

Viola – Organic Church- Reimagining Church¹ - a Review

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Contents

The Preface	1
The Foundation	3
The Meeting	12
The Leadership.....	19

The Preface

“But when I come to the dear truths of the Bible, ah if you get too high or too low, too fast or too slow, if there is the least breach, I catch it in a moment, spoils the music in a moment, Every blessed truth of the new covenant is like the harp, the psaltery, the lute unto my soul, and by them melody is there made, and these truths charm my sorrows away, when nothing else can do it. Now then, if you have true repentance, there will be faith, reconciliation, and this sincere love to the truth of God, Ah, say some, I do not care so much about the doctrine of God; it is the God of the doctrine I care about. But does it not say, “In vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men”? And if you pervert the Scriptures, then your love is not acceptable to God. When I say the truth, I in reality mean God himself in that representation which the truth gives of him.” James Wells January 22nd, 1865.

My purpose here is to review the book “Reimagining Church” by Frank Viola. This book is about what today is called “Organic Christianity” or “The Organic Church”. It’s part of a movement that is sweeping though different countries moving people away from the “Established” Churches. I am not an ordained minister. I am however a deeply committed Christian sold on the truth of God’s word as given to us the Old and New Testaments of the Holy Bible. I have been studying what I call “The Local Church” for over twenty years for personal as well as scholarly reasons.

¹ All quotations from this book are for review purposes only. They have been kept to the minimum length possible for this reason. The quotations within the book from other authors are, at least for the majority, available on the internet as I note when applicable.

As I shall demonstrate Viola bases his book on a very wide variety of highly unorthodox sources. These have little or nothing in common except for one fact. That fact is that they say something that supports what he wants to teach. Just imagine for a moment that you are a scientist and you have a theory for a cure for breast cancer. Rather than going down the established methods of proving your theory and testing your cure, you take a huge short cut. You scan all the sources you can, across the internet, in different journals, books advertisements etc. You then cherry pick from these sources just what will lend credence to your “cure”. Next you patch them together with a little actual research, just enough to testing so it looks real. Add some raw emotion and psychology and mix it up. Finally, you publish your “findings” and come up with a simple procedure that will cure breast cancer. The established medical community would be up in arms to say the very least. This is an analogy of what Viola has done. His “research” is the use he makes of scripture. There are in fact many references to the Bible in the book. I refer to some but there are many others. The point is this: Are those references backed up by facts? The rest is just anything that sounds good or that he feels is right.

I should add the fact that I am not “for” the established Church as it exists today. I am “for” what the Bible clearly teaches. I am a bit like Treebeard in Lord of the Rings. I am concerned for the sheep (Treebeard's trees). Am I way off base? Some will think so, but please read on and make up your own mind.

Before we begin it's useful to look at the word ‘organic’. That exact word is used eleven times in the text of this review. In addition, other similar words like ‘organism’ are also used. In fact, the main point of the book under review is to move people to what is called ‘The Organic Church.’ Its difficult to see how some of the meanings have any relation to fellowship (the gathering of Christians together for whatever purpose). The ones quoted below seem to be the most applicable.

c: having the characteristics of an organism: developing in the manner of a living plant or animal <society is organic> ²

of, relating to, or constituting the law by which a government or organization exists—**or•gan•i•cal•ly** \-ni-k(ə-)lē\ adverb—**or•ga•nic•i•ty** \,ôr-gə-'ni-sə-tē\ noun ³

the explanation of life and living processes in terms of the levels of organization of living systems rather than in terms of the properties of their smallest components⁴

a complex structure of interdependent and subordinate elements whose relations and properties are largely determined by their function in the whole

² Merriam-Webster, I. (2003). Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary. (Eleventh ed.). Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

2: an individual constituted to carry on the activities of life by means of organs separate in function but mutually dependent: a living being—
 or•gan•is•mic \, òr-gə-ˈniz-mik\ also or•gan•is•mal \⁵

It seems that the term is generally used in the book with reference to Christ being the head of His body which is the Church. This is, of course, one of the many ways the Bible portrays the Christ's relationship to His Church. Its subjective to pick out which definition best fits; but no definition seems all that appropriate. Any analogy can be pressed to far.

In his preface Viola sets up a dichotomy (two opposing positions). He says "If the past twenty years have taught me anything, they have taught me this: There will be two major responses to this book."⁶ He goes on to describe two groups; one, as it were, that accept the book with open arms, another that challenges and rejects it. In the short paragraph which I am referring to he uses the word 'church' five times. Also, the word 'church' makes up one of the two-word title of the book under review. Within the context it's clear that the single word, can and does have different meanings. It's no surprise that his answer to the critic is "...we Christians are very confused about what the church is."⁷

In the context of Viola's book and this review of it the answer to what the word 'Church' means is of the utmost importance. Therefore, one of the purposes of this review is to pin down and detail what 'church' means in the context of this book.

Viola gives a definition on the next page of his preface. He states:

"The church, therefore, should not be confused with an organization, a denomination, a movement, or a leadership structure. The church is the people of God, the very bride of Jesus Christ."⁸

At this early point two facts have come to light. Fact one: The word 'Church' and its meaning is of paramount importance. Fact 2: He sets up a situation were only one choice can be made. Its only possible to go down one road, turn in one way, follow one path. The purpose of his book, as well as his other writings are to show us the path. We can follow the critic and keep to the old style "church" or we can align with the enlightened person and follow Viola. Is there no other choice?

The material that follows is given in the hope that a more biblical reality can be opened up.

The Foundation

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Reimaging Church, Frank Viola Pub. by David C. Cook, Colorado Springs CO, 2008; page 12 Preface

⁷ Ibid page 12

⁸ Ibid page 13

So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us. We have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will continue to do what we command. May the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ. Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us.^{9, 10} (2 Thessalonians 3:4-6)

Chapter one of “Reimagining Church” which is titled “Reimagining the Church as an Organism”, starts as the chapters do, with a quotation(s). The first is by Dresden James. James was unknown to me so I did a simple Google search on that name. Viola’s quote was the first result returned. James, who died in 2008, is a British novelist and scriptwriter. The “LibertyTree” quote from the Google search returned this:

When a well-packaged web of lies has been sold gradually to the masses over generations, the truth will seem utterly preposterous and its speaker a raving lunatic.¹¹

The chapter one heading included the previous two sentences:

A truth’s initial commotion is directly proportional to how deeply the lie was believed. It wasn’t the world being round that agitated people, but that the world wasn’t flat.¹²

The take away from this is very clear: When it comes to ‘Church’, whatever meaning that finally takes on, we have all believed a lie. It is nothing like we thought it was.

Before looking at the chapter it needs to be noted that there is a second quotation. This one is by T. Austin-Sparks.¹³ As it is quoted by Viola, the first sentence in the actual quotation was placed last and he adds the words “In the early church” in square brackets.

The original text is as follows (emphasis is mine):

Everything then was the free and spontaneous movement of the Holy Spirit, and He did it in full view of the Pattern - God's Son. The ministry of the Holy Spirit has ever been to reveal Jesus Christ, and in revealing Him, to conform everything to Him.

⁹ New American Standard Bible: 1995 update. (1995). (Eph 2:19–22). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

¹⁰ All Bible passage quoted are from the New American Standard Bible as noted above. For the purpose of this review the verse numbers and any cross references have been removed from the text.

¹¹ <http://libertytree.ca/quotes/Dresden.James.Quote.8B45>

¹² Viola, page 15

¹³ “Mr. Sparks” was a British evangelist and author. He maintained a huge ministry and his teachings and books are heavily promoted today. The roots of what the “Organic Church movement teaches can be clearly seen in his writings.

No human genius can do this. **We cannot obtain anything in our New Testament as the result of human study, research, or reason.** It is **all** the Holy Spirit's revelation of Jesus Christ. Ours it is to seek continually to see Him by the Spirit, and we shall know that He - not a paper-pattern - is the Pattern, the Order, the Form. It is all a Person who is the sum of all purpose and ways.¹⁴

Our Lord Jesus, speaking to the Samaritan women clearly stated that we must “worship the Father in spirit and truth.” Note well: **Spirit and Truth.** Without human study, reason and research it is not possible to have Truth. One source¹⁵ defines ‘truth’ in this way:

- (1): the state of being the case: FACT
- (2): the body of real things, events, and facts: ACTUALITY
- (3) often capitalized: a transcendent fundamental or spiritual reality

Reason alone does not define truth but truth cannot be visualized without reason. This is clear, for instance in the actions of the people of Berea who “received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.” (Acts 17:11)

There is an alternative to Truth. If we follow the advice of Austin-Sparks (and of course Viola) we follow the path of mysticism. Mysticism is defined as:

- 1: the experience of mystical union or direct communion with ultimate reality reported by mystics
- 2: the belief that direct knowledge of God, spiritual truth, or ultimate reality can be attained through subjective experience (as intuition or insight)
 - 3 a: vague speculation: a belief without sound basis
 - b: a theory postulating the possibility of direct and intuitive acquisition of ineffable knowledge or power¹⁶

I would ask the reader to review Austin-Sparks remarks and the two dictionary references to form their own options of the what I have stated.

As noted, Viola in his preface gave a definition of what a church is. In the first two sentences of the first page of Chapter one he uses odd wording to give some details of what the New Testament calls the church. That word is ‘image(s)’. He then goes on to state that these various images show that the church is a “living organism”. Based on this analogy he branches out to what he calls the “DNA of the Church”. Why use the word ‘image’? One definition of this word is: “(2) : a mental conception held in common by

¹⁴ First published in "A Witness and A Testimony" magazine, May-June 1963, Vol 41-3 The complete text can be found at: <https://www.austin-sparks.net/english/001871.html>

¹⁵ Merriam-Webster.

¹⁶ Merriam-Webster

members of a group and symbolic of a basic attitude and orientation”¹⁷ This sums up exactly, what I believe, is the way the Organic Church movement uses this term.

A Building: Nothing is said (at this point and in most of the book) about the church being a building yet this is one of the main ways the Holy Spirit uses to show us what the Church really is.

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner *stone*, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.

The God of the Old Testament is the same God of the New Testament. There was nothing whatsoever haphazard in the building of the original tabernacle which was a copy of that which is in heaven. Every detail, down to the smallest had to be exact, not questions, no other option. In the same way no part of the heavenly temple, the people of God, exists without the exact plan and purpose of God. What we do, or do not do, will affect our eternal relationship to God but it will not, and cannot, alter or hinder God’s eternal purpose in Christ¹⁸. As the above scriptures show there is an ‘organic’ aspect to this. However, this is something very far from the concepts advocated in the O.C.M.¹⁹

The key phrase, for our purpose here, in the above passage is “the foundation of the apostles and prophets” There is already a foundation laid and we can only build correctly if we build upon and to the pattern of that solid foundation. To use the analogy of the human body and DNA: The body of Christ as the Church has always existed in the mind of God and to God it is already complete and perfect in Christ. We can come to a deeper understanding of what the body is and how it functions. We can as it were complete the growth until the return of Christ when every member will in physical fact be in place. We cannot however change or alter what that body is.

What is Viola’s foundation? In the opening pages of chapter one Viola is laying a foundation, his foundation, upon which he builds his concept of what a church is. Virtually all the superstructure that follows in the rest of the chapter and through the rest of the book rests upon this. Without understanding and evaluating this base we cannot correctly understand the rest of the book. Unfortunately, in spite of the importance of this foundation, he provides only scant evidence of what it is at this point in the book.

In his understanding the church has its own spiritual DNA. He tells us that we can learn about what this DNA is (what it will build) by looking at God himself. Rather than

¹⁷ Merriam-Webster

¹⁸ Isaiah 53:11, Luke 3:8, Ephesians chapters 1 and 2 and MANY other passages.

¹⁹ For rest of this paper I will use the initials ‘O.C.M.’ to refer to the ‘Organic Church Movement’. Frank Viola and the book “Reimaging Church’ is a leading example of what this movement stands for.

quoting a scripture he quotes a theologian. That person is Stanley Grenz. Please Note: Grenz is a Postmodernist theologian²⁰. Postmodernism has been defined as follows:

Postmodernism is a relativistic system of observation and thought that denies absolutes and objectivity. While no consensus exists on a precise definition, postmodernism nevertheless signals a dissatisfaction with one or more aspects of modernity. Its origins are found in the philosophies of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Marx and Freud. On some points, particularly its attitude to truth, it is similar to New Age thinking.²¹

Here is what Viola wants us to learn from Grenz:

God's triune nature means that God is social or relational – God is the “social Trinity.” And for this reason, we can say that God is “community.” God is the community of the Father, Son, and Spirit, who enjoy perfect and eternal fellowship.²²

Viola goes on to state that he found traditional (my word) teaching about the doctrine of the Trinity to be of little or no value (highly-abstract, impractical – his words). He states: “Later, I discovered that understanding the activity within the triune God was key to grasping everything in the Church life – including the Church.” **This is his foundation** (what he terms DNA). In a footnote to this statement he gives yet another reference to scholars, but not to scripture. The reference itself is without context and of little or no value. Before providing any other scriptural evidence, he quotes three other sources, Eugene H. Peterson, Catherine LaCugna and Miroslav Volf. All three are far left of theologians like Douglass Moo and Leon Morris. Just as he demeans and belittles the last two thousand years of orthodox teaching on the church, Viola turns away from the orthodox understanding of the Nature of God. He states: “The biblical teaching of the Trinity is not an exposition about the abstract design of God. Instead, it teaches us about God's nature and how it operates in Christian community.”²³ We will see what this means in practice in what follows.

To summarize: The key or foundation to Viola is that “understanding the activity within the triune God was key to grasping everything.” Obviously then the question becomes what is the “activity within the triune God”? However, he has already moved the center away from its Biblical base in a very subtle way. If we take a human family as a model, a husband, a wife and a child. What they are in and of themselves is one thing. What they do or how they act as a unit is something different. The activity will be determined by what they are. Viola has bypassed the former and gone straight to the activity.

As I have shown the O.C.M. teachings in this book are heavily dependent on what unorthodox men have said. As no book about what the Bible teaches can hope to at least

²⁰ Taken from Theopedia at <https://www.theopedia.com/stanley-grenz>

²¹ Taken from Theopedia at <https://www.theopedia.com/postmodernism>

²² Stanley Grenz, *Created for Community* (Grand Rapids, Mi: Baker Books, 1998, 52)

²³ Viola, page 34

appear legitimate without scriptural support, Viola makes some attempt to provide such support. Following the various quotations there is about a page and a half citing many Bible passages. Little comment is given and no effort at all is made to distinguish which refer to the Lord Jesus Christ in his humanity or his divinity. The emphasis, in this part of the book is on Jesus relationship to the Father.

Based upon his own understanding, that of the people he has quoted and the very brief reference to scripture he makes two sweeping statements in reference to the triune God. In both statements he speaks of attributes that are **mutually shared** within God. Some of these are love, fellowship, dependence, honor and submission. Along with these he adds “authentic community”. The last-mentioned attribute is clearly the most important for his purposes.

Consistently, he turns again to two theologians to establish and flesh out his views. These are Kevin Giles and Shirley Guthrie. Giles is controversial, strongly promoting the view that men and women are equal and should be given equal place in the ministry. His views on God are directly related to his views on ministry and vice versa. He is against the historic understanding of the trinity. Guthrie follows Karl Barth which speaks volumes as to his stance.

Its helpful at this point to look at the quote from Guthrie. I have taken it from a blog by Mark Conner (highlight is mine) but it is the same quote as in the book.

The oneness of God is not the oneness of a distinct, self-contained individual; it is the unity of a community of persons who love each other and live together in harmony ... They are what they are only in relationship with one another. Each only exists in this relationship and would not exist apart from it. Father, Son and Holy Spirit live only in and with and through each other, eternally united in, mutual love and shared purposes ... There is no solitary person separated from the others, no above and below; no first, second, third in importance; no ruling and controlling and being ruled and controlled; no position of privilege to be maintained over against others; no question of conflict concerning who is in charge; no possible rivalry or competition between competing individuals; no need to assert independence and authority of one at the expense of the others. Now there is only the fellowship and **community of equals** who share all that they are and have in their communion with each other, living with and for the others in mutual openness, self-giving love, and support; each free not from but for the others. That is how the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are related in the inner circle of the Godhead. [Professor Shirley Guthrie]²⁴

To summarize: We are told that the trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all mutually dependent. They are exact equals, no one member is above or more important. Equality is the all-important factor. Community, whatever that is, is the key attribute. It’s

²⁴ https://markconner.typepad.com/catch_the_wind/2011/07/thinking-about-the-trinity-.html

not a far step to go from this to “Openness Pentecostalism”. That doctrine teaches that God is a single divine spirit that manifests its self in three different ways.

This raises some questions: Is this a biblical representation of the trinity? Is this what the Bible really teaches, especially as very scant biblical evidence has been brought forward. Is Guthrie’s statement true? What is “authentic community”? Keep in mind that all that follows in the rest of the book is based upon this interpretation of what God is like. It stands or falls upon this interpretation.

As this is a book review and not a doctrinal thesis our research here must be very limited, yet sufficient to establish what the Bible clearly teaches in opposition to what the book presents. We will look first at what the Bible teaches about the trinity and then try to define what “community” means to the O.C.M.

What the Bible teaches on the Three in one nature of God:

Here is a summary of the scriptural evidence on The Trinity. It is taken directly from the Manser Dictionary²⁵ Any emphasis is mine and is used to highlight the points most important for this review.

Trinity, relationships between the persons

The actual term “the Trinity” is not found in Scripture, but the truths implied in a trinitarian understanding of God are clearly set out. The OT hints at a plurality of persons in the Godhead. The NT affirms that the Son and the Holy Spirit are divine.

There is only one God

Dt 6:4 See also Isa 43:10-11; 44:8; 1Ti 1:17; 2:5; Jas 2:19

OT indications of plurality in the Godhead

God refers to himself in the plural Ge 1:26 See also Ge 3:22; 11:7; Isa 6:8

The angel of the LORD Ge 16:11-13 The “angel of the LORD” is identified with, yet distinct from, God. See also Ge 18:1-33; Ex 3:2-6; Jdg 13:3-22

The word of God

The “word of the LORD” or “wisdom of God” is personified and identified with, yet distinct from, God: Ps 33:4; Pr 8:22-31

The Spirit of God

The Spirit of God is God’s personal agent: Ge 1:2; Ne 9:20; Job 33:4; Isa 40:13 fn

²⁵ Manser, M. H. (2009). Dictionary of Bible Themes: The Accessible and Comprehensive Tool for Topical Studies. London: Martin Manser. Taken from the Logos Bible Software edition.

The Messiah

The Messiah's divine nature is emphasized: Ps 110:1; Isa 9:6; Jer 23:5-6

Interchangeable expressions

Word, Spirit (or breath) and LORD are used interchangeably for God: Ps 33:6; Isa 48:16; 61:1

NT trinitarian references

Mt 28:19 The **unity** of the three persons is reflected in the singular name. See also 2Co 13:14; Eph 4:4-6; Rev 1:4-5

The **unity** of the three persons

The Son is fully united with the Father Jn 10:30 See also Mk 9:37 pp Lk 9:48; Lk 10:16; Jn 10:38; 12:44-45; 13:20; 14:7,9-11; 15:23

The Spirit is identified with God 2Sa 23:2-3 See also Ps 51:11; Mt 28:19; 1Co 3:16

The three persons are distinct from one another

Jesus Christ addresses the Father directly Mt 11:25-26 pp Lk 10:21; Mt 26:39 pp Mk 14:36 pp Lk 22:42; Mt 26:42; 27:46 pp Mk 15:34; Lk 23:46; Jn 11:41-42; 17:1

The Father speaks to the Son from heaven Mt 3:17 pp Mk 1:11 pp Lk 3:22; Mt 17:5 pp Mk 9:7 pp Lk 9:35; Jn 12:27-28

The Spirit speaks to the Father on behalf of believers Ro 8:26-27

Other examples of the difference between the persons Mt 12:32; 24:36; Jn 7:39; 16:7; 1Ti 2:5; 1Jn 2:1

The relationship between the Father and the Son

Jesus Christ is God's unique Son Jn 1:14 The Greek word for "One and Only", traditionally rendered "only begotten", is actually used to signify "**the only one of its kind**"; "**unique**". See also Jn 1:18; 3:16,18; Ac 13:33; Heb 1:5; Ps 2:7; 1Jn 4:9

The relationship of Father and Son **is unique** Mt 11:27 pp Lk 10:22 See also Jn 6:46; 7:28-29; 8:55; 10:15; 17:25

The Father loves the Son Jn 3:35 See also Jn 5:20; 10:17; 15:9; 17:24

The Father **shares** his divine life with the Son Col 2:9 See also Jn 5:26; 6:57; Col 1:19

The Father delegates his authority to the Son Jn 5:27 See also Mt 28:18; Jn 3:35; 5:21-22; 16:15; **Rev 2:26-27**

Father and Son indwell each other Jn 14:10-11 See also Jn 10:38; 14:20; 17:21-23

The relationship between the Holy Spirit and the other two persons

The Spirit is “the Spirit of God” and “the Spirit of Christ” Ro 8:9

“the Spirit of God”: Ps 106:33; 1Co 2:14; Php 3:3; 1Jn 4:2

“the Spirit of Christ”: Ac 16:7; Gal 4:6; Php 1:19; 1Pe 1:11

The Spirit’s unique relationship with God Mt 10:20 See also 1Co 2:10-11

The Spirit’s unique relationship with the Son Jn 1:33 See also Isa 61:1; Jn 14:16-17,26; Ac 10:38

Even if the above list were exhaustive, it shows that the Biblical evidence for and about the Trinity is rich, extensive and complex. Let’s look at three words that stand out in what has been documented above: **equal**, **unity** and **unique**. **Equal** implies sameness. It means for example being the same in degree, value, status and quality. **Unity** implies oneness, agreement and harmony. **Unique** can mean unequaled: without a like or equal. We should notice here that this is how the Father speaks about His Son: “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.” The words **only begotten** in the Greek mean ‘One of a kind’ in other words **unique**.

Clearly Viola is stressing the concept of sameness while the Biblical references above stress diversity within unity. There is a very definite gulf between these two viewpoints.

Let’s examine one passage in particular and apply it to the current context. Revelation 2:26, 27.

He who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, TO HIM I WILL GIVE AUTHORITY OVER THE NATIONS; AND HE SHALL RULE THEM WITH A ROD OF IRON, AS THE VESSELS OF THE POTTER ARE BROKEN TO PIECES, as I also have received *authority* from My Father;

Here we have the Lord Jesus both giving and receiving authority in same context. In order for him to give authority it is necessary for him to have the superior position and authority in the first place. In the same way it was necessary, in some sense at least, for the Father to have superiority and authority over the Lord Jesus. This is in fact, the basis for husbands to have, again in some sense, authority over their wives and elders over those they teach. Any type of authority is anathema to Viola and therefore, it was necessary to come up with the theory of equality. This then answers some of the questions that were asked above.

There remains then the question of ‘community’. What is “authentic community” in the context of this book? From what I can understand this is an extension of his doctrine of the trinity. Being equal and reacting to each other in the way Viola presents the three persons of the trinity form what is called ‘a community’. The basic meaning of the word community is that of a group, small or large bound by similar interest that live together.

The idea, again as far as I understand it, is that the trinity is just such a group of people. By adding the word ‘authentic’ this God community becomes the arch type example of what the Bible expects any Christian group to be. This is my understanding of what is being taught, but I am open to correction.

The review of chapter one above covers the first five pages. There are twelve more pages to the close of chapter one. The latter pages are an attempt to move reader to accept the ‘DNA’ pattern (paradigm) for church formation. Four patterns are examined in some detail: Biblical, Cultural, Post Church and Organic (DNA). Some reference is made to scripture but much is made of a very emotionally charged true story.

In talking about a “cut and paste” approach to studying the Bible he quotes John Locke (Locke is commonly known as the Father of Liberalism). I give here a slightly longer version of this quotation (taken from Locke’s Epistles of St. Paul, page 7). Locke (and Viola in a similar vein) dislike the dividing of the Bible into chapters and verses. Locke wrote:

the dividing of them into chapters and verses ... whereby they are so chopped and minced, and, as they are now printed, stand so broken and divided that not only the common people take the verses usually for distinct aphorisms, but even men of more advanced knowledge in reading them lose very much of the strength and force of the coherence and the light that depends on it. Our minds are so weak and narrow that they have need of all the helps and assistances [that] can be procured to lay before them undisturbedly the thread and coherence of any discourse, by which alone they are truly improved and led into the genuine sense of the author.

This is a gross and dangerous over misrepresentation of the truth. For one thing it completely ignores the sound proven methods of true Biblical exegesis. For another it demeans over 2000 years of study and effort by God’s chosen teachers and preachers. Thirdly it ignores the fact that most people in today’s world would find great practical difficulty reading the Bible with little or no punctuation and sentence structure. It seems that his goal is to have us read the Bible as a long narrative or story, he certainly uses words that clearly express this in his dialog. The subjective rather than the objective is stressed.

Much more could be said in review of chapter one but it’s time to move on. The book contains Fifteen chapters and an appendix. A review of each chapter is beyond the scope of this review. We will instead, examine two key elements from the book: the meeting and leadership.

The Meeting

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life— and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us— what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete. (1 John 1:1-4)

In the passage quoted above there is another Greek word that is of central importance when it comes to defining what a church meeting should be. That word in the Greek is 'koinonia', translated above as "fellowship". The New American Standard Dictionary gives this for the meaning(s).²⁶

2842. κοινωνία koinōnia; from 2844; fellowship:—contribution(2), fellowship(12), participation(2), sharing(3).

With reference to 1 John 1:3, were there word occurs in our text above, another source gives us this information.

34.5 κοινωνία, ας f: an association involving close mutual relations and involvement— 'close association, fellowship.'²⁷

There are about 66 references to the Bible in chapter 2 of the book. Some sound teaching is found in this chapter and there is a strong emphasis on the Holy Spirit. It's not too surprising that the verses from 1 John were not quoted; there is, after all, a wealth of material in the Bible on the subject of fellowship. However, these verses cannot be ignored if we are to lay down a good foundation for Church fellowship.

What foundation is laid out in the opening verses of 1 John? Simply put tangible reality, in other words hard facts form the base upon which fellowship takes place. The foundation of Christ's physical birth, life, death and resurrection provide the basis upon which we can have fellowship with God. Christ, as he lived on earth, is the physical representation of the Godhead. This is true to such an extent that Christ could say to Philip: "... Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" (John 14:9)

Viola divides the meetings of the New Testament into four groups: Those conducted by the Apostles, those dealing with evangelism, ones where decisions were made and finally "Church Meetings"

²⁶ Thomas, R. L. (1998). New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek dictionaries : updated edition. Anaheim: Foundation Publications, Inc.

²⁷ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 445). New York: United Bible Societies.

This brings us to another critical point in our review of this book. So far, we have defined some important words. The question now is what does the word ‘Church’ mean? Should it be distinguished from other types of meetings where Christians gathered? The Greek word here is ‘ekklesia’. One source speaks of this word meaning an actual assembly of Christ’s followers in an organized manner²⁸.

We have already seen that Christ’s body; his church, is often represented in the Bible as a physical building. This does not detract or take away from all the other representations, including that which Viola would have us concentrate on (a living body)²⁹. We have already touched upon this subject above but it’s importance cannot be underestimated. The source cited above brings this out in a very clear manner.

When Christ said, "Upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell (hades) shall not prevail against it," Matt 16:18. He was speaking of the church prospectively as something to be built "I will build." The church was a concept in the mind of Christ just as the building is a concept in the mind of the architect before it is erected. Christ saw all the material that was to make up this holy sanctuary, every living stone that would go into it, before it had been quarried from the hard rock of sinful humanity. "Christ also loved the church and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:25-27). And so the church Christ founded to build the church for which He died, is promised perpetuity and glory.³⁰

As this source goes on to state **the church is both the local assembly on earth and those who are already in heaven.**

Viola’s four-fold division above and his use of the term “Church Meeting” are used to funnel the reader into a very narrow understanding of what Church is. All four are as much ‘Church’ as any one is; yet we are carefully led to one alone. There are many elements of truth and the scriptural passages he quotes have relevance but as with the label on some dangerous chemical warns ‘let the user beware’. Simply put there is much more to what the Bible actually teaches about the ‘ekklesia’ than we are led to believe in this book.

The purpose of the meeting. My background is in the medical field and computers. As a result, a great deal of my working life was taken up in meetings. A well-organized meeting with a set purpose was more likely to achieve its goals. Without a clear purpose, even if well run, meetings often accomplished much less. The purpose then, is very important. Why are Christians meeting together? **Viola’s answer:** He looks at this from

²⁸ Cole, C. D. (n.d.). Definitions of Doctrine (Vol. 1).

²⁹ This is not to imply that he ignores the church as a building. He does use this analogy for secondary purposes.

³⁰ Cole, Vol 1

man's perspective and from God's perspective. Man's purpose is "mutual edification"; God's purpose is "to express His glorious Son and make Him visible."³¹ Among other statements about this he actually writes (in italics for emphasis) that "we gather together to **reassemble** (my emphasis) the Lord Jesus Christ on earth."³² This is not only his foundation, it's the whole building.

To understand what is purposed we have to go back to the analogy of the body. Christ is the head and we (true believers) are the body. Depending on what use we make of this, the comparison is sound and Biblical. Viola's purpose, however is not scriptural. In my understanding of the book as a whole and chapters two and three in particular he believes that Christ as the head of the body can best be manifested with believer's practicing fellowship in the way advocated by the book and the teaching of the O.C.M. This goes back to his statement about reassembling Christ on earth. That foundation is based in the supposed relationship that the Godhead (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) have in common and not the teaching of 1 John 1.

We find out a lot more about this in chapter 3 which is about **the Lords Supper**.

A shocking statement is made by Viola on page 79 (my highlighting).

As with **all aspects** of organic church life, the Supper was foreshadowed and previously **experienced by** the Trinitarian Community.

This is conformation of what was established above: that, to Viola, the inner life of God (The Father, Son and Holy Spirit in their native essence) is the foundation upon which all the teaching presented in this book is based. That teaching, according to the quote above includes the supposed fact that at some point in the past, the Lords Supper was actually experienced (i.e. eaten) by God Himself; Viola says that "**God the Father is food to God the Son**". (my emphasis)

For support from Scripture he gives four specific passages. The specific passages are Matthew 4:4, John 4:31ff; 6:27, 57.

Matthew 4:4: "But He answered and said, "It is written, 'MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE, BUT ON EVERY WORD THAT PROCEEDS OUT OF THE MOUTH OF GOD.'" Our Lord is quoting Deuteronomy 8:3 where Moses reminds the Jews that the mana from heaven is not the most important thing. Rather Gods words, spoken then in the written law and now in the living word Christ is the most important thing. The first verse of the Gospel of John, speaking of Christ, illustrates this fact: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." A little later John clearly states this truth:

For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten

³¹ Viola, page 59, 60

³² Ibid, page 60

God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him. (John 1:17,18)

John 4:34 is the central verse here: Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work.” What was the Father’s will and what was the work He gave Jesus to do? In short it was to accomplish our redemption: to become a man, fulfill all the Law of God, suffer and die on the cross, to be a propitiation for our sins and to rise again vindicating God’s justice; finally, to take his rightful place as God in heaven. See Romans 3:21-26.

John 6:27: “Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal.” and John 6:57: “As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats Me, he also will live because of Me.” Verse 58 needs to be added for context: “This is the bread which came down out of heaven; not as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live forever.” Both passages teach the same truth: Salvation comes through the free gift of Faith in Jesus Christ. Paul in Ephesians chapter one lays this out in the most beautiful way. In salvation we are blessed “... with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.” “the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on earth.” That “... the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling ... the surpassing greatness of His power toward us.” I would ask the reader to carefully read through Ephesians chapters one and two at this point.

These verses are not talking about some mystical or theoretical event or process that takes place in the being of God. They are talking about **the daily life** that **any true believer** has in Christ Jesus the Lord.

So, what is the purpose of the Lord’s Supper? Paul’s teaching on the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:23 – 34 and also 10:16ff) is of great importance. Three things that we learn are that **1.** It is “in remembrance” of Christ. I.E. to remember Him in the sense of what we learned of in the four verses above. **2.** In it we “proclaim the Lord’s death” The word that is translated in the NASB as “proclaim” is ‘katangelo’. “καταγγέλλω (aor. κατήγγειλα ; aor. pass. κατηγγέλην) proclaim, make known, preach; teach, advocate (customs)”³³ In a very real sense we are preaching the Gospel (good news) of Jesus Christ when we partake correctly of the Lord’s Table. **3.** That we can be “guilty of the body and blood of the Lord”. By misusing the Lord’s Supper some at the Corinthian Church had become sick and some even died. One is reminded of the closing words of the Bible in the Book of Revelation (22:18,19):

I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this

³³ Newman, B. M., Jr. (1993). A Concise Greek-English dictionary of the New Testament. (p. 93). Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft; United Bible Societies.

prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book.

Because much of what this book teaches is based upon what Viola thinks God is like it's helpful to briefly look at two of the attributes of God. When we speak of the attributes of God, we are seeking to understand what makes God, God.

First, **God is incomprehensible**. That does not mean that we cannot understand Him at all. Rather we can do so only to the extent of our human comprehension and to the extent He has chosen to revealed Himself in the Bible. This is why it was so important to examine the four references the Viola gave above. Without Biblical support we can have no true teaching.

The following is a good summary of this attribute of God:

 Incomprehensibility of God

This is a relative term, and indicates a relation between an object and a faculty; between God and a created understanding: so that the meaning of it is this, that no created understanding can comprehend God; that is, have a perfect and exact knowledge of him, such a knowledge as is adequate to the perfection of the object (<181107>Job 11:7; Isaiah 40).

God is incomprehensible,

1. As to the nature of His essence;
2. The excellency of his attributes;
3. The depth of his counsels;
4. The works of his providence;
5. The dispensation of his grace

(<490308>Ephesians 3:8; <183702>Job 37:25; Romans 11). The incomprehensibility of God follows,

1. From his being a spirit endued with perfections greatly superior to our own.
2. There may be (for anything we certainly know) attributes and perfections in God of which we have not the least idea.
3. In those perfections of the divine nature of which we have some idea, there are many things to us inexplicable, and with which, the more deeply and attentively we think of them, the more we find our thoughts swallowed up, such as his self-existence, eternity, omnipresence, etc.

This should teach us, therefore,

1. To admire and reverence the divine Being (<380917>Zechariah 9:17; <160905>Nehemiah 9:5);
2. To be humble and modest (<190801>Psalm 8:1, 4; <210502>Ecclesiastes 5:2, 3; <183719>Job 37:19);
3. To be serious in our addresses, and sincere in our behavior towards him. (Caryl, On <182702>Job 27:25; Tillotson, Sermons, sermon 156; Abernethy, Sermons, vol. 2. nos. 6. 7; Doddridge, Lectures on Divinity, lecture 59; Martensen, Dogmatics, p. 89; Buck, Theolog. Dictionary, s.v.)³⁴

The second attribute that should be touched upon is **His Immutability**.

IMMUTABILITY OF GOD The unchangeability of God. In biblical theology God is described as unchanging in His nature and in His character. This includes God's being (essence), purposes, and promises. Psalm 102:25–27 contrasts God's unchanging nature with that of the created order. Numbers 23:19 and 1 Sam. 15:29 indicate that God changes neither His plans nor His actions, for these rest on His unchanging nature. James finds assurance of God's future blessings in that there is in God "no variation or shadow cast by turning" (James 1:17 HCSB). After referring to His constant patience, long-suffering, and mercy, God concludes with a general statement of His immutability: "For I, the LORD, do not change" (Mal. 3:6 NASB).³⁵

Failure to allow the Bible to define precisely in what sense God changes, results in a distorted view of God.

The quotation above ended with the words: "...a distorted view of God." My contention is that we have in this book, especially in what was said about God and the Lords Supper, just that: 'a distorted view of God'. God is incomprehensible. We cannot, and we dare not dive into our imagination, come up with some concept that suits a human purpose, attach some scriptures to it and call that God.

We are not free to say anything we like about God, without Biblical foundation. If we do, we face condemnation. Matthew 12:30-32 shows this:

He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters. Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven. "Whoever

³⁴ Strong and McClintock. (n.d.). In Cyclopedia of Biblical Ect Literature .

³⁵ Johnson, W. (2003). Immutability of God. In C. Brand, C. Draper, A. England, S. Bond, E. R. Clendenen, & T. C. Butler (Eds.), Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary (pp. 810–811). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

speaks a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come.

Colossians 3:8 reads as follows: “But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth.” The Geek word translated as “slander” is *blasphemia* (Strong’s number 988) meaning vilification (especially against God). In English it’s the word ‘blasphemy’ which can be defined as:

- a: the act of insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence for God
- b: the act of claiming the attributes of deity
- 2: irreverence toward something considered sacred or inviolable³⁶

In conclusion: Is our guide the supposed inner workings of God manifested in a group of people meeting together without formal human authority **or** by the concrete facts about the Lord Jesus taught in the pages of the Bible? Christians today should follow the New Testament pattern when meeting together. There should be mutual give and take, shared participation within a structured framework. The framework is what is being questioned in this review not the concept itself.

The Leadership

Preach the word; be ready in season *and* out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but *wanting* to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, (2 Timothy 4:2,3)

He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things. And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:10-14)

The question of leadership comes to the fore quickly in chapter two. Indeed, the rest of the chapter lays the groundwork for Viola’s conception of leadership (really the lack of it) in the church. Put in the simplest words the book places Christ at the head of the meeting and **all** believers **equally** under him. The emphasis, again, is laid upon the head and body (i.e. organic) relationship. Unlike a building this model lends itself to what they propose. The specific concept of leadership, as presented in the book, is so important to

³⁶ Merrian-Webster

the author that more than half of the book is devoted to it (One half, part 2 is for that purpose alone). With this in mind the rest of this review will concentrate on some of the aspects of leadership as presented in this book. The orthodox Biblical counterpart will be examined at the same time.

In laying his foundation on the topic of Church leadership Viola turns to another theologian. This time it's John Howard Yoder (1927–1997). It's an acknowledged fact that during the 70's and 80's Yoder sexually abused over 100 women while he was at the Mennonite Bible Seminary.³⁷ I mention this as it shows Viola's willingness to use any source that says something he likes.

In academic terms Yoder states that there is no such thing in the New Testament as a paid preacher.³⁸ A sentence or two is sufficient for our purposes here. Yoder asks:

... Is there one particular office in which there should be only one or a few individuals for whom it provides a livelihood, unique in character due to ordination, central to the definition of the church and key to her functioning?³⁹

His answer as stated above is an absolute no. This, then, is the authority for the teaching that follows.

Viola goes even further; On page 55 just after the quote above he writes: "Perhaps the **most startling** characteristic of the early church meeting was the **absence of any human officiation.**" (my emphasis). This central premise is at the heart and soul of the O.C.M. If they can remove human leadership, they can turn the hearts and souls of God's people anywhere they choose. A widely known military tactic, since ancient times, has been to kill or capture the leaders. The Bible and cultural history are replete with examples. God, through his Holy Word has given us detailed concrete teaching on leadership. If we distort or ignore such teaching, we in effect 'kill' our leadership. Christ, like any good leader delegates leadership to members of his Church. Our Lord did not need the disciples. Indeed, as the Gospels clearly portray, they were often more of a hindrance than a help. Yet he chose this method and New Testament clearly lays out the patterns of leadership as we shall see.

Based on such a sweeping, indeed shocking, statement as Viola gave above objections are inevitable. Interestingly he bypasses this and delegates it to the appendix. His method of attack there is to redefine what the original Greek words, as used in the New Testament, mean.

³⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Howard_Yoder

³⁸ If the reader is interested in whole quotation it was taken from "The Fullness of Christ; Perspectives on Ministries in Renewal." Concern, no. 17 (February 1969)

³⁹ Concern, no. 17

He defines⁴⁰ ‘epistoloi’ translated ‘Bishops’ as just plain guardians. ‘Poimen’ translated pastors’ equal caretakers. ‘Diakonos’ translated Ministers become busboys. ‘Presbuteros’ i.e. elders are just men who have become wise because they are old.

One other example will be sufficient for our purpose here. On page 288 (in the appendix), he goes into a little detail on the word ‘proistemi’ as used in 1 Timothy 5:17. He categorically states that translating this word as ‘rule’, as some Bible versions do, is incorrect. He wants a meaning like ‘among’ or ‘guides’, so as to stress equality.

Before we look at what the New Testament as a whole teaches let’s look at this word ‘proistemi’. ‘Proistemi’ in 1 Timothy 5:17 is Strong’s number #4291.

Strong defines it in this way: προΐστημι proïstēmi, prō-is´-tay-mee; from 4253 and 2476; to stand before, i.e. (in rank) to preside, or (by impl.) to practice:— maintain, be over, rule.⁴¹

Other sources define it in the same way: προΐστημι proistēmi; from 4253 and 2476; to put before, to set over, to rule:—engage(2), have charge over(1), leads(1), manage(1), managers(1), manages(1), rule(1).⁴²

Another source says: 4613 προΐσταμαι (proistamai), προΐστημι (proistēmi): vb.; ≡ Str 4291; TDNT 6.700—1. LN 36.1 guide, lead, direct (Ro 12:8; 1Th 5:12; 1Ti 3:4, 5, 12; 5:17); 2. LN 35.12 be active in helping, engage in aiding (Tit 3:8, 14+), for another interp, see next; 3. LN 68.67 strive to (Tit 3:8, 14+)⁴³

Once final source has: προΐστημι rule, direct; care for⁴⁴

As you can see the meaning in 1 Timothy 5:17 is ‘rule’ or similar words like ‘be over’. In some verses it can have the meaning of guiding or aiding. However, to state that it does not mean ‘rule’ (i.e. “is incorrectly translated”) is completely without foundation.

What does the New Testament teach about leaders in the Church? Let’s look at the four words Voila defined, as noted above. What did these words mean when the original documents (Paul’s letters etc.) were written? Note: I’m not referring to what they became in latter tradition but what the meaning was in the first Century after the birth of Christ. This can be referred to as the Apostolic period or Apostolic tradition: what the

⁴⁰ The reader may feel that I have misinterpreted his words, which I have not. Please see page 282 for his exact wording.

⁴¹ Strong, J. (1996). The New Strong’s Dictionary of Hebrew and Greek Words. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁴² Thomas, R. L. (1998). New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek dictionaries : updated edition. Anaheim: Foundation Publications, Inc.

⁴³ The meaning given for our verse is guide, lead, direct. Swanson, J. (1997). Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament) (electronic ed.). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

⁴⁴ Van Voorst, R. E. (1990). Building your New Testament Greek vocabulary (p. 29). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

New Testament Apostles laid down as the pattern for Church leaders. As we examine the New Testament evidence a curious fact emerges: three of the four words were used interchangeably. To clarify, the three synonymous terms are *epislopoi*” translated ‘Bishops’, ‘Poimen’ translated pastors’ and ‘Presbuteros’ i.e. elders. The fact that they are used interchangeably can be seen by comparing the following passages⁴⁵. In Titus 1:5 we find Paul having Titus appoint elders in various towns on Crete. In Titus 1:5 he calls them elders (*prēsbutērōs*). Two verses later in the seventh verse he uses the term Bishop (*ēpiskōpōs*). The passage reads as follows:

For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you, namely, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. For the overseer must be above reproach as God’s steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain,

The same interchange is seen in Acts 20 vs. 17 and 28. The same people are referred to by the two different Greek words. Clearly, he is speaking about the same leaders and the terms are interchangeable. *Prēsbutērōs* (elder) is used in 1 Peter 5 interchangeably with ‘poimen’ (pastor) as the context shows. *Prēsbutērōs* (elder) is used in both verses 1 and 7. The context of these verses (shepherding the flock) and the context of Peter’s calling (John 21:15-17) which is to shepherd (*pōimainō*) the flock of sheep means they are the same in usage.

Its time now to see what the actual meaning and usage of each of these four words were when they were written.

Epislopoi: We will examine this word as it is found in 1 Timothy 3:1 “It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do.” As we see the NASB translates *ēpiskōpē* as “**office of overseer**”.

Strong’s dictionary for this word says this: 1984. *ἐπισκοπή* *ēpiskōpē*, ep-is-kop-ay’; from 1980; inspection (for relief); by impl. superintendence; spec., the Chr. “episcopate”:—the office of a “bishop,” bishoprick, visitation^{46, 47}.

Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. - 53.69 *ἐπισκοπή*β, ἥς f: a religious role involving both service and leadership—‘office, position, ministry as church leader.’ *τὴν ἐπισκοπὴν αὐτοῦ λαβέτω ἕτερος* ‘let someone else take his office’ Ac 1:20; *εἴ τις ἐπισκοπῆς ὀρέγεται, καλοῦ ἔργου ἐπιθυμεῖ* ‘if a man is eager to fulfill a ministry as a church leader, he desires

⁴⁵ I am indebted to David Schrock, [See Here](#), for his thoughts on this subject.

⁴⁶ As with many Greek words, (and English ones as well), the same word can have different meanings based on the context. In some contexts the word is used for visitation but that is obviously not meaning in this verse.

⁴⁷ Strong, J. (1996). Dictionary of Hebrew and Greek Words.

an excellent work’ 1 Tm 3:1. See discussion at 53.71. For a more probable interpretation of ἐπισκοπή in Ac 1:20, see 35.40.⁴⁸

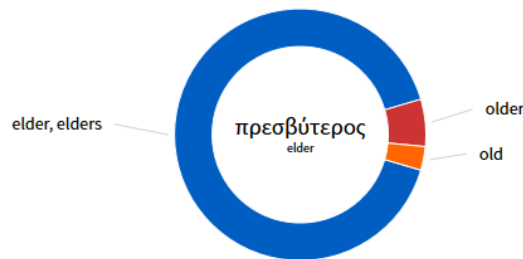
Ρῶιμῆν: Ephesians 4:11 is our reference verse for this word. “And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers,” As we see the NASB translates ρῶιμῆν as “pastors”.

Strong’s dictionary for this word says this: 4166. ποιμήν ρῶιμῆν, ποι-μανε΄; of uncert. aff.; a shepherd (lit. or fig.):— shepherd, pastor.

Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. - 53.72 ποιμήν, ἑνος m: (a figurative extension of meaning of ποιμήνα ‘shepherd,’ 44.4) one who is responsible for the care and guidance of a Christian congregation—‘pastor, minister.’ αὐτὸς ἔδωκεν τοὺς μὲν ἀποστόλους, τοὺς δὲ προφήτας, τοὺς δὲ εὐαγγελιστάς, τοὺς δὲ ποιμένας καὶ διδασκάλους ‘he appointed some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, others to be pastors and teachers’ Eph 4:11. Note that in Eph 4:11 there are four classes of persons, not five, for the last class involves two complementary roles, that of pastor and teacher, in other words, to guide and help a congregation as well as to teach.⁴⁹

As we saw above pastor and elder can be interchanged.

Presbuteros: We will examine this word as it is found in Titus 1:5 “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you,” There is no controversy over the translation of the word as ‘elder’. As with each of the words we are examining there are different scriptures where they are used and, in some cases, they can have different meanings or connotations. For example, the NASB Dictionary lists 67 times this word is used in the New Testament. Sixty of those are ‘elder(s)’. Only six refer to age. It helps to visualize this as a diagram:⁵⁰



Anyone who as has made even a moderate attempt to use and understand Biblical Greek understands that the raw meaning of a word can only takes you part way into a deeper

⁴⁸ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, pp. 540–541). New York: United Bible Societies.

⁴⁹ Louw, J. P., & Nida, Vol. 1, p. 541

⁵⁰ Copied from Logos Version 8.

knowledge of what the Bible teaches. The word ‘elder’ is one such word. It is obvious from the diagram above that ‘Presbuteros’ as it is used in the New Testament means much more than just old or older. The context in which the word is used determines to a large extent its meaning. This is why we end up with the diagram looking like it does. The context in the vast majority of cases refers to an office (to a group of people set apart from the main body of believers based on the gifts they have been given and the quality of the life they lead).

For many years one of the standard references for understanding the Greek of the New Testament has been “The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament” by Kittel, Gerhard and Gerhard Friedrich. Gerhard Kittel, the general editor, was a German Lutheran theologian. He supported Hitler and was very against the Jewish people. Indeed, the reader has not mis-read what I just wrote. Yes, you could say: “Then why are you quoting from such a person, isn’t this exactly what you say Viola does?” Let me go back to my analogy at the start of this review. A true scientist (researcher) is concerned about facts, things that can be demonstrated to be true. Kittel and those who worked with him, on this massive ten volume set, were after facts. They did not set out to falsify what the Bible words mean. With diligent, exhaustive research they defined in great detail what the words actually mean. Kittel’s dictionary is the Greek word equivalent to the Merriam-Webster’s dictionary that I also use for this review for English words.

Kittel has a lengthy section on the word ‘Presbuteros’. One section is titled “Presbyters in the Primitive Christian Community”. There are five main subdivisions under this heading and many divisions under those. This indicates something of the wealth of information the New Testament holds on this word (as noted above). The following quotation is from three of the five divisions, those which concern us the most in this review. I have bolded the parts that need our special attention.

- b. Acts. In Acts 14:23 Paul and Barnabas ordain elders in the Gentile churches. **The address of 20:18ff. shows that they are to be overseers and pastors administering the apostles’ legacy, following their example, and protecting the people against error.** The designation of the elders as bishops in 20:28 (the only use in Acts) is of special interest.
- c. 1 Peter. In 1 Pet. 5:1ff. **the writer addresses the elders and younger believers as though these were age groups, but obviously the elders are a college of officebearers with a pastoral function. The warnings of vv. 2–3 show that they have charge of the funds and exercise authority. Yet their powers are not autonomous, for they are responsible to Christ, who alone is called epískopos (2:25).** The dignity of the office may be seen in Peter’s self-designation as sympresbýteros, for if this modestly sets him alongside them, it also sets them alongside him.
- d. The Pastorals. **In 1 Tim. 5:1 age is obviously denoted by presbýteros, but elsewhere an office is at issue. The presbytérion is a college (1 Tim. 4:14).** Titus is to ordain presbýteroi (1:5), and presbýteroi are to be rewarded if they rule well (1 Tim. 5:17) and protected against frivolous

charges (5:19). **Preaching and teaching are a special function of at least some of the elders (5:17). The bishops and presbyters seem to be much the same (cf. Tit. 1:5, 7ff.). Yet the bishop is always in the singular and the presbyters are always plural (even in Tit. 1:5ff.).** Already, then, there may be a tendency for a leading presbyter to take over administrative functions within the presbyteral college—the probable starting point for the later development of the monarchical bishop.⁵¹

To summarize, for the purpose of this review ‘Presbuteros’ (elder) is a office (a leader) in the Church and not just or even exclusively an older person⁵².

Diakonos: One example of this word, translated in the NASB as ‘servant’, is in 1 Timothy 3:8 “Deacons must be husbands of only one wife, and good managers of their children and their own households.”

Strong’s gives this information. 1249. διάκονος diakōnōs, dee-ak’-on-os; prob. from an obs. διάκω diakō (to run on errands; comp. 1377); an attendant, i.e. (gen.) a waiter (at table or in other menial duties); spec. a Chr. teacher and pastor (tech. a deacon or deaconess):— deacon, minister, servant.

As with the word elder, context is very important. My purpose here is primarily to show that the definition that Viola gave is ridiculous in the context of Christian leadership. If one wants to be vulgar and demeaning the term “busboys”, as Viola called them is technically correct in some specific contexts. Even then however, that usage is not correct in the context of leadership.

Kittle gives a good Biblical understanding of what this word means in the New Testament:

Sometimes *diákonos* is used for the bearer of a specific office (translated *diaconus*, not *minister*, in the Vulgate) (cf. Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8, 12). In Phil. 1:1 deacons are mentioned along with bishops. It is unlikely that these are two terms for the same people, but we are not told what the offices involve. Deacons are also found alongside bishops in 1 Tim. 3, which tells us that they are to be blameless, temperate, with one wife, ruling their houses well, not double-tongued or avaricious, holding the faith with a clear conscience. **That their duties were those of administration and service may be deduced from the title, the qualities demanded, their relation to bishops, and the use of *diakonía* in the NT.** That they took their origin from the Seven of Acts 6 is unlikely

⁵¹ Kittel, G., Friedrich, G., & Bromiley, G. W. (1985). *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (p. 933). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

⁵² Timothy is one exception. As a rule, elders are normally older men, but that does not rule out the possibility of a younger man if he is so gifted by God.

in view of the work of the Seven in evangelizing and preaching, but there may be an indirect connection.⁵³

In Summary: Kittel's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament condenses what we have learned about these four New Testament Greek Words (Emphasis in the text is mine).

Elsewhere men are called *epískopoi*, and this raises two questions. a. Who are these people called *epískopoi*? **The word is not used for itinerant charismatics but only for leaders of settled congregations. For such leaders we quickly find the words *presbýteroi* or *epískopoi* and *diákonoi*. As may be seen from Acts 20:28 (Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders) there is at first no distinction between *presbýteroi* and *epískopoi*. All the *presbýteroi* here are *epískopoi*, their task is that of shepherding (cf. 1 Pet. 2:25; 5:2ff.), there are several *epískopoi* in one church, their calling is from the Holy Spirit (though this does not rule out election or appointment, Acts 6:3ff.; 14:23), and their function is that of the watchful direction of believers on the basis of Christ's work.** b. **When does the free activity of overseeing become a designation of office? There is from the outset an impulse in this direction, for while Paul describes a function in Acts 20:28 he is also addressing a specific group. The addition in Phil. 1:1 ("with the bishops") also shows that an office and not just an activity is in view even if it does not tell us what this specific office is except in general terms of function. In 1 Tim. 3:1 *episkopé* is a definite office that may be sought and for which there are qualifications (though no duties are listed). Since there is here no further reference to the Holy Spirit, everyday needs influence this development, but the qualifications are very soberly stated, embracing moral reliability, a monogamous marriage, disciplined family life, teaching ability, maturity, and blamelessness according to the standards of the non-Christian world. In the parallel passage in Tit. 1:5ff. the qualifications for elders are similar, and the sudden use of *epískopos* in v. 7 shows that the same function is in view, namely, that of guiding and representing the congregation, teaching, and conducting worship when no itinerant minister is present.** The use of the singular in 1 Tim. 3:2 and Tit. 1:7 does not mean that there is only one bishop in each church; it is simply a reference to the bishop as a type. **The point of the office is service rather than power; the bishop, too, receives admonition and must be sober and disciplined in outlook. His authority is from the Holy Spirit. The singling out of some elders in 1 Tim. 5:17 because of their good rule, especially in teaching and preaching, may hint at early distinctions that would eventually lead to a primacy of bishops.**

⁵³ Kittel, pp. 154–155

It is hardly likely that the angels of the churches in Rev. 1:20 etc. are bishops.⁵⁴

Final Conclusion: If nothing else, what was discussed above should provide food for thought. I hope I have demonstrated that words matter. To latch onto a catch phrase like “Organic Church” and run with it has consequences. In today’s world that phrase has specific connotations and implies specific teaching. In light of what was presented above do you, as an individual or group want to be associated with that term? Perhaps you do, your response may even be “Of course I do, I’m all for it. Thank you, Frank!” Only the Holy Spirit of God can guide us unto the truth as it is in Jesus. May God have mercy upon us and lead us (myself included) into His truth.

In ending this review, I would encourage anyone who wishes to get at the facts on this matter to study their Bible and to obtain (though a library, amazon etc.) a copy of Viola’s book. Please study this matter for yourself. Do as the people of Berea did and examine the Word of God. I have, as it were only scratched the surface, both in regard to what is presented in this book and in regard to what the Bible teaches on these subjects.

For further study:

What is ‘preaching’? What place does it have in the Bible? Should it be a part of our gathering together? Is so who should preach and when? What should be the content of the preaching be (if it allowed to take place)?

What does the Bible teach about a “Paid Ministry”?

What about women? In the marriage and in the fellowship. What does ‘headship’ really mean? If we allow preaching can a woman preach to men as well as women?

Is it against the Bible to rent or own a church building? Is this sinful in some way? Can this be a positive thing in some contexts?

With regard to fellowship does size matter? Thousands were brought into the church at one time: was this somehow wrong?

Did the early Christians meet in houses because they had to? Did they have any other practical choice? What are the implications to the answers to these questions for us today?

If there are leaders (elders), should there be more than one at one place?

These are a few of many questions that highlight areas that need wisdom to discern and to act upon.

⁵⁴ Ibid. p 247