

# Viola – Finding Organic Church- a Review

## Preface and Introduction

Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction. You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, **be on your guard so that you are not carried away by the error of unprincipled men and fall from your own steadfastness**, but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen. (2 Peter 3:14-18)<sup>1, 2</sup>

I wish that you would bear with me in a little foolishness; but indeed you are bearing with me. For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, so that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin. **But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ.** For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully. For I consider myself not in the least inferior to the most eminent apostles. But even if I am unskilled in speech, yet I am not so in knowledge; in fact, in every way we have made this evident to you in all things. ... But what I am doing I will continue to do, so that I may cut off opportunity from those who desire an opportunity to be regarded just as we are in the matter about which they are boasting. **For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.** No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end will be according to their deeds. (I Corinthians 11:1-6, 13-15)

In modern Church life Frank Viola is a very public, well-known figure. He has authored various books, including this one under review: “Finding Organic Church”<sup>3</sup>. I have reviewed a previously written book of his titled “Reimaging Church”. That review can be found at the Surrey Tabernacle Pulpit Website from this menu page: [Here](#) If you desire to understand what the “Organic Church Movement” stands for I would encourage you to read both my reviews and at least one of Viola’s books. In the prior review I lay down the meanings of different Greek and

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<sup>1</sup> New American Standard Bible: 1995 update. (1995). (2 Pe 3:14–18). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

<sup>2</sup> All Bible passages will be in the NASB as referenced above. I have removed the verse numbers and references for the purpose of this review. Any emphasis is mine, again for purpose of this review.

<sup>3</sup> Finding Organic Church; Frank Viola, David C. Cook pub. 2009

English words. In addition, I give some insights into God and his Nature. This review will concentrate on other aspects.

Viola's book consists of three basic elements. 1. His teaching in his own words. 2. Over 55 quotation's from at least 32 people 3. Numerous Bible passages. With regard to the quotations, 38 occur in the first one third of the book. The majority of the quotes are from seven sources with Watchman Nee having the most (a total of 8). Viola correctly acknowledges his indebtedness to these main sources in his Acknowledgments page at the back on the book. I commend him for this.

The book is divided into four parts. The latter two parts deal, for the most part, with practical matters and will not be reviewed in any detail. The reason for not doing so will become clear in the following pages. In his introduction Viola makes two general statements about both traditional and non-traditional churches. In summary (my words) he says: **Scripture has been ignored and we have moved away from what the Bible teaches about the Church.** He then says something very thought-provoking: "Granted, these conclusions are built on pragmatic observations. But they carry the weight of Scripture to support them."<sup>4</sup> Here we have pragmatism and at the same time an appeal to the Bible.

What does 'pragmatism' mean? I did a simple google search on that word and the following meanings were at the top of the returned list:

1. a pragmatic attitude or policy.  
"ideology was tempered with pragmatism"
2.  
Philosophy  
an approach that assesses the truth of meaning of theories or beliefs in terms of the success of their practical application.

In other words, if it works it's true.

This review will concentrate on these two aspects: Pragmatism and Truth. If he had not claimed support from the Bible there would be little or no need for any Bible believing Christian to consider the contents of the book at all. Book shelves the world over are full of "Self-Help" books based on an endless variety of ideas. The Bible is unique among all world religions and all belief systems. If the Bible has authority at all it must have supreme authority. The Bible makes this claim about its self over and over again. (2 Timothy 3:16-17 etc.)

The first section deals with the sources Viola uses and why he chose them. The second section concentrates on the Bible and what we can learn from it. The conclusion gives a brief summary and touches briefly on the rest of the book.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. pg. 19

## Which Principles - Pragmatism

Part of the sub title for Part one of the book is ... Biblical Principles for Church Planting”<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly Part One does not open with a direct appeal to the Bible. Instead we find two quotations from Watchman Nee. In other words, the book starts with pragmatism rather than truth. At this point the reader might object or worse yet put this review down, thinking I’m crazy. Please tolerate me for a moment or at least go to the next section of this review.

I have already shown how dependent Frank Viola is upon the teachings of Watchman Nee for his beliefs as presented in the book under review. He is dependent on others as well, like Roland Allen, quoted seven times. Based on teachers like this he finds four ways (models) in the New Testament upon which the first churches were built. In his conclusion he states: “Because these four models are God-given, I don’t believe they can be improved upon.”<sup>6</sup>

My point is this: Within this first chapter there is virtually no attempt made to examine the New Testament text in any depth whatsoever. The underlying supposition seems to be ‘that it worked for them so it will work for us’ This is however **not** based on a deep understanding of the Bible as a whole **but on** what certain men think about it. That is a pragmatic approach.

The reader may still be skeptical, in which case I would like to submit the following quote. This is found in introduction of Viola’s book but I have taken it from the cited source on the Web.

The fact is that, while certain things characterize the New Testament churches, the New Testament does not give us a complete pattern according to which churches are to be set up or formed! There is no blueprint for churches in the New Testament, and to try to form New Testament churches is only to create another system which may be as legal, sectarian, and dead as others. Churches, like the Church, are organisms which spring out of life, which life itself springs out of the Cross of Christ wrought into the every being of believers. Unless believers are crucified people, there can be no true expression of the Church.<sup>7</sup>

To summarize what Viola says: We are given four excellent God given examples of how churches were built in the New Testament. However, based on the quote above they offer no blueprint for us at all, it’s all subjective! I know that does not make sense but that’s what pragmatism is all about. Its right because it works not necessarily because it makes any sense. As so much of chapter one is about what people say its important to understand who some of these people are and what they believe.

What about Watchman Nee; wasn’t he a great Christian? He founded a whole church after all! Surely, he is a safe guide for us to follow! I thought so as a very young Christian in the early 70’s. I purchased some of his books and studied them avidly. It was not until I also purchased the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. pg. 23

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. pg. 49

<sup>7</sup> Grace Centered Online Christian Magazine at [Here](#) It was posted on Dec. 4<sup>th</sup> 2008

full set of Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Bible that serious questions arose. I compared in depth comments on scripture passages in Henry to what Nee taught. I could see that they did not agree with one another on many passages. By God's goodness it was not long before I rejected such mystic teaching. In the following comments I am deeply indebted to a Biographical Study on Watchman Nee by Huelon Mountfort<sup>8</sup>.

Nee founded the "Little Flock" denomination which grew into a huge movement in China by the time the Communists took over in 1949 (more than 700 churches). If we desired to judge correctness by success then we would conclude that he was correct in what he taught. Mountfort lists five (not just one) areas where Nee is controversial. First is Mysticism. He was influenced by the Catholic Madam Guyon. Second is Keswick Theology, including T. Austin Sparks who Viola also quotes. Third is Brethren Theology. Fourth is Dispensationalism and the last is Chinese Nationalism (again before the Communist takeover). According to Mountfort Nee believed that elders have a distinct leadership role, which Viola opposes. Like Viola he stressed the priesthood of all believers. Clearly Watchman Nee's roots are complex and not consistent.

Mountfort quotes an authority on Nee's theology. This source highlights some troubling concerns. Nee used a non-historical allegorical method to study the Bible<sup>9</sup>. Not surprising, considering Viola's interest in him, Nee believed that denominations were sinful (based on a false interpretation of Galatians 5:19-20). Nee's teaching is that God must be served "in the name of the Lord" without church denominations. As is pointed out in the biography he actually created his own denomination, that was very restrictive. Thus, he went against his own teaching.

Any foundation built upon the teachings of Watchman Nee is at best a patchwork of mixed material of very disparate sizes and shapes. Viola adds to the confusion by quoting from other questionable sources.

As I showed in my review of "Reimagining Church" Viola loves to "hand pick" quotes from almost any source if the teaching is favorable to his view. The next most widely quoted person is Roland Allen (seven quotes). Allen is a very logical choice for Viola to use. He was an ordained Anglican missionary who spent much of his time in Northern China. There is both similarity and discontinuity in comparing Allen's missionary-oriented teaching with Viola's Organic Church teaching. Viola uses material that highlights his position and to some extent is justified in this as Allen based his views on what he perceived as the Apostle Paul's church planting methods.

R. Paul Stevens is quoted three times in the first 100 pages of the book. His website states that:

Paul has been a pastor, a student counselor, a business person and a professor. His mission is to empower ordinary people to integrate their faith and life from Monday to Sunday. He does this through teaching, coaching, advocating and publishing.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The Web address of the article is [Here](#) Its taken from the IIM Magazine Online, Vol 4, Number 19 May 2002

<sup>9</sup> In other words, like Viola, Nee rejected facts and what could be learned from history. The meaning comes from what we feel or experience not from objective truth.

<sup>10</sup> <http://rpaulstevens.com/>

The website also refers to him as “Marketplace Ministry Mentor”. This refers to evangelism that is geared to people in their place of work.

Stanley Grenz is another person called into service for the cause. He was a Baptist best known for an almost 900-page work promoting postmodern evangelical theology. Yes, you can ask what is postmodern evangelical theology? Basically, this is a system that denies absolutes and objectivity. In other words, the exact opposite teaching to that of all the early Christian leaders in the New Testament taught. He was also involved in the early teachings of the Emerging Church movement. In their own words they began this movement because many were "disillusioned and disenfranchised by the conventional ecclesial institutions of the late 20th century."<sup>11</sup>

**In summary:** As one examines the list of people quoted (from Benjamin Franklin to a well-respected orthodox Professor (F.F. Bruce)) it's clear the glue that binds them all together is that they have something to say that supports what Viola wants to put across. Without that glue there is really nothing to bind them together. The quotations work because they teach exactly what Viola wants us to believe not because they contain truth. Two questions remain: What is the teaching and is there any sound Biblical basics (any Biblical glue) behind it?

## Which Principles – Is there a Biblical Base?

I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: 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, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.** But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. (2 Timothy 4:1-5)

As was demonstrated in the first part of this review Viola is a master at accumulating teachers who support his own teaching not matter what their background is. He also claims Biblical support for the teachings in this book. This section will examine how he uses the Scriptures.

In contrast to most of the book chapter 4, which is titled “Apostolic Covering vs. Apostolic Help”, is full of Scriptural references. It contains well over 100 direct references to passages in the New Testament. There are dozens more indirectly referenced; a veritable avalanche of verses. An unsuspecting reader is likely to be carried away by the sheer volume of passages. It seems almost obvious that the Bible **must** teach what this chapter advocates; so many Bible verses must be right. As Genesis chapter 3 shows, it seemed obvious to Eve and then also to

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/about/>

Adam, that Satan was right and God was wrong after all. Mankind fell then and continues to turn away from God to this very day. Numeric numbers by themselves do not equal correct teaching

Chapter four deals with the subject of apostolic authority. Based on the way this chapter defines such authority a conclusion is reached and summed up in the following words:

... many discerning Christians have concluded that apostles do not exist today. Let it be known, however, that God has raised up genuine apostolic workers in this century.<sup>12</sup>

The begs the questions: Is Viola, Watchman Nee or others he quotes such apostles? Is the statement even Biblically correct? In other words, is this what the Bible teaches? Its not possible, with any certainty, to answer the first question but it is very possible with regard to the latter question. All that is necessary is to compare what Viola says the New Testament teaches with the New Testament. Here is another point were the reader my stop and scratch their head and say: Isn't that just what Viola does? After all he is quoting the Bible.

First of all, there are correct and incorrect ways to study the bible. By joining two Bible verses together **out of context** we get an interesting command. Matthew 27:5 relates how Judas went and hung himself. Luke 10:37 contains a command from the Lord Jesus "Go and do you likewise" Putting the two together out of context can lead to this: 'Judas went out and hung himself you go and do the same thing'. This is of course a far-fetched example. The very sad fact is that this is Viola's common method of using the Scriptures.

Viola professes to be a Bible believing Christian. In other words, he professes that the Bible has divine authority and shows us how we should live. Unless we are prepared to accept the Bible as the divinely inspired, authoritative Word of God we cannot hope to study the Bible correctly. Many of Viola's 'teachers' reject this view of the Bible. A non-believer can find truth and facts in the Bible but they cannot understand its basic teaching. As Paul says it makes no sense to them:

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void. For the word of **the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing**, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Corinthians 1:17,18)

If we have eyes to see, how than should we study the Bible correctly? The Bible, in Paul's words to Timothy, gives us the answer: "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth." (2 Timothy 2:15) It takes diligent study with an eye on accuracy. Here is a summary of what one source<sup>13</sup> has to say on this important subject.

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<sup>12</sup> Finding Organic Church; pg. 113

<sup>13</sup> The "GotQuestions.org" page on this topic is very helpful. For sake of space I summarizes part of what is there and quote only specific sections. The page can be found [Here](#)

Studying the Scriptures is hard work. A cursory or brief scanning of Scripture can sometimes yield very wrong conclusions. Therefore, it is crucial to understand several principles for determining the correct meaning of Scripture.

First, the one who would study the Bible must pray and ask the Holy Spirit to impart understanding, for that is one of His functions. “But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come” (John 16:13).

Second, to study the Bible properly, we cannot pull a verse out of the verses that surround it and try to determine the meaning of the verse outside of the context. We should always read the surrounding verses and chapters to discern the context. While all of Scripture comes from God (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21), God used men to write it down. These men had a theme in mind, a purpose for writing, and a specific issue they were addressing. To study the Bible, we should understand the background of the book we are studying: it’s helpful to know who wrote the book, to whom it was written, when it was written, and why it was written. Also, we should take care to let the text speak for itself. Sometimes people will assign their own meanings to words in order to get the interpretation they desire.

Third, to study the Bible properly, we should not think of ourselves as totally independent in our analysis of the text. It is arrogant to think that we cannot gain understanding through the lifelong work of others who have studied Scripture.<sup>14</sup>

Simply put Viola does not adhere this simple straightforward advice. Two of his fatal errors are 1. He ignores the context of many of the passages he quotes. 2. Aside from a select group of people who support his views, he rejects the past 2000 years’ worth of Christian teaching.

**Its time now to compare what Viola teaches to what the Bible teaches.** As I said above anyone who is deeply interested in this subject should buy Viola’s book. Examine it for yourself and compare what he writes to what I say in this review.

Let’s start with the quotation given above, here it is again:

... many discerning Christians have concluded that apostles do not exist today. Let it be known, however, that God has raised up genuine apostolic workers in this century.<sup>15</sup>

At the heart of the matter is how we define the word ‘apostle’. Even within the New Testament it is used in different contexts and has different meanings. If we are not careful, we will be like a magician making it appear and disappear at will. This is exactly what Viola does: he gives it a very special meaning but then uses it in the classic New Testament sense at the same time.

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<sup>14</sup> GotQuestions

<sup>15</sup> Finding Organic Church; pg. 113

As we have seen the title of this chapter is “Apostolic Covering vs. Apostolic Help”. He is talking about Apostolic leadership, in other words about a role or office in the New Testament. The classic passage is Ephesians 4:11ff.

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 4:11-13)

Paul is speaking about a clearly defined leadership structure ordained, not by man, but by God Himself. Our interest here is in the office of the apostle. John Gill, a widely respected Bible commentator from the 19<sup>th</sup> century has this to say about this office as taught in verse 11 (my emphasis).

And he gave some apostles, That is, he gave them gifts by which they were qualified to be apostles; who were such as were immediately called by Christ, and had their doctrine from him, and their commission to preach it; and were peculiarly and infallibly guided by the Spirit of God, and had a power to work miracles for the confirmation of their doctrine; and had authority to go everywhere and preach the Gospel, and plant churches, and were not confined to anyone particular place or church; **this was the first and chief office in the church, and of an extraordinary kind, and is now ceased;**<sup>16</sup>

In addition, there is much that we can learn from the Greek word translated as ‘apostle’. In Eph. 4:11 quoted above, the Greek word is ‘Apostolos’. The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament<sup>17</sup> (often referred to as ‘Kittle’) has some very relevant information on this word. Any emphasis is mine.

The Meaning.

- a. The NT contains no trace of the common nonbiblical use for the act of sending or, figuratively, the object. **Always signified is the person sent with full authority**. The Greek gives only the form, the Hebrew the content. The legal element entails that the reference is only to males, although by the course of things women might have been apostles too (see D.2.).
- b. There is full identity between apóstolos and šālī(a)ḥ in Jn. 13:16, **where apóstolos denotes one who is legally charged to represent the person and cause of another** (cf. the juxtaposition of doúlos and kýrios, apóstolos and pémpsas).
- c. **apóstolos can refer to the commissioned representative of a congregation**, as in 2 Cor. 8:23 or Phil. 2:25 (Epaphroditus).
- d. apóstolos also denotes bearers of the NT message, first the twelve (Acts 1:26) sent out by Jesus himself (cf. Mt. 10:2; Mk. 6:30), with Peter their head and

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<sup>16</sup> John Gills Exposition of the Entire Bible Ephesians 4:11

<sup>17</sup> For more on “Kittle” please see my review of “Reimagining Church.” The web address is in the text above.



Jerusalem their center (Acts 8:1); then the first Christian missionaries, as in Acts 14:4, 14 (Paul and Barnabas), Gal. 1:19 (James), Rom. 16:7 (Junias and Andronicus), and 1 Cor. 15:7 (a wider circle). Paul and Barnabas are sent by the congregation at Antioch (Acts 13:1ff.), **but the apostle is properly an apostle of Jesus Christ, and this larger group shares with the twelve the common basis of a meeting with the risen Lord and commissioning by him personally. Hence Apollos and Timothy are not called apostles, but Paul's apostleship is accepted at Jerusalem (Acts 15; Gal. 2:9; cf. 1 Cor. 15:8ff.). Apostles, then, are not officials of the church but officers of Christ for its upbuilding, and in this sense they are comparable to the OT prophets (Eph. 2:20; 3:5). "In the church" in 1 Cor. 12:28 refers to the whole body whose head is Christ (cf. Eph. 1:22; Col. 1:18; Eph. 4:11), not to the local congregation.**<sup>18</sup>

Please notice the extensive references to the New Testament scriptures in the quote above. These are not pragmatic but factual references. Not someone's nebulous ideas but results based on careful and detailed study. These conclusions differ radically from Viola's.

According to the New Testament being an eyewitness was one of the qualities that an apostle had to have in order to hold that office. For example, Acts 1:21-26 relates how Matthias was chosen to replace Judas as one of the original 12 disciples chosen by Christ Himself. Only those who had been with Christ from the beginning of His ministry were eligible as applicants. Paul as well, had to be an eyewitness. As we saw from Kittle neither Apollos nor Timothy qualified. Paul was singled out by the Lord Jesus who revealed Himself to him and commissioned him as an apostle. Based on this revelation and commission Paul could claim this title (Romans 1:1, Galatian's 1:1 etc.). Paul brings out the finality of God's choice of himself in the following passage:

For I delivered to you **as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,** and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also. For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (1 Corinthians 15:3 – 9)

Paul starts this passage with these words "... **I delivered to you as of first importance what I also **received,**" In Galatian's 1:11-12 Paul some more detail on this:**

For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>18</sup> Kittel, G., Friedrich, G., & Bromiley, G. W. (1985). Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (p. 70). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

I will look at this in more detail below. The point here is that Paul was ordained by Christ Himself.

There are other things that distinguish an apostle from others, for example the miracles that supported the authority (as was the case with the Lord Jesus Himself). Taken together with that of being an eyewitness and the commissioning by Christ Himself this was an exclusive group! Christians down through the ages are correct in believing that the office of the apostle stopped existing when the last of the eyewitnesses ordained by Christ died. The apostle John being the last as far as we know. Based on Viola's own statement that there are "genuine apostolic workers in this century" a fact comes to the surface. What Viola calls an 'apostle' or 'apostolic worker' is different from what the New Testament defines. It's his idea not what the New Testament teaches.

Viola goes on to reflect on the apostle Paul's ministry. He says: "One of the **most dynamic** features of Paul's pattern of church planting was his **consistent subjection** to other Christians."<sup>19</sup> After one of the most Scripture-orientated sections (in the sense of actually giving some whole verses and listing others) of the whole book he concludes "**So Paul was not an authoritarian personally.**"<sup>20, 21</sup>

We learned a lot about what the New Testament teaches with regard to apostles in previous paragraphs. Based on this knowledge if these statements of Viola's are true Paul could not have been an apostle in the New Testament sense of the word. It's that simple! What we learned above and what Viola is teaching are two mutually exclusive doctrines.

That being said, what does the New Testament teach us about Paul and his style of ministry?

Notice that Paul was Christ's ambassador, His spokesman and representative. He had the very authority of Christ Himself.

Then after an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also. It was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but I did so in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain. But not even Titus, who was with me, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. But it was because of the false brethren secretly brought in, who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage. But we did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel would remain with you. But from those who were of high reputation (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—well, those who were of reputation contributed nothing to me. But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised (for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles), and recognizing the grace that had been

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<sup>19</sup> Finding Organic Church; pg. 99 (my emphasis)

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. pg. 101

<sup>21</sup> Emphasis is mine in both quotes

given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. They only asked us to remember the poor—the very thing I also was eager to do. But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. (Galatians 2:1-11)

**Paul claimed almost total independence from the church at Jerusalem.** For fourteen years he exercised an independent ministry. By this point Paul was well into his ministry. His only reason for seeking out what could be termed “A different but related established church” was a direct command (revelation) from God himself. The importance of apostolic authority and Paul’s equal status with the Jerusalem apostles is clearly in view. Once Paul had been accepted **as an equal at the apostolic level** fellowship could and did take place. **Fellowship was secondary to authority.** Authority, given to Paul directly from the risen Lord was the base upon which all else was built. All the apostles, Peter, James, John etc. founded churches and did the same basic work Paul did, based on the same commission from the Lord Jesus Christ. The book under review singles out Paul in many places for that reason I’m centering on that particular apostle.

We have seen how Paul works with established leaders. How does Paul speak to members of a local Church? Let’s look at one example. Does it show that Paul submitted himself to them, that they were equal with Paul? Did Paul exercise no real authority on this occasion?

Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And so **I direct** in all the churches. ... Now concerning virgins I have **no command** of the Lord, but I give **an opinion** as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy. (1 Corinthians 7:17, 25)

Let’s look at some of the Greek words in the text above. “Direct” translates the Geek word *diatasso*. This is Strong’s number 1299. The NASB dictionary gives it these meanings: “*to arrange thoroughly, i.e. to charge, appoint*:—arrange(1), arranged(1), commanded(3), direct(1), directed(4), gave orders(2), giving instructions(1), ordained(1), ordered(1), orders(1).<sup>22</sup> In the context Paul goes on to speak of a “command of the Lord”. The Greek word there is ‘epitage’ (Strong’s number 2003) and the meaning is command: authority. The third word “opinion” comes from the Greek word ‘gnome’ which most often means decision, decree. It can also mean opinion, judgment, purpose and intent. Even the ‘weakest’ word “opinion” is authoritative. This highlights just **how very authoritative** the other two commands are. There is no hint of equality, Paul is laying down the New Testament Law as given by the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul is in total command.

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. (1 Corinthians 9:1-2)

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas, R. L. (1998). [\*New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek dictionaries : updated edition\*](#). Anaheim: Foundation Publications, Inc.

Here as well Paul sets himself apart, and in a very significant way, from the church at Corinth. He is the worker; they are the worked material. He is the apostle; they are the ones who are subject to his authority.

Prof. Robertson Smith<sup>23</sup> sums up Paul's independence and authority in a coherent manner:

No characteristic of the apostle is more marked than this. He went on his way unmoved alike by prejudiced and narrow-minded bigotry within the Church, or by armed and persecuting hostility without. Whether he is confronted with the worse than heathen libertinism that threatened to corrupt the Churches of Greece, or by the half-converted Pharisees who would have offered up the universality of the gospel to the prejudices of a sect; whether he stands before a Roman officer or before an infuriated mob; whether he is exposed to the sneers of a scoffer like Agrippa, or the sordid venality of an unjust judge like Felix — in all circumstances and under every temptation to make concessions to the prejudice or passions of those around him, Paul maintained an undaunted fearlessness of bearing, and stands forth with vigorous self-reliance, refusing to submit to the control of others his conviction of duty, refusing to swerve a hairsbreadth from the path his conscience marks out for him.<sup>24</sup>

We will look at one other example of where Viola's teaching disagrees with what the Bible teaches. There are many examples. I choose these few, more or less at random. The following quotation is from Chapter 7 where he talks about applying the New Testament to today's church movement. Within the context of the salvation of souls, and the importance of that he says:

Put another way, **Paul's chief goal in preaching the gospel was to create Spirit-baptized communities that corporately expressed the Lord Jesus Christ on earth.**<sup>25</sup>

He then quotes two of his favorite authorities (see in the first section of the review on what these are like). Shortly after this he says:

... Paul's missional impulse was not the saving of lost souls ... it was to create Christian communities that fulfilled God's ageless purpose."<sup>26</sup>

For scriptural support he briefly references five scriptures. All five are given to support his statements quoted above. I will examine each of these passages comparing his conclusions to mine. His reason for quoting these passages is to bring the reader to the conclusion the salvation

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<sup>23</sup> William Robertson Smith FRSE was a Scottish orientalist, Old Testament scholar, professor of divinity, and minister of the Free Church of Scotland. He was an editor of the Encyclopædia Britannica and contributor to the Encyclopaedia Biblica.

<sup>24</sup> [https://biblehub.com/sermons/auth/smith/paul%27s\\_fearless\\_independence.htm](https://biblehub.com/sermons/auth/smith/paul%27s_fearless_independence.htm)

<sup>25</sup> Finding Organic Church; pg. 134 (my emphasis)

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. pg.135

and community are inseparable. The individual aspect of salvation is to give way to the corporate expression. Unlike Viola I will give some context to the passages:

*References 1 and 2 - Acts 5:14 and 11:24*

### **Acts 5:14 in context**

And great fear came over **the whole church**, and over all who heard of these things. At the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people; and they were all with one accord in Solomon's portico. But none of the rest dared to associate with them; however, the people held them in high esteem. **And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number,** (Acts 5 11-14)

### **Acts 11:24 in context**

So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and **large number who believed turned to the Lord**. The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch. Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord; for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. **And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord**. And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul; and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch. (Acts 11:19-26)

Viola omitted at least one important passage from the Book of Acts. I am adding it here because of its importance. The quoted verses below come directly after Peter preaches a powerful sermon. They are the affect of what Peter preached.

### **Acts 2:37-44**

Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent, **and each of you** be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of **your** sins; and **you** will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. "For the promise is for **you and your children** and for **all who are far off**, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself." And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, "**Be saved from this perverse generation!**" So then, **those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. They were continually devoting**

**themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.** Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common;

*Reference number 3 - Acts 8:26ff*

This section of Acts relates how God intervened in a special way to save an Ethiopian eunuch. This passage should be familiar to most readers. If not, I encourage you to look up the passage in Acts 8:25 to 40.

Viola uses this scripture to try and convince us that this is the sole place in the whole of the New Testament where a person was singled out and saved. In other words, this is the only place where salvation and community are separated. To Viola this is an anomaly, a freak occurrence. The reference is not given to edify but to warn.

The passages above form a unit; they are all from the Book of Acts and they all deal with the same subject matter. Because of this what they teach can be summarized together. We learn that though the ministry of the Apostles and other highly gifted men thousands of individual men and women found salvation. The saving of souls through the preaching of the gospel is the central theme of each and every quoted passage. This is a fact that can be clearly seen with even a casual reading of the texts. The Ethiopian eunuch salvation is not unique! It's an example of thousands upon thousands of a people being saved by the Holy Spirit through the preaching and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ, one at a time. **These passages also reveal a distinct, separate fact.** As a natural **consequence** of their salvation they joined with other Christians for "the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer". All this is in direct contradiction to what the book under review teaches.

*Reference number 4 - 1 Thessalonians 2:7-12*

Viola's purpose for the next two references is to show the reader that Paul was a father, mother and nursemaid **to the communities.**

But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children. Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to **impart** to you not only **the gospel of God** but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us. For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, **we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.** You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as father would his own children, **so that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.** (1 Thessalonians 2:7-12)

*Reference number 5 - 1 Corinthians 4:15*

I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers, **for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.** Therefore I exhort you, **be imitators of me.** (1 Corinthians 4:14-16)

To Paul the gospel of God, given through the Lord Jesus Christ, is the heart of soul of his ministry. One of the practical implications of this gospel is that it leads to a life of holiness (“walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you” and “be imitators of me.”) Any reference to father, mother or nurse is in the precise context of the gospel and sanctification. Salvation and holiness not community life was always at the heart of Paul’s ministry; in whatever situation Paul was in. Paul summarizes this in a powerful way in this missionary letter the Romans:

I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So, for my part, I am eager **to preach the gospel** to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for **it is the power of God for salvation** to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. **For in it the righteousness of God is revealed** from faith to faith; as it is written, “**BUT THE RIGHTEOUS man SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.**” (Romans 1:14-17)

At its very center, the gospel is about God’s means of saving individual people through the person and work of the Lord Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the Bible the gospel is universally linked to the salvation of individual people, not communities. For instance, the first four books of the New Testament are commonly called “The Gospels” John, the author of the Gospel of John, clearly states why he wrote his gospel:

Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but **these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.** (John 20:30-31)

The phrase “His name” carries the same meaning as it does when we pray in Jesus name. It’s nothing mystical at all. It’s all the actual facts we know, through all that the Bible teaches about His life, death and resurrection. John is writing to individual people who are not saved (that do not believe in Jesus in a saving way) so that they, one by one, can become saved through a knowledge of what John has revealed about Christ in his gospel.

The gospel is about the “Good News” that God has provided a way from death to life. A way from being totally alienated from God. From being under God’s eternal wrath, doomed for all eternity to hell. Its not about some quasi mystical manifestation of Jesus by small individual groups of Christian communities<sup>27</sup> (an “organic church”). Its about the Lord Jesus, what He is in actual fact, **as the written word** in the New Testament proclaims. Central to the gospel is the cross of Christ, His shed blood for the remission of our sins.

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<sup>27</sup> Please see my first book review as referenced in this review for why I use these terms.

No true believer, whoever or where ever they are wants to exist by him or herself. As the Bible clearly shows new believers are like new born babies, little children, indeed like sheep. How long can sheep exist without a Shepard? Not long at all. That is why the Holy Spirit has set apart specially gifted men to be leaders, sperate yet united to the flock to care and nurture it. **A natural consequence of salvation is the need to gather with other likeminded believers. True fellowship is however something very different to “Organic Church”. Fellowship and salvation are two distinct things.** Viola is dead wrong preaching is not to make “communities” it’s to save souls and if they are not saved to bring Glory to God none the less.

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things? For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God.

Like a good teacher I would like to give the reader some homework for this section. What does the Bible teach about Fellowship? Use 1 John 1 as a starting point. **Notice that it is in the physical as well as risen Jesus Christ,** Christ as pictured in the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament.

## Which Principles – Concluding Remarks

But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed! For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ. (Galatian’s 1:8-10)

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, *even* to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. 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. (John 1:12-14)

So far, this review has touched upon a few of the subjects presented in the book, mostly from part one. We have learned a lot about the academic figures that Viola uses to support his teaching. In addition, we have learned about how he uses the Bible; how that differs from a proper use of the Scriptures. Is there any value in examining other parts of the book?



Before I answer that I would like to use an illustration. For many people, owning and especially building a home is a cherished dream. To some that may be a mud hut with a thrashed roof or even a tin shack but for my purpose lets think of a typical new American house. When you are ready and have sufficient funds (God saves you and you become his child) you need two things: Land and a Builder (The Bible, what it teaches and true fellowship). Think of our Lords parable in Matthew 7:24-27 of the builder who built on sand. When you go out to buy land would you buy a swamp that could not be drained, an area of sand that would be washed away at the first storm, a toxic waste dump site? No of course you would not. Before you even began to lay the foundation, your dream home would be doomed if you chose land like that. Even if the land was good the foundation is still all important. Clay is cheap, sand even cheaper. Perhaps some ordinary pine wood on top of loose gravel. No, you would reject all but the best materials you could afford other wise you would not begin to build in the first place.

My point is that Viola provides neither suitable land or a suitable foundation. There is no real value in examining the rest of the book if we hope to build something out of it. This does however goes back to what I said at the beginning of this review. It's summed up in that one word "Pragmatism". To many the facts presented in this review just don't matter. If what he says works or if it's useful in one or more ways that's all that matters: go for it! Reader be warned: your house of cards will not stand on Gods day of Judgment. You may, like some of the leaders behind the "Organic Church", gain worldly successes, make tons of money, move many away from the truth as it is in Jesus, or just have a 'successful organic church' but there will be a price to pay when God judges the world. You and your work will be judged.

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:11- 15)

All that being said there is one reason to glance at a little more of the book. The reader may still be in doubt that this book is based on pragmatism.

Looking into the book we find that laying a foundation is like "preparing a womb where Christ can be born"<sup>28</sup> That its important how the chairs are arranged when we meet. We must be careful that the room temperature is suitable (not too hot or cold) during the meeting. That we sing but in a special way. We are actually told that the "concept" of Bible study started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>29</sup>! We need a new way to study the Bible, one that will work. A lot of pages go into defining just

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<sup>28</sup> Finding Organic Church; pg. 174

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. pg. 211

how we should sing. There should be a lot of fun involved. **This list goes on and on!** The reader can decide if this is a pragmatic approach or not.

Finally, I would plead with anyone who has taken the time to read even a part of this review. Don't take anything for granted! These things are so important! They are matters of life and death. I know of some, like my late Father, who commonly crossed roads without looking. I see this often when I am out walking or driving, people do it all the time. This is a matter of life and death. Doing so places a person in the hands of other drivers. Will they see you or not? With regard to the Bible: When you follow the teaching of anyone, myself included, you place yourself in their hands. Please look before you believe.