit. Always there has been and will be a true church on the earth (*Westminster Confession* 25:5), and always Christ has been defending and preserving this church by His Word and Spirit. There was never a time when the Spirit departed from the church. Contrary to this, the philosophy of the Anabaptists is reiterated in this book. There is a false glorification of the early church in the days of the apostles, and it is believed that, if only we could go back to these roots of how the church then was, all manner of problems would be solved (for this they received the name the Radical [root] Reformation). The whole notion of the historical development of the church is ignored. Notice Viola's remarks:

I believe that the first-century church was the church in its purest form, before it was tainted or corrupted.<sup>13</sup>

The practices of the first-century church were the natural and spontaneous expression of the divine life that indwelt the early Christians.<sup>14</sup>

So we would argue that on theological grounds, historical grounds, and pragmatic grounds, the first-century church best represents the dream of God ...<sup>15</sup>

But with the death of the apostles and the men they trained, things began to change.<sup>16</sup>

This presents a totally false view of the early church in the time of the apostles. First of all, we cannot go back to that state, even if such a state was desirable (in fact, the New Testament is full of all manner of serious problems in the early church). As we will later discuss, the apostolic office has ceased, because its role was foundational. Apostles laid the foundation of the church upon which we are called to build (Eph. 2:20; I Cor. 3:6-11). Viola sees the apostles as some kind of itinerant church-planters, who set up house-churches (though really these cannot be described as churches at all), and equipped them for "every-member functioning." After having "submerged the churches in a

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

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. ix.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. ix.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

revelation of Jesus Christ” (whatever this means—it is apparently not preaching a sermon!), Viola's “apostles” must necessarily leave for long periods of time before returning. These “apostles” of Viola's invention are not incidental to his “re-imagined” church. Without them, his vision cannot be fulfilled. In his view, every church must be planted by one of these “apostolic workers.”<sup>17</sup>

This is the dream of Viola, not the dream of God. Furthermore, the “dream” of God is always reality in exactly the way it is. God cannot have mere “dreams,” because God always accomplishes exactly His desires according to His sovereign power (Ps. 115:3). It is characteristic of Anabaptist restorationism and charismaticism, in general, that there is a desire to bring back the apostolic ministry, coupled with a necessarily dim view of God's sovereignty. One is left with the conclusion that God's plan for the church has gone horribly wrong. If the neglect or denial of the doctrine of total depravity is the doctrinal weakness which feeds the Anabaptist philosophy of world flight, then it is the neglect of the doctrine of God's sovereignty which feeds the Anabaptist philosophy of restorationism. This is perhaps reflected in a closing comment: “The progress of God's work depends to some extent upon how we utilise the ample resources that He has entrusted to us.”<sup>18</sup>

Considering the course of history, and the development of doctrine and heresy, it is incredibly naïve to think that returning to the state of the early church would be beneficial. The church is now in a far better position than it was then. For example, it now has the completed New Testament Scriptures (which are far better than having apostles and prophets). It also has 2,000 years of the work of the Holy Spirit leading and guiding her into all truth away from all manner of heresies (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13-15), a glorious work that is clearly seen in her creeds.

The church has become battle-trained through long years of experience. She is richer now than ever before, with the addition of each of her members throughout these past 2,000 years. As this present evil age draws to a close, the battle will become fiercer. The delicate early church was simply not equipped to face what we will face in these last days, because the church's greatest battle is

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 238-239.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 257.

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not primarily against physical persecution, but against sin and deception. These enemies are now far more developed and dangerous than in those earlier days.

Restorationism is a many-headed beast. One head is a theological heresy denying God's sovereignty; another is an ecclesiological heresy denying the preservation of the church (by "heresy" is meant a stubborn, deliberate departure from the biblical truth officially confessed by the church). Yet another is a pneumatological heresy denying the work of the Holy Spirit throughout the New Testament age. Still another is an eschatological heresy denying the gathering of the church throughout the last days, and the false idea of some sort of restoration, instead of increasing apostasy (much like postmillennialism). The pneumatological heresy is two-edged, and related to a wrong view of Pentecost. First, it denies the true work of the Holy Spirit, as explained in the paragraph above, and therefore must necessarily propose a new and different work. The modern-day heresy of charismaticism finds its roots in the theology of the Anabaptists.

This heresy claims that the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit in the days of the apostles still continue today (this is why it is also called continuationism, in distinction from Reformed cessationism). Many bold charismatics will go so far as to claim that there are still apostles today in order to defend their continuationism because they admit that the various miraculous gifts of the Spirit were signs of the apostles (II Cor. 12:12). This necessarily results in a totally different view of apostles and of the gifts themselves. Some of Viola's own charismatic views (especially on apostles) expressed in *Pagan Christianity* and more developed in *Reimagining Church* will be discussed later.

In the restorationist tradition of the Anabaptists, *Pagan Christianity* expresses hyper-spirituality and continuationism of the miraculous gifts and of apostles. The only major difference in philosophy seems to be that since Viola can at least point to the Anabaptists, he wants to claim that there have always been Christians who have stood outside the church institute against what he sees as pagan traditions. Therefore, he may claim his views are not explicitly restorationist. However, the difference is really that people like certain Anabaptists and Mormons at least recognized that history did not support their charismaticism and hyper-spiritual views, and so developed the eschatological branch of restorationism to solve their dilemma. In short, the Anabaptists

said that the early apostolic church was in its most pure form, and then it went downhill rapidly. Their theology tried to explain how it was that now the church was being restored to its former purity and spirituality through and in them, but Viola has no such theory. His shallow and limited defence is to point to the Anabaptists as if they covered all of church history. They do not.

*Pagan Christianity* begins with a poem by Sam Walter Foss, which the authors use as a metaphor for what they call the “crooked path” which has supposedly led the institutional church to its current form.<sup>19</sup> It is a wonderfully constructed, flowing procession of thoughtful rhyme. However, Viola's claim that there have always been Christians who suffered outside the church institute finds no place in this poem. The poem speaks of a primeval calf, which made a crooked trail hundreds of years ago, and this trail is now devoutly followed by all, while the calf itself is dead. Not to stretch the analogy too far, its greatest weakness lies in the fact that there is no mention of the shepherd. This is exactly what restorationists omit from their theology. Christ is the good shepherd who does not lead his flock in a crooked path, but leads them in straight paths of righteousness (Ps. 23:3), and He is and has always been present with His church to correct her wanderings (Matt. 28:18-20). The Holy Spirit, the Comforter, is the Spirit of Christ, and the church is the body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit in which He dwells (John 14:16-18; 15:26-27; 16:7-15; Rom. 8:9; I Cor. 2:9-16; 3:16-17; 6:19; II Cor. 6:16; I John 2:24-27).

### **Anabaptist Schismatic Moralism**

Above, the emphasis which Viola places upon practices was mentioned. The criticism was made that his books seem to treat church practice as more important than theology. This was first seen in his attitude toward creeds, which he calls “bloodless abstractions.” Is it possible that he could be unaware of just how much blood has been shed for the Reformed confessions? Certainly, for such a student of church history, as he presents himself in the book, this cannot be imagined to be the case. It is a puzzle. Nevertheless, with the probable exclusion of Viola, the education of Christian young people in church history and also in the associated bloody history of martyrdom seems to have fallen on hard times.

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xxxii-xxxiii.

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Once upon a time, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* was found in a great many Protestant homes, and widely read. Young Christians from evangelical backgrounds today seem largely ignorant of church history. The writer of this article, until recent years, had never heard of even William Tyndale, Hugh Latimer, Thomas Cranmer, John Wycliffe, John Hus, John Bradford and Patrick Hamilton, to name a few. No doubt Satan, where he is not stirring men up to boast of such cruelties in order to frighten the faithful, seeks to hide them. Surely, the enemies of Christ know that the faithful martyrs, by their refusal to recant their confession in the face of such adversity, afford untold benefit and courage to the church in her public confession, since this assures us that such strength and preservation must come from our faithful God.

When referring to the Anabaptists, their favourite term is used, the “Trail of Blood.” Yet, Viola claims, our confessions are “bloodless abstractions.” Readers presumably do not need to be reminded that the author of the *Belgic Confession*, Guido de Brès, was martyred for his public confession of the truth. Those who persecute the church have always much preferred to silence the church, and to force Christians to recant or compromise, than to kill them. When a man disparages creeds in general, he makes an alliance with those who wish to silence the proclamation of God's glory.

Viola's view of creeds is very popular today. He parrots the claim that doctrine divides, and most of all creeds divide. The opposite is true, however. Confessions serve to unite Christians in public confession of the true faith, and what Viola advocates is merely unvoiced division. His dream of the church is where only some very basic essentials of Christianity are ever taught, talked about, and confessed. He praises the philosophy of C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*, claiming that the church needs only to hold to “the belief that has been common to nearly all Christians at all times.”<sup>20</sup> In another place, he tells us to imagine the “rosy” picture of a church in which the members do not know what each other believe about the return of Christ—“and really don't care to know them.”<sup>21</sup> There is something very wrong with that picture.

The church is called with “one hope,” not many (Eph. 4:4). It was mentioned already that the Holy Spirit leads the church into all truth (John 16:13), not

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<sup>20</sup> Viola, *Reimagining*, p. 237.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

just some. Furthermore, the apostle could not have had a clear conscience in leaving the churches of Asia, except that he had preached to them all the counsel of God (Acts 20:26-27), and had kept back nothing from them that was profitable (Acts 20:20). Since “all Scripture is ... profitable” (II Tim. 3:16-17), it is the responsibility of every faithful preacher to preach everything in Scripture. How then can a church be selectively silent on certain issues, and yet remain the pillar and ground of the truth (I Tim. 3:15)? What is at stake here is not simply the salvation of men, but the glory of God. The church must testify to the truth without embarrassment, compromise, fear, or confusion, to the glory of God. This is her highest calling and the very purpose of her salvation (I Pet. 2:9; Eph. 1:5-6; Eze. 36:22-24). What Viola proposes is to hide the light of the world under a bushel (Matt. 5:13-16). Any church that is stubbornly determined to be silent where God has spoken is “good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men,” because it is like salt that has lost its savour (Matt. 5:13). When a church is no longer a pillar and ground of the truth (I Tim. 3:15), it is no longer a church; its candlestick has been removed (Rev. 2:5).

Inseparably connected to this is also Viola's criticism of denominations in *Reimagining Church*. He sees denominations and the church institute as the greatest single barrier against church unity. However, the very idea of denominations is to avoid the kind of disordered disunity which can only result from the disorganized, disparate HCM. Denominations bring together churches to help one another in various ways, such as maintaining a seminary (II Tim. 2:2), evangelism and mission work (II Cor. 11:8-9), combating new heresies and advising (Acts 15:1-2), and also financial aid for those in need (II Cor. 8:13-15). It is necessary for denominations to have a common confession to ensure that they do not yoke themselves with heretics, fanatics, and unbelievers, or aid at all in the work of the devil who is eager to waste the church's precious resources (II John 10-11; I Cor. 11:19). Jehoshaphat was harshly reprimanded for helping the ungodly (II Chron. 19:2), and Amaziah also was reprimanded for enlisting the help of ungodly Israel (II Chron. 25:6-7). It is a matter of godly stewardship, and more basically, of the glory of God. Christ must not be confused with Belial (II Cor. 6:14-18). Of course, with Viola's view of creeds, denominations must be opposed. It is difficult not to be amazed at Viola's arrogance and blindness on this account.

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While he praises the supposed “Christian unity” which he found outside the church institute (even though we have noted that this is really a shallow veneer of unity, made possible by silencing the public confession of believers and the preaching of the whole counsel of God), he seems not to notice that in leaving the church institute, he has cut himself off from and alienated far more than he has gained. Having separated from the church institute in an act of schism, he now rails against it by his books, trying to persuade others to separate from it also. This is a bizarre kind of “Christian unity.” Outside the church institute, those in the HCM are now supposed to keep silent about what they believe, except insofar as it agrees with others. How are the church and the truth of God to survive such violent treatment? Nothing could be more schismatic than Viola's attack upon the church institute.

This is very similar to the attitude of the Anabaptists. For many Anabaptists, issues of lifestyle and practice were more important than unity in doctrine. They went so far as to separate themselves from whatever church they considered to be too lax in its discipline, in their pursuit of a pure church with only regenerate membership. The HCM is similar in its reaction to what Viola claims are church practices with pagan origins. The advice is “leave quietly and do not take anyone with you.” How seriously can he suggest not to take anyone else, when he writes these books in order to persuade people to leave? And how does this not cause division rather than unity? Calvin rightly charged the Anabaptists with following the extremism of the Donatists and Cathars.<sup>22</sup> Those who leave the church institute in order to form their own separate little groups are doing no different except for even less of a cause.

Just suppose, for a moment, purely hypothetically, that much of the criticism of Violas against the church institute were true. Would that really justify such schismatic behaviour? But Viola's boldness knows no bounds. He does not draw back from arguing that all those who form a denomination have committed heresy,<sup>23</sup> and all churches are sects, if they demand anything more than an ambiguous, non-doctrinal profession of repentance and trust in some unidentified Christ.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Calvin, *Treatises Against the Anabaptists*, p. 70.

<sup>23</sup> Viola, *Reimagining*, p. 235.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.



In defence of their argument that Christians ought to leave the church institute, and become part of the HCM, Barna and Viola speak about what kind of worship is acceptable before God. In so doing, they recount the history of the ark of the covenant being carried up to Jerusalem on a wooden cart (II Sam. 6:1-10). The conclusion is that we must only worship God in the way he has prescribed. This seems at first to be the regulative principle of worship, and it would seem that we agree (though differing vastly in what exactly God requires), but elsewhere, they show that their meaning is very different. It was mentioned above that Viola does not consider that the New Testament contains a blueprint of proper church practice.

By this it is meant that the many specific instructions about church practice contained in the New Testament are not to be considered prescriptive, but descriptive. Then the argument is that the HCM can do all kinds of things differently due to different times and cultures. But the condemnation of this philosophy is that it can only be left to Viola to tell us what is merely descriptive and what is prescriptive. He mentions that togas are not mandatory, for example, and explains his vision that these so-called “house-churches” look different throughout the world, like a hydrangea buried in different soil conditions. To some extent we agree that churches may look different simply as a result of cultural differences which have no moral relevance. Such indifferent matters are called *adiaphora*. Viola himself mentions that carpets and chairs are not sinful to use, even though they supposedly have pagan origins.<sup>25</sup> This glimmer of light is shed only very selectively though.

The architecture of church buildings, for example, is greatly criticized for having roots in pagan philosophy. Suddenly, the shape of the building in which the church meets is a moral issue for Viola. This inclination to force indifferent matters into grave moral issues is also characteristically Anabaptist, and is derived very logically from their “hyper-spirituality” which we have discussed. To be seen as more spiritual and elevate oneself in pride, it is advantageous to condemn the practices of others (Matt. 23:4).

Really, most of the book relies upon this faulty reasoning: if we find something in historical paganism which seems similar to something in the church

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<sup>25</sup> Viola and Barna, *Pagan*, p. 75.

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institute today, then the former is the origin or cause of the latter (and the latter must therefore be sinful). This is an example of confusing correlation with causation. Correlation can be significant and causative (and is therefore suggestive), but it can also be nothing more than co-incidental. The further implication is that if something originated in paganism, it must necessarily be condemned. That is not necessarily the case (Rom. 14:1-15:3), and it is a wicked and despicable tactic to try to rob the liberty of the people of God by attempting to trouble their consciences with the word “pagan” as if everything in common with unbelievers was necessarily evil (Gal. 2:3-5). Both the believer and the unbeliever eat the same food and employ the same currency to purchase it. Does that make these things or the use of them evil? Or if unbelievers originate and develop new technology, for example, is it fundamentally sinful for believers to make use of it? Such is the attitude of some Anabaptists today, such as the Amish.

If an unbeliever wears green clothes, must believers wear a different colour? Where does such philosophy end? Therefore, the existence of a thing or practice in historical paganism ought not trouble the consciences of believers. Even if something were to be traced back to a long-dead, yet ungodly, religious practice, if the believer does the same thing today, is it sinful necessarily? What about when a man would have to search out obscure references in lengthy books to even find that its long-forgotten origin was pagan? For example, should believers use different names for the days of the week and months of the year? The origins of these names are of false pagan gods. Yet who today would even begin to think that those who use these names for the days of the week are actually worshipping false gods or participating in such false worship?

Moreover, the practices of the early church which we consider merely descriptive are taken by the HCM to be prescriptive. Meeting in the houses of church members is an obvious example. Church buildings, for Viola, are “an architectural denial of the priesthood of all believers.”<sup>26</sup> In stark contrast, the regulative principle of worship, which we believe and confess as Reformed Christians, does not confuse indifferent issues with moral issues. Unlike Viola, it does not confuse the elements of worship with the mere circumstances of worship. The elements of worship recorded in the Bible are prescriptive (such

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

as the preaching of God's word, the sacraments, etc.), not the circumstances (such as where Christians meet).

### **Anabaptist Sacraments and Worship**

It is to be expected in such a book, that the Anabaptist views of the sacraments would also eventually be promoted. Indeed they are. In fact, infant baptism and sprinkling are rejected with so little comment, it would seem that Viola considers any argument on these points superfluous. What is interesting is that the point he belabours the most is that “converts were baptised immediately upon believing in the early church.”<sup>27</sup> This is exactly consistent with his rejection of creeds and his restorationist principle that the early church represents the church in its purest form. In this Anabaptist view, there is no room for development of heresy and of doctrine as the church is led into all truth by the Spirit, and, accordingly, there is no possible reason why the time between an initial conversion and baptism should be any longer. In addition, instead of baptism symbolising the work of God in salvation as a sign and seal of the righteousness of faith, for Viola, baptism is “simultaneously an act of faith as well as an expression of faith.”<sup>28</sup> No wonder then that he discounts infant baptism so swiftly. Again, it is Anabaptist theology that claims that baptism is a sign of what we do, rather than what God does in washing away our sin.

It is also typical that, for Viola, the biggest issue with regard to the Lord's Supper is not so much the theology behind it, but the details about how it ought to be practised! It is precisely his criticism of all the church world outside the HCM, that by making it “the centre of theological debate,” it is no longer “precious and living.”<sup>29</sup> Again, he presents the truth of God as dead and lifeless (John 14:6). It is clear he would prefer that no-one concerned themselves with the theology of it, but rather, just get the practice of it right (according to his instruction). He wastes no words in repeatedly denouncing all practice of the Lord's Supper which is not a full, physical meal. Reformed readers are likely to be very offended at this profane attitude, but a detailed critique will have to follow later.

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

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In addition to Anabaptist sacraments, *Pagan Christianity* also appeals for an Anabaptist style of worship. Specifically, the book advocates an unordered, spontaneous meeting, where everyone present is free to take part in possibly limitless ways, whether by teaching, singing, praying, prophesying, etc. Viola calls this “every-member functioning,” and denounces as “passive” godly Christians who diligently worship by listening to the preaching of the Word. This view is derived from the de-contextualized eisegesis of I Corinthians 14:26, in which it is presumed that Paul is describing a *normative* order of worship. In fact, as will be discussed later in this series of articles, Paul is here criticising their lack of order! With this wrong view, one is inevitably led to Viola's absurd conclusion that the minister of the Word is actually the greatest obstacle to proper Christian worship.

*Pagan Christianity* claims that in the worship service (based on their false application of I Corinthians 14:30-31) every Christian has the right to stand up and speak in a meeting at any time.<sup>30</sup> In the Anabaptists' day, this confused and disorderly practice was known as the *Sitzrecht* (the sitter's right), and Viola tells us that Luther taught that this Anabaptist practice was from the pit of hell. This series of articles is in agreement with Luther's conclusion (I Cor. 14:33). Further proof of this point will be demonstrated later.<sup>31</sup>

### **Anabaptist Revolution**

It has been mentioned already that the authors identify themselves with the Anabaptists of history, but the extent of this is seen also in the sensationalism of the book itself. It is written in order to shock and astonish the reader, as if the greatest conspiracy in the history of the world was now being revealed. This is especially seen in Chapter Twelve, entitled, “A Second Glance at the Savior: Jesus, the Revolutionary.”<sup>32</sup> The reader is boldly instructed: “Behold your Lord, the Revolutionary!”<sup>33</sup> It is even claimed in this chapter that our Lord was an iconoclast!<sup>34</sup> Should it really need said that it is not only untrue,

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>31</sup> See Manuel Kuhs' article “Is ‘Open Time’ Really Being Open to the Spirit?” for a refutation of this abuse of I Corinthians 14 ([www.limerickreformed.com](http://www.limerickreformed.com)).

<sup>32</sup> Viola, *Pagan*, p. 243.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 244.

but also thoroughly impossible and absurd that the Lord of all the universe, to whom all authority in heaven and earth belongs, is actually a revolutionary?

Admittedly, this language is tempered by careful explanation that he was not a rebel—but since this is ordinarily what a revolutionary is, why use the word? It has to be admitted that this label would appeal to many young people today who, infatuated with the spirit of the age, blindly crave change and novelty, and disrespect authority. The chapter is most concerned with persuading readers that such drastic proposed changes to historical church practice are justified because of this supposedly over-looked role of Jesus Christ. The effort is wasted: “Jesus, the Revolutionary,” is most certainly not the Lord Jesus Christ of the Bible. It is more probably the “Jesus” of Che Guevara worshippers and the fanatical and rebellious Anabaptists. As for the label, iconoclast, the Reformers (for example, Luther and Knox) condemned such behaviour as sinfully abusing personal property which belongs to others. Our Lord never did such a wicked thing.

Despite the attempt to distinguish between a “revolutionary” and a “rebel,” Viola clearly demonstrates his attitude toward authority. It is the very same attitude as the Anabaptists. This is seen very clearly in *Reimagining Church*. A substantial proportion of the book is devoted to redefining the biblical terms relating to authority in the church, such as, submit, elder, oversight, rule, etc. In each case, the attempt is made to remove from these terms any semblance of authority. Instead, Viola wants every single believer to have exactly the same authority in the church. This is how he imagines the headship of Christ over all believers to be. This is nothing less than opposing the authority of Christ in the church which He exercises by ordained office-bearers.

### **Anabaptist Double-Speak**

It was mentioned previously that Viola's theology imitated orthodoxy by use of the same vocabulary. Upon further analysis, and especially seeing the conclusions which he draws from his carefully worded theological statements, it appears that he uses his own obscure definitions to lure the reader gradually into his web of errors. Briefly, the connection between Viola's charismaticism and the Anabaptist “spirituals” was also mentioned with regard to their views of apostles and the apostolic gifts. Also characteristic of the “spirituals” was

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their tendency to use familiar and pious-sounding words to attract gradually the unwary into their sect. Calvin describes the tactic of the Libertines (an Anabaptist sect) thus:

Therefore when a zealous person falls into the hands of these suitors and hears them talking primarily about the “Spirit,” and that the Word of God is nothing but “Spirit,” and that Jesus Christ is equally “Spirit,” and that we must be “Spirits” with Him, and that our life must be “spirit[ual itself],” his first impression is that the Libertines are deeply zealous persons who are concerned lest the Word of God become polluted and compromised by the scandalous lives of false Christians. Being thus deceived, he forms a good impression of them and is won over by their friendliness and by the fact that they require nothing by way of faith.<sup>35</sup>

Viola's strategy is very similar. He speaks about the church organic, for example. Many in the church world today perhaps understand that in a sense the church is an organism. Enticed by his elucidation on the organism of the church (and perhaps in churches where the teaching is weaker and shallower, this can be an effective lure), the reader is suddenly plunged into error, when it is seen that his understanding of the church organic is such that this is inherently incompatible with the church institute. The Reformed faith however, demonstrates that these two concepts are inseparably connected and complimentary, rather than being mutually exclusive. Viola also continually chants the phrase, “the priesthood of all believers” (as if this meant that there are no special offices). If he actually cared to study the key passage in the Bible which teaches this doctrine (not as he teaches it), he might learn that the church organic is not at all opposed to the church institute: “Ye also, *as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house*, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ” (I Pet. 2:5).

### **Important Criticisms for Reformed Churches?**

Frank Viola, referring to the laboriousness of the task, describes his deci-

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<sup>35</sup> Calvin, *Treatises Against the Anabaptists*, pp. 227-228.

sion to write this book as “a moment of insanity.”<sup>36</sup> While one could wish that he had seen sense, and decided not to undertake this task of folly, there are still some advantages to it. First, the book asks important questions which are especially pertinent to the departing mainline Protestant and Evangelical churches today. These compromising or even apostatising churches need to be questioned and criticized if there is any hope to stir them up to strengthen the things which remain, and be reformed (Rev. 3:2). And faithful Reformed churches should never be afraid of questions or criticisms. We should however, unlike the authors of this book, never assume that they have not been asked before, or that we have all the answers ourselves. Also, we have no need for Anabaptists to raise these criticisms, since it is useless to condemn one error in order to put in place even worse errors.

Instead, in humility knowing that we are members of the church which is gathered by Christ throughout all ages, we must seek the wisdom of our fellow saints who have endeavoured to answer these questions from Scripture throughout history and in the present day. Then we should also compare their answers with Scripture ourselves too, and not in a blind attempt to defend them, but with a view to both our own propensity to err, and that of our brethren too. Only in this way can we be reformed and always reforming, according to the Word of God. Reformed Churches should not forget their motto, *semper reformanda*.

*to be continued (DV)*

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