

# Frank Viola and the Organic Church

Feb/22/12

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The “organic church” is a concept promoted by Frank Viola and his associates. Part of the larger house church movement, it has been called “church with little organization, little structure, and loose doctrine,” which is true and would be dangerous enough in itself; but there is far more to the organic church than that, and the “far more” is insidious.

A major principle of the organic church is that every member has equal authority and there is no office of pastor or elder. It is defined as “Spirit-led, open-participatory meetings and nonhierarchical leadership” (Viola, *Pagan Christianity*). Each member, male or female, is encouraged to contribute to the services as “the Spirit moves.”

Viola has promoted the organic church in popular books such as *Jesus Manifesto* (2010, co-authored with Leonard Sweet), *Pagan Christianity* (2002 and 2008, co-authored with George Barna), *Reimagining Church* (2008), *The Untold Story of the New Testament Church*, *Revise Us Again*, *Finding Organic Church*, *Rethinking the Wineskin*, and *So You Want to Start a House Church*.

Having become increasingly aware of the growth and influence of “the organic church,” I read the first three of these books as research for this report, in addition to extensive online investigations.

The organic church claims to be geared toward putting God’s people under the headship of Christ, but in reality it woos them out from under the protection of God-called leaders, affiliates them with bogus “apostles” and “prophets,” and thrusts them unwittingly into the treacherous waters of end-time apostasy.

## **WHY ORGANIC CHURCH IS SPREADING**

There are many reasons why the organic church in particular and the “house

church” concept in general are spreading.

One is apostasy and compromise. Some of the criticisms of “traditional churches” are legitimate to various degrees in far too many cases. It is not wrong to reject human tradition and spiritual lifelessness and church growth techniques that have transformed churches into well-oiled machines in which the individual is a near meaningless cog.

A second reason why the organic church concept is growing is the abuse of pastoral authority. Some churches are not merely pastor-led; they are man-venerating cults. We have often warned about this error which exists far too commonly among fundamental Baptist churches.

Another reason for the rapid growth of the organic church is the “me” generation’s rebellion toward authority, which is prophesied in Scripture:

“This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves...” (2 Timothy 3:1-2).

Another reason for the growth of the house church movement is the lack of education in so many churches. The people aren’t grounded Biblically and aren’t educated sufficiently about doctrinal error. They aren’t taught how to interpret the Bible for themselves and how to deal with the abuse of Scripture by heretics. Thus they aren’t able to recognize and deal with the error represented by the house church movement. The average member of a professing Bible believing church comes into contact with heretics through Internet blogs, Christian bookstores, Christian radio, the influence of Christian friends, etc., and he isn’t able to deal effectively with the error. He is impressed with the false teacher’s use of Scripture, not understanding how they take verses out of context and otherwise abuse the Word of God.

## **A CHALLENGE**

Some things about the organic church *COULD* be a challenge to a New Testament church, though that is not what the organic church is intended to be. I want to deal with these, though, for the sake of individuals who might be tempted to joined an organic church or something like it.

The organic church teaching *could* be challenging in its emphasis on the “one-another ministry” which should characterize a New Testament church.

“admonish one another” (Rom. 15:14)  
 “by love serve one another” (Gal. 5:13)  
 “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal. 6:2)  
 “forbearing one another in love” (Eph. 4:2)  
 “forgiving one another” (Eph. 4:32)  
 “comfort one another” (1 Th. 4:18)  
 “edify one another” (1 Th. 5:11)  
 “exhort one another” (Heb. 10:24)

The church is not just a head; it is a body and each member is a necessary member. The New Testament church is a temple, and each member is a spiritual stone (1 Cor. 12:12; 1 Peter 2:5). Ministry-gifted men--pastors, preachers, teachers, evangelists--are given to the churches to prepare the members for the work of the ministry and to protect them from the winds of false doctrine (Ephesians 4:11-16). A godly pastor is not in the church to hinder the Spirit’s working through the body of believers by exercising an oppressive type of “pastoring” that cripples godly vision and initiative on the part of members in the body. His role in the church is rather to build up the body so that it prospers spiritually and all of the various gifts are functioning within biblical boundaries and Christ can be Lord throughout the entire body to freely accomplish His work. Godly pastors have the goal of maturing the flock so that they can participate in the work of the Lord to the fullest extent possible. They do not want to tie the saints down but to liberate them to their greatest potential in Christ. Pastoral authority is “to edification, and not to destruction” (2 Cor. 13:10). Too many pastors are so jealous of their authority that they hinder and cripple the work of God by turning the ministry of the Lord into a near “one man show,” and the people rise only to the level of being the servants to his vision and never mature to the true liberty in Christ that we see in Scripture. Brethren, these things ought not to be. (See “The Pastor’s Authority and the Church Member’s Responsibility,” which is available from the Way of Life web site -- wayoflife.org.)

The organic church *COULD* also be a challenge to a church to re-examine itself in light of Scripture and to refuse to follow any tradition merely for tradition’s sake. We need to do this because it is so easy to mistake tradition for Scripture and to get into a rut. We Baptists say, “The Bible is the sole authority for faith and practice,” but all too often we fight for things that are mere human traditions (e.g., soul winning techniques, youth ministries, Sunday School programs, Vacation Bible School, Bible Colleges, Mission Boards) as fiercely as or even more fiercely than we fight for faith and

practice based on solid Scripture.

The fact is that much of what we do in church is a matter of soul liberty and a matter of practicality rather than spiritual law. As for Sunday School or VBS or a children ministry or a youth ministry or a seniors' ministry or a college & career ministry, the Bible says nothing about these one way or the other. The churches are commanded to preach the gospel to every creature, to teach God's people "to observe all things whatsoever I have taught you," and to train faithful men (Mark 16:15; Matthew 28:20; 2 Tim. 2:2), and largely it is up to each church to determine *how* to get this job done within the boundaries of Scripture. Sunday School is neither scriptural nor unscriptural. It is simply a program that can be used to accomplish the Lord's Great Commission or it is a program that can be a waste of time, depending on whether it is Spirit-empowered and Bible-based and taught by the right people or whether it is a lifeless religious ritual that bores people to tears. I have seen Sunday Schools that are operated both ways. The same is true for VBS and youth ministries and other sorts of "programs."

Many "home church" or "family church" people who have rejected Sunday Schools and youth ministries are as tradition-bound as those who use these ministries. They avoid these ministries "out of conviction," claiming that it is only the job of families to teach children and youth; but there is absolutely nothing in Scripture that forbids churches from teaching them. In fact, the churches have a commission from Christ to teach everyone. Christ put no limitation on the Great Commission as far as the age of those who are to be taught the gospel and disciplined in the "all things" that Christ has delivered to us in the canon of the New Testament faith. Thus, it is not only the job of parents to teach children and youth; it is also the job of the churches, and if they decide to do this through a Sunday School or a biblically-operated youth ministry of some sort, no one can say it is wrong and no one can rightly condemn it. While it is wrong to have a worldly, entertainment-oriented youth ministry, because such a thing has no authority in Scripture and in fact is condemned in Scripture (e.g., "be not conformed to this world," Romans 12:2); it is not wrong to have a "youth ministry" as such if it is designed and geared toward fulfillment such commandments as Mark 16:16 and Matthew 28:19-20. The same is true for Sunday School.

I have attended several "family home churches," and I have always been impressed with two thoughts: First, it is a good thing that these families are doing with their own families. To "focus on the family" in the sense of

building a godly home and a strong marital relationship and raising children as disciples of Christ is a wonderful thing. It is very important. It is very scriptural and right. But the second thought I have been impressed with is that these families aren't fulfilling the Great Commission. What about all of the children and youth in the community that don't have the advantage of living in a godly home? What is that "family home church" doing for them? What about the needs of children even within the membership of the church? Are they all being properly taught at home? Is every one of the families attending the "home church" really doing an effective job? Usually not. There are usually some families that have their "stuff together," and there are families attracted to that type of church that are very weak.

I think about our church plants in South Asia, where we have been missionaries since 1979. Take our youngest church. There are about 60 adult and teen members. Many of the families are broken. There are men whose Hindu wives left them to raise the children. There are women whose husbands are unsaved. There are teens whose parents are unsaved. There are unmarried young people. The church does everything it can to disciple the various groups of people who exist in these imperfect situations. We don't get young people together to play soccer; we get them together to learn God's Word and to show them how to find God's will, and we have authority from Christ to do this. There are also children who live near the church and who attend the services. If the church didn't provide Sunday School or children's Bible classes of some sort, who would teach those children? Someone might say that the church families could teach them. Sure, they can if they have a desire to do so, and more power to them if they want to do this type of thing. But the church can also teach them! In fact, in light of Christ's commandments, the church *must* teach them.

Returning to the theme of soul liberty (referring to things not specifically forbidden in Scripture) and practicality, most of the things we do in church services fall into the realm of practicality. We are told to do all things decently and in order (1 Cor. 14:40), but we are not given a specific "order of service." We are told to pray, but we are not told specifically to have a Wednesday evening prayer service. We could have a prayer meeting on Friday or on every day of the week. When we do meet for prayer, we can meet for prayer only or for a combination of prayer and teaching and preaching and whatever. It's not spelled out in Scripture. Each church makes those decisions before the Lord in light of its particular situation, and when the church leaders make that determination the members obey because that

is what God tells them to do, as long as the activity is not contrary to the Bible's teaching (Heb. 13:17). (The Bible's silence on something is not a law *against* it.) We are told to preach and teach the Word, but we are not specifically told to have a preaching service on Sunday morning and Sunday evening and Wednesday evening. Those are issues of practicality that each church decides before the Lord. All too often traditions that start right deteriorate into empty lifeless rituals, and we need to guard against this.

Thus, for a church to analyze what it is doing in the light of God's Word and by seeking the Lord's guidance is important. Times change. Cultures change. Neighborhoods change. A church's composition changes. We are foolish just to continue doing something because "we have always done it." That is a recipe for lukewarmness followed by spiritual death.

At the same time, church traditions are not wrong in themselves as long as they are not contrary to the clear teaching of God's Word.

## **AN ATTACK**

I want to hasten to say, though, that the organic church is not intended to be a challenge and help to a "traditional" Bible-believing church in any sense. Its object is not to help *revive* churches but to *replace* them. The organic church's criticism of Bible-believing churches is not intended to be constructive. John Beardsley rightly observes that the organic church's criticism of churches is "propaganda to mislead the reader for another agenda" ("Doctrines of Devils and Men," Aug. 30, 2011).

In fact, the organic church is a vicious attack upon every Bible-believing church. It is an attack upon the office of pastor/elder, an attack upon owning a building, an attack upon having a church larger than 20 or 30, an attack upon preaching, an attack upon having the Lord's Supper less often than weekly and as a "ritual" as opposed to a full-blown meal, an attack upon restricting the woman's ministry, and many other things.

Frank Viola makes no secret of the fact that he wants to encourage people to leave "traditional" Bible churches.

Consider some statements from his writings:

"We are making an outrageous proposal: that the church in its

contemporary, institutional form has neither a biblical nor a historical right to function as it does” (*Pagan Christianity*, location 110).

“Let’s suppose the authors of this book attend your church service. And let’s suppose that the Lord Jesus Christ puts something on our hearts to share with the rest of His body. Would we have the freedom to do so spontaneously? Would everyone else have the freedom to do it? If not, then we would question whether your church service is under Christ’s headship” (*Pagan Christianity*).

According to Viola, if your church has appointed leaders who wield authority and who would not allow anyone to speak out at any time, then your church is unscriptural and should not exist.

Consider Viola’s description of one of his “organic church” services:

“A Christian sister began the meeting by starting a song. And everyone sang with her ... a sister stood up and began sharing. ... two other sisters interrupted her and shared insights out of their own experience ... a brother stood up to speak ... He spoke for several minutes, and then a sister stood up and began adding to what he had shared. ... no one was leading this gathering” (*Reimagining Church*, pp. 69, 70).

Viola is wrong in claiming that no one was leading this gathering. In fact, the gathering was obviously being led by the most forward, outspoken women!

And Viola is hypocritical in his claim that a church must allow anyone to speak out. As we will see, he hates dispensational theology and separatism, and if a dispensational fundamentalist were to attend one of the organic churches that is under his “apostleship” and try to speak out on the imminency of Christ’s return and the necessity to win souls before it is too late and to urge the people to separate from every form of end-time apostasy, such an individual would soon be shut down!

Viola’s organic church principle makes much of 1 Corinthians 14:26 --  
 “How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying.”

Let's consider the context of this verse, which is the first principle of sound Bible interpretation. Paul was not saying that this is to be the standard pattern for every church service in every congregation throughout the age; he was simply stating that this was the pattern for the services AT CARNAL CORINTH WHERE SPIRITUAL GIFTS WERE BEING ABUSED.

Paul was not writing to encourage them to continue what they were doing; he was writing to correct what they were doing! He didn't say, "How is it then, brethren? when ye come together LET EVERY ONE OF YOU HAVE a psalm, have a doctrine..." He didn't write this as a commandment. Rather, he simply described what they were doing in the context of correcting it. He corrected their practice by limiting tongues speaking in two ways (verses 27-28) and by restricting both tongues speaking and prophesying to men only (verses 34-35).

Paul further stated in the same context that both tongues speaking and prophesying were temporary gifts that would vanish away (1 Cor. 13:8). The book of Acts tells us that this happened even before the death of the apostles. Tongues speaking is only mentioned three times in Acts: on Pentecost (Acts 2:3-4), at the conversion of Cornelius and his friends (Acts 10:46), and at the baptism of Apollos' disciples at Ephesus (Acts 19:6). That's it for tongues! About A.D. 58 is the last time tongues speaking is mentioned in the divinely-inspired history of the early churches.

It was about that time that Paul wrote his first epistle to the church at Corinth to correct their abuse of the spiritual gifts. Tongues aren't mentioned in any other New Testament epistle. Paul explained that tongues speaking was a sign to the unbelieving Jewish nation that God was doing a new thing (1 Cor. 14:20-22). The tongues were a fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah 28:11-12, where the prophet said that though God would speak to Israel in other tongues, they would *not* hear. This is exactly what happened. With the establishment of the first churches and the destruction of the Jewish Temple, the need for the sign was finished and church history tells that both tongues speaking and prophesying (in the sense of imparting new revelation) vanished except among heretical cults. Tongues ceased because their function as a sign to Israel was no longer needed, and prophesying ceased because the canon of Scripture was completed and the only type of prophesying that is needed now is the proclamation of Scripture.

We have testimony times in our churches, when the men are encouraged to share things with the congregation. We also allow the women to give testimonies in some services and to share prayer requests as long as they don't teach. But none of this replaces the authoritative preaching and teaching of God's Word by the pastors and other ministry-gifted men, which is specifically commanded in Scripture (e.g., 2 Timothy 4:1-2; Titus 2:15; 1 Peter 4:11).

## **THE ORGANIC CHURCH IS AN ATTACK UPON THE PASTORATE**

The organic church is preeminently an attack upon and rebellion against the office of pastor/elder.

Consider the following quotes from Frank Viola's writings:

"The pastor is an obstacle to every-member functioning" (Frank Viola and George Barna, *Pagan Christianity*).

"There is not a single verse in the entire New Testament that supports the existence of the modern-day pastor" (*Pagan Christianity*).

"Pastor is not an office or a title" (*Pagan Christianity*).

"Up until the second century, the church had no official leadership. ... The Christians themselves led the church under Christ's direct headship" (*Pagan Christianity*).

"In the first century, the laying on of hands merely meant the endorsement or affirmation of a function, not the installment into an office or the giving of special status" (*Pagan Christianity*).

"First-century elders were merely endorsed publicly by traveling apostolic workers as being those who cared for the church. Such acknowledgment was simply the recognition of a function. It did not confer special powers. Nor was it a permanent possession" (*Pagan Christianity*).

"We believe the pastoral office has stolen your right to function as a

full member of Christ's body" (*Pagan Christianity*).

"The one who plants a New Testament-styled church leaves that church without a pastor, elders, a music leader, a Bible facilitator, or a Bible teacher" (*Pagan Christianity*).

"Nowhere in the New Testament do we find grounds for a church meeting that is dominated or directed by a human being" (Frank Viola, *Reimagining Church*, p. 53).

"First-century elders were simply spiritually mature men" (*Reimagining Church*, p. 171).

"... the New Testament knows nothing of an elder-ruled, elder-governed, or elder-directed church. And it knows even less about a pastor-led church. The first-century church was in the hands of the brotherhood and the sisterhood. Plain and simple" (*Reimagining Church*, p. 187).

"All in all, the New Testament knows nothing of an authoritative mode of leadership" (*Reimagining Church*, p. 198).

"... the Bible never teaches that God has given believers authority over other believers" (*Reimagining Church*, p. 214).

Viola goes to great lengths in his attempt to prove the previous statements, but in the process he twists Scripture out of context, abuses "the Greek," and ignores the plain meaning of God's Word in the most frightful, heretical manner.

The fact is that the terms "pastor," "elder," and "bishop" are used interchangeably in Scripture and refer to the same office in the New Testament church (1 Timothy 3:1). The terms emphasize three different aspects of the church leader's ministry. As pastor, he is a shepherd; as elder, he is a mature example; as bishop, he is an overseer. The pastor/elder is not merely a spiritually mature church member. He must meet certain specific qualifications (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1) and must be ordained (Titus 1:5). The apostle Paul set the pattern for this with the ordination of elders in the churches he started on his first missionary journey (Acts 14:21-23). And there is no hint that the elders were ordained as some sort of temporary

function.

While elders are warned not to abuse their authority (e.g., 1 Peter 5:1-3; 3 John 9-11), they do have authority and will be held accountable to God for exercising it in a godly manner. The believers are to obey them that have the rule over them (Heb. 13:17), and that verse means exactly what the King James Bible says it means. The Greek word for “rule” here (*hegeomai*) is also translated “chief” (Acts 14:12), “governor” (Acts 7:10), and “esteem” (1 Thess. 5:13).

There are certain men in the churches with ruling authority, and the saints are to submit to them as long as they are leading according to God’s Word. Their authority is not their own opinion; their authority is God’s Word (Heb. 13:7). God’s people are to honor them that are “over you in the Lord” (1 Thes. 5:12-13). Obviously not every member has the same authority. Elders who “rule well” are to be given double honor (1 Timothy 5:17). Obviously elders are rulers.

These passages are unambiguous and totally refute the “organic church” premise and no amount of wolfish Scripture twisting will change this fact.

At the same time, self-willed men who exalt themselves and rule according to their own thinking rather than God’s Word and who are proud, demanding loyalty to themselves rather than to Christ and refusing to allow the people to prove all things by God’s Word, are not Scriptural pastors and are not qualified to lead God’s people.

Frank Viola further says it is wrong for a church to support a pastor financially.

“... the clergy salary has no New Testament merit ... it runs against the grain of the entire New Covenant” (*Pagan Christianity*).

“Paul waived this right because he didn’t want to burden any church financially while he served it” (*Reimagining Church*, p. 180).

In fact, God’s people are instructed to give double honor to elders who rule well and the context makes it clear that this refers to money (1 Timothy 5:17-18). Paul taught that “the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:14). Paul received support from

churches (e.g., Philippians 4:14-16). At times he refused to accept support, but this was not because it was wrong for a preacher to be financially supported; it was because in certain situations it would have been detrimental to the ministry to have received support (1 Cor. 9:15). Paul did urge the elders at Ephesus to work with their own hands (Acts 20:33-35), but this does not contradict what he wrote in 1 Timothy 5:17-18 and 1 Corinthians 9:14 and elsewhere. Pastors should not serve Christ for money and should guard against covetousness in their daily lives; they should always be ready to “work with their own hands” and to do whatever is necessary to further the gospel. I know many godly pastors who work a second job and live very frugally in order to carry on the ministry, and I know many godly pastors who are rightly recompensed “double” by flocks who are capable of doing so. Both of these scenarios are Scriptural.

The bottom line is that the office of pastor/elder is a biblical one and an essential one in the New Testament church and God’s people should show great honor to those who are doing the work of God in a humble, godly manner.

The issue of prophets and apostles is an issue of charismatic heresy. There are no apostles today in the sense of men who wield authority over the churches as the Lord’s apostles did in the first century. Those were men who had been individually appointed by Christ and had seen the risen Christ (1 Cor. 9:1). They had miracle signs to authenticate their office (2 Cor. 12:12). Together with the prophets, those apostles laid the foundation of the church, completed the canon of Scripture, and when they died those offices ceased. The Bible tells us that there are only 12 apostles in this sense for ever (Rev. 21:14).

The Greek word “apostolos” is also used in a general sense to describe men who are messengers of the churches, and in this general sense there are “apostles” today. They are also called “missionaries,” but they do not hold the office of a sign-gifted apostle and cannot be called the “apostles of the Lamb” (Rev. 21:14). They have no authority over the churches beyond the congregations that they actually plant.

The charismatic “apostles” are self-deceived impostors who are building the end-time harlot church.

As for how many pastor/elders a church must have, the Bible nowhere says.

It should therefore have as many as it needs and as many as the Lord calls. And as for how pastor/elders share authority when they are in the plural, that too is not spelled out in Scripture and is something that each church determines before the Lord and in light of its particular situation. Viola claims that “a senior pastor” is unscriptural, but he cannot prove that. It is something the Bible is silent on, and the Bible’s silence is not a law. In fact, a multi-headed body is a strange thing and in strictly practical terms it is more natural and reasonable that one man will have more authority than others.

Viola has no right to interfere with the business of churches by making laws where the Bible is silent.

### **THE ORGANIC CHURCH IS AN ATTACK ON PREACHING**

The organic church is also an attack on preaching. This makes sense, as the organic church is an assault on authority in the church, and biblical preaching is an authoritative ministry. Consider the following quotes from Viola’s writings:

“The Christian sermon was borrowed from the pagan pool of Greek culture” (Frank Viola and George Barna, *Pagan Christianity*).

“The sermon preserves the unbiblical clergy mentality” (*Pagan Christianity*).

“The sermon often stalemates spiritual growth. Because it is a one-way affair, it encourages passivity” (*Pagan Christianity*).

“The Barna Group has shown that sermons are generally ineffective at facilitating worship, at drawing people closer to God, and at conveying life-changing information to those in the audience” (*Pagan Christianity*).

Mr. Viola and Mr. Barna are wrong. God has ordained authoritative preaching and teaching.

“I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove,

rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine” (2 Timothy 4:1-2).

“These things speak, and exhort, and rebuke with all authority. Let no man despise thee” (Titus 2:15).

“If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God” (1 Peter 4:11).

Speaking as the oracles of God refers to speaking with the very authority of God’s Word itself (Romans 3:2).

The organic church wants to replace authoritative preaching with non-authoritative “sharing.” A dogmatic “thus saith the Lord” is replaced with an anemic “it appears to me that this is the meaning, but what does the passage say to you?”

Along this same line, Viola and Barna claim that the pulpit itself is pagan, which is nonsense. The pulpit is simply a lectern for preaching and teaching. Viola and Barna complain that “the pulpit elevates the clergy to a position of prominence.” Maybe that is true in the Catholic Church, but it is not true in a Bible-believing church. In a Bible-believing church the pulpit does not exalt a man; it exalts the Word of God that the man is preaching. The preacher is to “reprove, rebuke, exhort” (2 Timothy 4:2). Preachers are to speak as the oracles of God (1 Peter 4:11). Preachers are to “speak, and exhort, and rebuke with all authority” (Titus 2:15). The God-called preacher who is proclaiming the Bible faithfully is God’s mouthpiece, and it is wise to honor this position and activity in the house of God.

## **THE ORGANIC CHURCH IS AN ATTACK UPON CHURCH BUILDINGS**

There is an entire chapter in *Pagan Christianity* on the supposed “error” of church buildings.

“The first churches consistently met in homes. Until the year 300 we know of no buildings first built as churches” (Frank Viola and George Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, location 333).

“All the traditional reasons put forth for ‘needing’ a church building collapse under careful scrutiny” (*Pagan Christianity*, location 596).

“There does not exist a shred of biblical support for the church building” (*Pagan Christianity*, location 602).

While it is true that Rome’s doctrine of “sacred” church buildings and cathedrals is unscriptural, this does not mean that there is anything wrong with a church having its own building. Viola is again making a law from the Bible’s silence, which he has no authority to do. Nowhere does the Bible forbid a congregation to own property or to have its own building.

Even if it were true that churches didn’t have buildings before the third century, this means nothing. Further, it is an argument largely from silence since most of the record from the first two centuries has not survived. Prior to the reign of Constantine, churches were generally not welcome in the Roman Empire, and the believers were bitterly persecuted. Under such a circumstance it would not have been practical for churches to have their own buildings. During our first ten years as missionaries in Nepal, it was illegal to preach the gospel and to baptize, so churches had to operate underground without drawing attention to themselves. In those days, most churches met in rented houses and did not have their own buildings. After the laws changed in the 1990s and there was more freedom, churches began to purchase property. It was a simple matter of practicality.

The bottom line is that *nowhere* does the New Testament indicate that it is wrong for a church to rent or own a building. If a church needs a building, let it have a building. It’s none of the business of Frank Viola or George Barna or anyone else.

Where a church meets is irrelevant. It can meet in a home, a barn, a store front, or its own building. Oftentimes new churches start out in homes and then move to their own building as they grow. It’s a simple matter of practicality, and to make a doctrine about buildings is to make laws beyond Scripture, which is true Phariseeism.

Viola and Barna also claim that the order of service itself is pagan. While an order of service *can* be a vain ritual, such as in Roman Catholic and some Protestant terms, an order of service itself is nothing but an order of service! We are commanded to do “all things decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:40). An order of service as such is a simple matter of practicality.

On the basis of the Bible's silence, Viola further condemns Sunday Schools, tithing, dressing up for church, altar calls, and other things, none of which are forbidden by the Bible.

### **SHEEP STEALING AND A PATH TO CONTROL**

In reality, the organic church is a sheep stealing movement. When a so-called organic church is started, it isn't usually started by winning the lost to Christ and discipling them by God-called preachers. An organic church is started by people who pull out of "traditional" churches and think they have the authority to be a church simply by meeting together with a few other people.

The organic church is more than a sheep stealing movement, though. It is a movement that is led by self-appointed "apostles."

Frank Viola calls for a "paradigm shift," which is a term used by emergents and New Agers to identify the type of dramatic change they are trying to instigate. It refers to replacing something old and established with something new and different. Viola writes:

"To borrow a term from scientific philosopher Thomas Kuhn, we need a 'paradigm shift' regarding the church before we can properly rebuild it. ... in my personal judgment, the church doesn't need renewal. It needs a complete overhaul. That is, the only way to fully renew the institutional church is **TO WHOLLY DISASSEMBLE IT AND BUILD SOMETHING FAR DIFFERENT**" (Frank Viola, *Reimagining Church*, pp. 272, 276).

Here we see Viola's true objective. To **BUILD** something requires **BUILDERS**. It requires **LEADERSHIP** and **CONTROL**. Something like this doesn't just happen on its own "organically."

At its heart, the organic church is not a "people's movement"; it is a heretical "apostolic movement."

Viola is part of a network of self-appointed apostles who are building the new paradigm. The organic church is just another plank in the large house of end-time apostasy.

“Every church in the first century had at its disposal an itinerant apostolic worker who helped navigate it through common problems. ... Present-day workers give similar guidelines to churches that are having difficulties in their meetings” (Frank Viola, *Reimagining Church*, p. 65).

“I had just spent a year and a half ministering Jesus Christ to this group in biweekly ‘apostolic meetings.’ The goal of that ministry was to equip this new church where it could function on its own--without any human headship” (*Reimagining Church*, p. 69).

Integral to the organic church philosophy is the doctrine that there should be only one church in each town or city. And guess what “church” this will be? And guess who will be in control of this church!

“God’s people have splintered themselves into masses of disjointed, unconnected congregations all operating independently of one another ... During the New Testament era, each church was completely unified. All the believers in a specific locale lived as members of one family” (Viola, *Reimagining Church*, p. 129).

The existence of “masses of disjointed, unconnected congregations” is both an issue of New Testament polity and a product of apostasy. Each church is supposed to be autonomous under its one head Jesus Christ. That’s what we see in Scripture. Thus, the fact that churches are “disjointed and unconnected” in polity is not a matter of concern; it is what the Bible demands.

Further, churches are instructed to hold to and contend for the one New Testament faith (Jude 3). They are to “allow no other doctrine” (1 Timothy 1:3), and they are warned that apostasy will explode at the end of the age, and this requires that Bible-believing churches be “disjointed” in fellowship from the majority of churches that are moving with the apostasy. Again, this “separatism” on the basis of doctrine is not a matter of concern; it is faithfulness to God’s Word.

Further, it was not true even in the earliest days of the churches that “all the believers in a specific locale lived as members of one family.” This statement ignores the fact that there were many false teachers and heretical sects even in the days of the apostles. They are mentioned and reprovved in

passages such as Acts 20; 1 Corinthians 15; 2 Corinthians 11; Galatians 1; Philippians 3; Colossians 2; 1 Timothy 1, 4 and 6; 2 Peter 2; 1 John 2; 1 John 4; 2 John; Jude; and Revelation 2-3. Some denied Christ's deity; some denied the resurrection; some denied the doctrine of godliness; some preached a false gospel, a false christ, or a false spirit; some abused the law. Some corrupted the Word of God (2 Cor. 2:17) and wrested the Scripture (2 Pet. 3:16).

This tells us that professing believers were far from united in the first century. Paul and Peter and John specifically warned the brethren to mark and avoid those who taught heresies. That means that they were to stay away from them. They were to be "disjointed and unconnected" from them! Paul even warned about many of the leaders of these sects by name (1 Timothy 1:20; 2 Timothy 1:15; 2:17-18).

Since that was true in the first century, how much more will it be true today in the midst of the apostasy predicted for the end of the age! Paul warned that "evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived" (2 Tim. 3:13). This describes the course of the church age in terms of the growth of apostasy.

Only heretics and ecumenists who want to create an unscriptural unity fret about "disjointed, unconnected congregations" more than about heresy and apostasy.

### **A BRIDGE TO END-TIME APOSTASY**

The effect of the organic church movement is to stir up dissatisfaction with "traditional" New Testament churches and to lead people into the treacherous waters of apostasy. There is no solid commitment to sound Bible doctrine, no protection from God-called pastors, just the vague "oversight" of mystical "apostles" who are actually wolves in sheep's clothing.

The waters of the organic church are treacherous indeed.

In just one of his books -- *Jesus Manifesto* -- Viola introduces his readers to a virtual who's who of ancient and end-time heretics: Karl Barth, Thomas Aquinas, Origen, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, John Henry Newman, Sören Kierkegaard, G.K. Chesterton, Thomas à Kempis, E. Stanley Jones, Roger Schutz (founder of Taizé), the "Cappadocian Fathers," Pope John Paul II,

Pope Benedict XVI, and Reinhold Niebuhr, to mention a few. All of these are quoted favorably without a hint of warning about their rank heresies.

Consider some of the heresies that we find in Frank Viola's own ministry and writings:

### **A Neo-orthodox view of the Bible**

It is no accident that Frank Viola frequently quotes Neo-orthodox theologians such as Karl Barth (who Viola calls "one of the greatest theologians of this century"), Reinhold Niebuhr, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Consider some statements about the Bible from Viola's writings:

"Chapters 1 and 2 [of Genesis] were never intended to be the battleground for the Creation-versus-evolution debate" (Frank Viola and Leonard Sweet, *Jesus Manifesto*, p. 9).

"[The Bible] does not offer a plan or a blueprint for living" (*The Jesus Manifesto*, p. 137).

"The Christian religion teaches that the Bible answers virtually every question that's brought to the sacred text. The problem with this line of thought is that the true God cannot fit into anyone's box" (*Jesus Manifesto*, p. 130).

"Truth is not a book ... or a creed ... Truth is a person. And Jesus is His name. Christianity, therefore, is not fundamentally about following a book" (*Jesus Manifesto*, p. 137).

"[The Bible] speaks anew to every age. It should be read in the light of new information and fresh discoveries. It must also be understood in community, not as an individual. ... Each age draws new insights from the Scriptures based on what that age brings to it. This means that revelation is always veiled in mystery. We bring to it our culture, our history, our gaze, and our glasses. The fundamentalist idea that the text has only one meaning is of relatively recent invention" (*Jesus Manifesto*, pp. 139, 140).

"... the New Testament doesn't supply us with a detailed blueprint for

church practice. It's a gross mistake, therefore, to try to tease out of the apostolic letters an inflexible code of church order that's as unalterable as the law of the Medes and Persians. Such a written code belongs to the other side of the cross" (Frank Viola, *Reimagining Church*, p. 244).

"The meaning of Christianity does not come from allegiance to complex theological doctrines, but a passionate love for a way of living in the world that revolves around following Jesus..." ("A Magna Carta for Restoring the Supremacy of Jesus Christ a.k.a. A Jesus Manifesto for the 21st Century Church" by Sweet and Viola)

This is pure Neo-orthodox heresy, which claims that the Bible itself is not infallible, that only Jesus is infallible, and that revelation is given to the individual directly rather than mediated through Scripture. The Bible becomes the Word of God only as we experience it as the Word of God. This denies what the Bible says about itself, that it is propositionally the infallible Word of God (e.g., 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:19-21). It also ignores the essential fact that we know nothing certain about Christ apart from the Bible. The Bible is not Jesus and it is not God and we don't worship it, but apart from the actual words of the Bible we are left with vain mysticism, and the ultimate authority ceases to be God's revelation of Himself in Scripture and instead becomes my intuition of the word of God.

Viola's Neo-orthodox heresy is evident in the following statement:

"The meaning of Christianity does not come from allegiance to complex theological doctrines, but a passionate love for a way of living in the world that revolves around following Jesus..." ("A Magna Carta for Restoring the Supremacy of Jesus Christ a.k.a. A Jesus Manifesto for the 21st Century Church" by Frank Viola and Leonard Sweet).

To set up following Jesus over against allegiance to Bible doctrine is a very dangerous heresy. Apart from sound Bible doctrine, how do we know that we are following the right Jesus in the right way of "living"? This statement by Viola and Sweet is an out-and-out commitment to blind mysticism and is a recipe for spiritual delusion at the hands of the one who transforms himself into an angel of light and who walketh about seeking whom he may devour (2 Cor. 11:14; 1 Pet. 5:8).

Viola's Neo-orthodox mysticism and heretical view of Scripture is a fundamental, cardinal error that could easily lead the members of his "house churches" into the realm of the New Age, where Leonard Sweet dwells.

### **An ill-defined gospel**

Viola talks a lot about the gospel but in the three books of his that I read he never defines the gospel in a scripturally-clear manner. In light of Paul's warnings about the danger of false gospels (2 Cor. 11:3-4; Galatians 1:6-9), this is a huge warning sign.

Viola says that it is insufficient to preach a "gospel that is centered on saving man's spirit/soul" (*Reimagining Church*, p. 137). He calls this a "man-centered gospel" and urges people to discard it (p. 149), but that is exactly the gospel that the New Testament emphasizes.

Viola says that "... there is no 'gospel' that is not a 'social gospel'" (*Jesus Manifesto*, p. 108), but this is patently false. The gospel teaches us to love our neighbors as ourselves, but that is the fruit of the gospel and not the gospel itself. Paul summarizes the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, and there is no "social gospel" in Paul's definition.

"For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures."

In his writings, Viola does not emphasize the issue of sin which is such an emphatic part of the true gospel. "Christ died FOR OUR SINS..."

It is no wonder that Viola speaks highly of emergents such as Brian McLaren and counts them as friends rather than reprovng them as heretics. McLaren says, "I don't think we've got the gospel right yet" ("The Emergent Mystique," *Christianity Today*, Nov. 2004, p. 40). In the book *What Is the Emerging Church?* we document the great confusion and heresy that surrounds the subject of the very gospel itself within the emerging church, and Viola is part of this confusion.

### **A radical ecumenism and a non-dogmatic view of doctrine**

The organic church preaches a radical ecumenism and its twin, which is a non-dogmatic view of doctrine. Consider the following statements:

“So, any church that welcomes some members of the body but rejects others is not fully receiving Christ” (Frank Viola and Leonard Sweet, *Jesus Manifesto*, p. 147).

“Though we have never discussed any of these issues, the two of us might disagree about many things--ecclesiology, eschatology, soteriology, economics, globalism, or politics. But in this book, we have sounded forth a united trumpet. We have sought to present the vision that has captured our hearts and that we wish to impart to the body of Christ” (*Jesus Manifesto*, p. 172).

Thus, Viola counts “soteriology” or the doctrine of salvation as a non-essential. His “vision” does not include a clear, settled doctrine of soteriology, ecclesiology (the church), or eschatology (prophecy).

Viola says,

“... making doctrinal purity the basis for fellowship typically ends up splintering the body of Christ even further. ... it’s fundamentally unbiblical and profoundly unchristian to go about scrutinizing our fellow brethren with a critical eye” (Viola, *Reimagining Church*, p. 126).

In fact, it is fundamentally biblical and profoundly Christian to obey God’s command to earnestly contend for the faith once delivered to the saints. Paul fought against false doctrine in practically every epistle he wrote and he oftentimes warned about false teachers and compromisers by name.

Viola says,

“I have many friends who are pioneering in the emerging church. And I applaud much of what they are saying, especially in the area of upholding a ‘generous orthodoxy’ that emphasizes accepting all Christians whom God has received” (*Reimagining Church*, p. 265).

*A Generous Orthodoxy* is the title of one of Brian McLaren’s books, and

Viola is promoting the same unscriptural ecumenism. In fact, Viola includes *A Generous Orthodoxy* in his list of “Best 100 Christian Books Ever Written” at his blog. McLaren claims that we can’t be sure if our doctrine is correct, so we should be generous rather than strict, but the Bible says we are to mark and avoid professing believers on the basis of doctrine (Romans 16:17); thus, it is obvious that we *can* “get it right.”

“We have learned a lot from different perspectives on Jesus: feminist theology, creation theology, process theology, liberation theology, narrative theology, postliberal theology, emergent theology” (*Jesus Manifesto*, p. 109).

Here Viola lists a breathtaking number of heretical end-time theologies and instead of condemning them, he says “we have learned a lot” from them. And yet he is called “an evangelical”!

“As you continue to attend ‘First Presbycharisbaptist,’ you quickly discover that in order to be fully accepted by its members, you must hold to their view of spiritual gifts. You must also hold to their view of election and the second coming of Christ. ... If a group of Christians demands anything beyond a person’s acceptance of Christ before admitting that person into fellowship, then that group isn’t a church in the biblical sense of the word. It’s a sect” (*Reimagining Church*, pp. 118, 119).

“The historic Christian creeds are an expression of the need to answer Jesus’ ‘Who do you say that I am?’ But that ‘you say’ is contextual. Each new generation, in every culture, is given a ‘you say’” (*Jesus Manifesto*, location 215)

“... the church doesn’t need rules established, laws passed, or wolves shot” (*Jesus Manifesto*, p. 25).

The non-doctrinal “church” envisioned by Frank Viola is apostate. Scripture is given for doctrine (2 Timothy 3:16-17). We are to preach doctrine (2 Timothy 4:2). We are to continue steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine (Acts 2:42). We are to allow no other doctrine (1 Timothy 1:3). We are to have one mind in the church (1 Cor. 1:10). We are to teach doctrine to faithful men who are to teach “the same” to others (2 Timothy 2:2). We are to mark and avoid them which teach contrary to apostolic doctrine (Romans 16:17).

We are to earnestly contend for the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

In reality, Viola is hypocritical in that he *does* care about doctrine and does reject others on the basis of doctrine. He cares about his doctrine of the organic church, writes book after book on this theme, judges every church by it, and divides believers on this basis.

### **Rejection of pre-tribulationism**

Like his friends in every branch of the emerging church, Viola hates dispensationalism and despises the doctrine of the imminent Rapture of New Testament saints.

“John Nelson Darby ... raised proof texting to an art form. In fact, it was Darby who gave fundamentalist and evangelical Christians a good deal of their presently accepted teachings” (Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*).

“Pretribulationist dispensationalism gave rise to the idea that Christians must act quickly to save as many souls as possible before the world ends” (*Pagan Christianity*).

“Imagine a church where the members don’t know one another’s views on the rapture. Imagine a church where the members don’t know one another’s theories on the millennium--and really don’t care to know them” (*Reimagining Church*, p. 131).

Viola never misses a chance to take a pot shot at a literal interpretation of prophecy with its imminent Rapture and the urgency to preach the gospel while there is opportunity, because this gets in the way of the creation of his “new paradigm,” which is kingdom building.

### **A false doctrine of Christian liberty**

Viola abuses “grace” and holds the Christian rock philosophy that replaces liberty with license. Note the following statements:

“I shall argue in this book, the New Testament contains no ... list of rules and regulations for Christians to follow” (Viola, *Reimagining*

*Church*).

“Sadly, many of us today combat problems and erroneous teachings with laws, rules, religious duty--and the mother of all religious tools: guilt” (Viola and Sweet, *Jesus Manifesto*, p. 25).

“Christ nailed to His bloody cross every law, every rule, and every regulation that would condemn the beloved people of God” (*Jesus Manifesto*, p. 32).

“... a church that is filled with leader-oholics, justice-oholics, commandment-oholics, and doctrine-oholics ... For Paul, his apostolate was not to advance a defining array of doctrines or a checklist of propositions. ... Christianity is a relationship with Jesus the Christ. When things go wrong, it’s not because we don’t understand certain doctrines or fail to follow particular commands” (*Jesus Manifesto*, p. 39).

While salvation is a free gift of God’s grace, salvation is *unto* good works (Eph. 2:8-10), and the New Testament is literally filled with laws, rules, and duties. The epistle to the Ephesians itself contains, by my count, 88 specific laws and duties in chapters 4-6. The believer does not obey the New Covenant by his own strength. He obeys through the power of the indwelling Christ, but that does not make the laws and duties of the New Testament any less real and binding. What Christ nailed to the cross was the Old Covenant, the Law of Moses, with its curses. It was a ministration of condemnation and death because it demanded perfect righteousness from sinners who cannot provide it (2 Cor. 3:7-9). The Old Covenant has no power over the New Testament believer (Romans 7; Gal. 3:24-25), but Jesus commanded the churches to teach the disciples to observe *all* things that He has commanded, and this refers to the commandments in the New Covenant (Matthew 28:18-20). Paul instructed Timothy that he was responsible to keep the New Covenant commandments without spot (1 Timothy 6:13-14). The New Testament is a law of grace and liberty, because the curse of the Old Covenant has been taken away, but it is a law nonetheless and every commandment in the New Testament epistles is binding. The doctrines are also binding. Paul instructed Timothy to allow “no other doctrine,” which is the very strictest concept of doctrinal purity (1 Tim. 1:3). In Revelation 2-3, when Christ addressed the seven churches, He condemned them for holding and countenancing false doctrine as well as for disobedience to particular

commandments.

### **A heretical doctrine of sanctification**

“So why do we preach rules, regulations, and laws instead of Christ? And why such an emphasis on ‘works’? Good works are simply fruit falling off a tree” (Viola and Sweet, *Jesus Manifesto*, p. 58).

“A person who is living by the tree doesn’t sit back and say, ‘Let me try to do good and avoid evil.’ Instead, he allows the life of God to flow within and through him. He yields to the instincts, promptings, and energy of that God-life” (*Jesus Manifesto*, p. 129).

The New Testament doesn’t preach rules *instead of* Christ; it preaches “rules” to show us the mind of Christ. Viola’s heretical doctrine of sanctification puts the professing believer into the driver’s seat and turns the liberty of Christ into license, because he feels that he is at liberty to follow his spiritual inclinations. If a believer tries to “yield to the instincts, promptings, and energy of the God-life” apart from defining the Spirit’s mind strictly according to Scripture, he becomes a mystic who moves according to his own interpretation of God’s will. As we will see, this is exactly what Viola promotes.

Good works in the believer’s life are indeed *the fruit* of abiding in Christ, but according to the New Testament’s instruction about sanctification good works are also *the means* of abiding in Christ (John 15:8-10)! Viola is preaching the heresy that there is one key to sanctification in Christian living. In his case it is the key of a mystical abiding in Christ that is not clearly defined by and bound by Scripture, whereas the New Testament presents *a multiple approach* to sanctification. There are many aspects to spiritual victory and neither Christ nor the writers of the New Testament epistles ever present it as any one thing. It is not only resting or not only abiding or whatever, it is abiding *and* resting *and* yielding *and* obeying *and* avoiding *and* pursuing, etc.

If there were any one “key” to sanctification, we can be sure that the apostles and prophets would have described it in precise and clear terms to the oft-struggling first century churches and they would have emphasized it in the Pastoral Epistles to the preachers who were in the midst of the battle. But we look in vain for such a “key.” Consider Romans 6-8. Here Paul describes

many things that are necessary for Christian growth and victory. We are to reckon ourselves dead with Christ and alive unto God (Rom. 6:11). We are to refuse to yield our bodies to unrighteousness (Rom. 6:13). We are to yield our bodies to righteousness (Rom. 6:13). We are to walk after the Spirit rather than the flesh (Rom. 8:4). We are to mortify the works of the flesh by the Spirit (Rom. 8:13).

Viola's doctrine of sanctification through merely "abiding" is part of his mystical approach to Christianity, which is not doctrinaire or tightly prescribed by Scripture. It consists of a vaguely defined yielding "to the instincts, promptings, and energy of the God-life," but when that is not strictly defined by the Bible it is pure mysticism. The professing believer actually becomes his own god even while professing to be submitted to Christ as Head.

Viola's doctrine of sanctification is also a heretical denial of the continuing reality of the "sin nature" in the Christian life. He says the believer is to "yield to the instincts, promptings, and energy of that God-life." This doctrine is true as far as it goes, but it fails to deal with the fact that there is an "old man" as well as a "new man" present in the Christian life, and the old man has its own instincts, promptings, and energy. Romans 6:16 instructs the believer to yield to obedience rather than to sin, which plainly implies that sin is still present and is giving its promptings and can be yielded to. In Ephesians 4:22-24 the believer is instructed to put off the old man and put on the new man, and this *process* is described as a necessary part of Christian growth. The "old man" or old nature is present in the believer and issues its evil promptings. As a believer, Paul testified that in his flesh dwelt no good thing (Rom. 7:18). John said that if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves (1 John 1:8).

In the born again Christian life, there are holy promptings and there are sinful promptings. The particular danger is that the sinful promptings are wrapped in deception. The Bible says the "heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked" (Jeremiah 17:9). This wickedness and deception that is a part of our fallen nature is still a reality in the believer's life, because the old fallen heart is still present.

Thus, it is not true that the believer is free merely to yield to the instincts and promptings that come to him. Rather, he must carefully test those promptings by God's Word to see if they are right or wrong and he must

continually reject the evil promptings.

Christian sanctification is not merely a matter of resting in the new man; it is spiritual warfare with the old man (2 Cor. 10:5). It is not merely floating along on the current of the new man in Christ; it is paddling upstream against the current of the old.

### **New Apostolic Pentecostal heresy**

Viola's commitment to mysticism is not surprising in light of his background in Pentecostalism and his continued close association with the most radical elements of the charismatic movement. He says,

"I used to belong to one of the largest Pentecostal churches in the state of Florida" (*Reimagining Church*, p. 111).

In the 1990s Viola attended the laughing-drunken-slaying "revivals" in Toronto, Pensacola, Lakeland, and Melbourne. In a 2006 article he said that he was glad that he went to the meetings and had nothing negative to say about them ("Slaughtering Sacred Cows: Part 3 The Felt-Presence of God," Present Testimony Ministry newsletter, April 2006, [http://procinwarn.com/frankviola\\_april-2006.htm](http://procinwarn.com/frankviola_april-2006.htm)).

Viola praises John Wimber's "Third Wave" movement which integrated charismaticism with evangelicalism:

"The third-wave movement has contributed a number of helpful spiritual accents. Most significantly, it has fostered a genuine hunger for and openness to God's moving. It has produced a sound blending of evangelical and charismatic theology. And it has created a vast collection of wonderfully anointed praise and worship music" (*Reimagining Church*, p. 260).

The Third Wave's so-called "openness to God's moving" is blind charismatic mysticism not properly controlled by Scripture. It's so-called "sound blending" was the corruption of whatever biblical theology and practice previously existed in evangelicalism. And its supposed "anointed worship music" is an illegitimate co-mingling of the holy Rock Christ and the unholy rock of the world.

Viola's close association with radical charismaticism is evident in his relationship with House2House. Viola spoke at their conferences in 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2011. His book *Reimagining Church* is effusively recommended by Tony Dale, editor of House2House magazine. Contributors to the magazine include John Arnott who led the wild, drunken "revival" at the Toronto Christian Fellowship Church in Ontario.

Joining Viola at the 2011 House2House conference in Jacksonville, Florida, was Wolfgang Simson who is a promoter of extra-biblical revelation and the interpretation of dreams. He is a proponent of the heretical latter rain apostolic miracle revival with its dominionist objective of building the kingdom of God before Christ returns.

Other associates of Viola point to his involvement with and acceptance of the Latter Rain apostolic miracle revival. Heidi and Rolland Baker are examples.

"[The Bakers] flourish in the New Apostolic Reformation and can often be found on the Elijah List (chief organ for the NAR) and OpenHeaven.com (a radical Dominionist group). The Bakers spoke at the Global Awakening 'Voice of the Apostles' conference, October 28-31, 2009, along with other NAR apostles Randy Clark, Che Ann, Bill Johnson and John Arnott. Heidi was featured along with Latter Rain cult leader Rick Joyner at his MorningStar Ministries 'Harvest Fest' held September 24--30, 2009. The list of interconnections and associations with the NAR could go on and on" (Ken Silva, "The Other Side of Emergent: The New Apostolic Reformation," *Apprising Ministries*, July 8, 2010).

These are incredibly dangerous spiritual waters, and the Bible asks "can two walk together except they be agreed" (Amos 3:3)? The answer is no, they cannot. Men do not walk together unless they agree on fundamental things.

Regardless to what degree Frank Viola agrees with the Latter Rain apostolic miracle revival and its dominionist objective, it is evident that those who associate with Viola in his organic church movement can easily come into contact with this heresy and with the heretical "apostles and prophets" that promote it.

(For more about John Wimber, Rick Joyner, the Third Wave, and the Latter

Rain see *The Directory of Contemporary Worship Musicians*, which is available as a free eBook at the Way of Life web site, under the entries on Lindell Cooley, Tim Hughes, Kevin Prosch, David Ruis, and John Wimber. See also *The Pentecostal-Charismatic Movements*, which is available in print and eBook formats from Way of Life - wayoflife.org.)

### **Full reconciliation already made**

Viola teaches the heresy that the universe has already been reconciled to God through Christ's cross.

“And by that horrible death, He reconciled a fallen cosmos to God” (Viola and Sweet, *Jesus Manifesto*, p. 28).

“I [Jesus] made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of My blood on the cross” (*Jesus Manifesto*, location 2804).

In fact, though God's *goal* is to reconcile all things, reconciliation will occur in stages, with the New Testament believer as the first fruits (Colossians 1:20-21).

At this time, the creation is most definitely *not* reconciled to God. Paul tells us that the whole creation still groans together under God's curse (Romans 8:22). The cosmos will not be reconciled unto God until the current heaven and earth are replaced with a new heaven and a new earth (2 Peter 3:10-13).

Unbelievers are not presently reconciled to God. They are invited to be reconciled through faith in Christ (2 Cor. 5:18-20). But those who die in unbelief will never be reconciled to God but will endure eternal punishment in the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15).

### **Roman Catholic contemplative mysticism**

By his own admission, Frank Viola has been deeply involved with contemplative mysticism since the mid-1990s.

“In 1994, what came to be known as ‘the Toronto Blessing’ hit the United States. Rodney Howard-Browne held his first convention in the Carpenter's Home Church in Lakeland, Florida. That convention went on for weeks. From there, it quickly spread to other parts of

North America: most notably Toronto, Canada; Melbourne, Florida; and Pensacola, Florida. Upon hearing about the new move of God in 1994, I traveled to Lakeland and sat in on those first meetings where 'the blessing' had just begun. The following year, I traveled to Melbourne, Florida and sat in a meeting officiated by Randy Clark when the phenomenon had spread there in full force. I will not share my observations of 'the blessing' in this article. But I'm glad I went to those meetings. ...

"One of my closest friends is a man named Frank Valdez. I met Frank in 1992. He is the wisest Christian I've ever met. ... Sometime in 1995, as we were sharing lunch together, I told Frank about my observations on 'the Toronto blessing.' This led into an invaluable discussion that marked a turning point in my life. Frank said to me, 'There is a Christian tradition that practices a form of prayer that employs no words. It's beyond speaking in tongues and deeper than the Toronto blessing.' He had my attention. As I quizzed him about his comment, Frank began to share with me about the contemplative prayer tradition. He spoke about centering prayer, *lectio divina*, and other ancient spiritual practices that were unfamiliar to me at the time. ... Frank introduced me to the Christian 'mystics.' ... Meister Eckhart was a 13th century German mystic who is generally regarded as the fountainhead of 'Rhineland mysticism.' He taught that God was beyond all conceptualization. This conceptualization included the 'concept' of god itself. Meister pointed people to the 'God beyond god, i.e., the God who exceeds any concept we have of Him. ... Thomas Merton was very influenced by Eckhart. Merton added a social and historical dimension to Eckhart's critique of religion" ("Slaughtering Sacred Cows: Part 3 The Felt-Presence of God," Present Testimony Ministry newsletter, April 2006, [http://procinwarn.com/frankviola\\_april-2006.htm](http://procinwarn.com/frankviola_april-2006.htm)).

Nothing could provide a more enlightening and frightful glimpse into Frank Viola's doctrine and philosophy of Christian living than this testimony. He is a mystic who has sought enlightenment through the most radical of Pentecostal nonsense (e.g., the Lakeland Outpouring with its Holy Ghost Bartender, Rodney Howard-Browne, dispensing uncontrollable laughter and spiritual drunkenness; the Toronto Blessing with its barking and roaring and crowing; the Brownsville Revival in Pensacola with its pathetic uncontrollable shakings and its pastor so "drunk" in the "spirit" that he has

to be hauled out of church in a wheelbarrow). Viola doesn't tell us to what extent he agrees with these things, but the very fact that he would travel long distances to such places and his refusal to renounce them is evidence of his spiritual blindness and his commitment to a mysticism that is not bound by Scripture.

Yet Viola tells us that he has found an even more powerful form of mysticism in the contemplative movement, and he mentions two of the most radical and dangerous of the contemplative mystics: Meister Eckhart and Thomas Merton.

Eckhart was a German Dominican priest who taught complex gnostic and pagan doctrines. His theology was akin to Hinduism and Buddhism. He taught evolution and reincarnation. In his book *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist*, D. T. Suzuki compared Eckhart's teaching favorably with Zen Buddhism. Eckhart taught that God, which he called "the absolute principle" and "the ground of the soul," is "pure intellect and not being," and that man at his highest level is one with God. Eckhart said that in every man there is divinity and spiritual wisdom. He called this "divine ground," "divine spark," "divine image," "holy self," and "inner light."

Thomas Merton, a Roman Catholic monk, was a universalist and a panentheist (God is in everything). He called himself a Buddhist and traveled to the coast of Sri Lanka to worship before Buddhist statues. The titles of his books include *Zen and the Birds of the Appetite* and *Mystics and the Zen Masters*. He said: "I see no contradiction between Buddhism and Christianity. The future of Zen is in the West. I intend to become as good a Buddhist as I can" (David Steindl-Rast, "Recollection of Thomas Merton's Last Days in the West," *Monastic Studies*, 7:10, 1969). Merton promoted a blind mystical communion with God that "is beyond words, beyond speech, beyond concept" (*The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, 1975 edition, p. 308). Any "god" that is beyond words, speech, and concept is not the God who has revealed Himself in Scripture. Merton was led by his contemplative mysticism to believe in the pagan heresies of universalism and the divinity of man. He said that if men were to realize who they are, they would bow down and worship one another.

(For more about Eckart and Merton, see *Contemplative Mysticism*, which is available in print and eBook editions from Way of Life.)

## New age panentheism

Contemplative mysticism often leads the soul to the pagan doctrine of panentheism--the belief that God is in everything--which denies the fall and the curse as defined biblically. Contemplative practitioners often become enamored with out-and-out New Agers.

Frank Viola's close association with Leonard Sweet (co-authoring *Jesus Manifesto*) points precisely in this direction.

Sweet is devoted to contemplative mysticism. He wrote:

“Mysticism, once cast to the sidelines of the Christian tradition, is now situated in postmodernist culture near the center. ... In the words of one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century, Jesuit philosopher of religion/dogmatist Karl Rahner, ‘The Christian of tomorrow will be a mystic, one who has experienced something, or he will be nothing’” (*Quantum Spirituality*, 1991, pp. 11, 76).

In light of this unhesitating recommendation of mysticism and of the Roman Catholic universalist/panentheist Karl Rahner, who was a bridge between Catholicism and Eastern religions, it is no wonder that Sweet is a New Age sympathizer if not an out-and-out New Ager. Sweet promotes a universalistic-tinged doctrine that he calls New Light and “quantum spirituality” and “the Christ consciousness.” He describes it in terms of “the union of the human with the divine” which is the “center feature of all the world’s religions” (*Quantum Spirituality*, p. 235). He defines the New Light as “a structure of human becoming, a channeling of Christ energies through mindbody experience” (*Quantum Spirituality*, p. 70). Sweet says that “New Light pastors” hold the doctrine of “embodiment of God in the very substance of creation” (p. 124). In *Carpe Mañana*, Sweet says that the earth is as much a part of the body of Christ as humans and that humanity and the earth constitute “a cosmic body of Christ” (p. 124). Sweet says that some of the “New Light leaders” that have influenced his thinking are Matthew Fox, M. Scott Peck, Willis Harman, and Ken Wilber. These are prominent New Agers who believe in the divinity of man, as we have documented in the book *The New Age Tower of Babel*.

(For more information on this see the following reports at wayoflife.org -- “Thomas Merton,” “Beware of Leonard Sweet,” “Contemplative Practices

Are a Bridge to Paganism,” “Contemplative Spirituality Dancing with Demons,” “Contemplative Spirituality and the New Age,” and “Silence vs. the Silence.”)

### **Heresy Pertaining to Christ**

Viola’s contemplative mysticism is leading in the direction of false christs. He makes the following heretical statements:

“Paul’s idea is not that the Head is somehow screwed onto the body. His idea is that Christ embodies the church. The risen Christ is a living, inclusive, ‘more-than-individual’ personality” (*From Eternity to Here*, pp. 266, 267).

“Jesus Christ cannot be separated from His church. While Jesus is distinct from His Bride, He is not separate from her. She is, in fact, His very own body in the earth” (*Jesus Manifesto*, p. 141).

On page 143 of the *Jesus Manifesto*, Viola favorably quotes Dietrich Bonhoeffer saying the church is “Christ existing as community.”

### **Viola praises *The Shack***

In light of Viola’s frightful heresies and his deep involvement with contemplative mysticism, it is no wonder that he endorses William Paul Young’s *The Shack* and its non-judgmental father-mother god. Viola says,

“All told, I will shamelessly throw my hat in the ring with those who are giving unqualified praise for *The Shack*” (<http://frankviola.wordpress.com/2008/07/28/short-book-review-of-the-shack-by-william-p-young>).

Every individual who loves *The Shack* god is an idolater.

See “The Shack’s Cool God” at the Way of Life web site.

Frank Viola and the Organic Church are very dangerous spiritual waters. Beware!