

HOUSE-CHURCHISM: AN ECCLESIASTICAL PANACEA OR POISON? (2)

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Radical Rebellion Against the Kingdom's Foundations

In the last article (*BRJ* 56 in 2012), we saw that the house-church movement (HCM) promotes essentially an Anabaptist ecclesiology. It has all the schismatic Anabaptist characteristics of world flight, proud hyper-spirituality, restorationism, charismaticism, distorted moralism, corruption of the sacraments, disordered will-worship and similar. Of all these, perhaps its primary characteristic (as well as the primary characteristic of Anabaptism) is its rebellion against the authority of Christ and especially Christ's authority in the church which He has instituted.

The "house-churchism" described by Frank Viola, author of *Pagan Christianity* and co-author of *Reimagining Church*, is a very comprehensive rebellion. The supreme authority for everything in the instituted church is the Word of God (Eph. 2:20), but Viola rebels against this foundation with his view of the truth (alethiology), his interpretive methods (hermeneutics) and his view of how knowledge is attained (epistemology). This rebellion is then manifested in his teaching and practice regarding creeds, councils, denominations, church history, office-bearers, ordination, preaching, sacraments, worship, etc. Viola's alethiology is essentially illogical and irrational, his hermeneutics are intentionally unsystematic and inconsistent, and his epistemology is unapologetically mystical and extra-biblical. Since this rebellion against God's authority attacks the very nature of the truth which God has revealed, it is a *radical* rebellion. It aims at the very *root* of the church institute in order to destroy it utterly (Ps. 11:3). Viola admits this in the opening chapter of his book, *Reimagining Church*:

Indeed, a *revolution* is brewing today. And that revolution goes beyond church reform and renewal. Instead it goes straight

to the *root* of the practice and theology of the church itself.¹

In the end, Viola's "organic church"² is not a "pillar and ground of the truth" (I Tim. 3:15), is not apostolic (Eph. 2:20), and sets aside the "one Spirit" and "one Lord" of the "one body" (Eph. 4:4-5). This article will examine Viola's most fundamental rejection of Christ's authority.

Irrational Rebellion Against Logical Truth

In *Pagan Christianity*, Viola frequently speaks disdainfully of what he calls "rational knowledge and logic." This is his major criticism of what he calls contemporary theology and, on this basis, he condemns it as merely the development of Greek philosophy:

Contemporary theology cut its teeth on the abstractions of Greek philosophy. University academics adopted an Aristotelian model of thinking that centered on rational knowledge and logic. The dominating drive in scholastic theology was the assimilation and communication of knowledge. (For this reason, the Western mind has always been fond of creedal formulations, doctrinal statements, and other bloodless abstractions.)³

Here we have the usual Anabaptist contempt for creeds which is rampant throughout the church world today. It is a wonder how any rational being, let alone an intelligent man, like Frank Viola, and one who even claims the name of Christian, can speak of logic as if it were nothing more than a pagan

¹ Frank Viola, *Reimagining Church: Pursuing the Dream of Organic Christianity* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2008), p. 16; italics mine.

² Frank Viola and George Barna, *Pagan Christianity? Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2008), p. xix. Here Viola defines his "house-church" as an "organic church" which he calls "Spirit-led" and sets that at odds with the idea of a church institute. The Reformed view, however, is that the church organic (properly understood) is not at odds with the church institute but is, in fact, the source of the church institute. The church institute emerges supernaturally as the church organic miraculously obeys (by the power of the Spirit) the authority of Scripture (the Word of the Spirit) which teaches the necessity of the church institute (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5).

³ Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 204.

House-Churchism: Panacea or Poison?

invention, all the while employing logic (though faulty) to try to convince his readers. Surely this is flagrant hypocrisy on his part? If logic is pagan, then he should follow his own advice and eschew its use, and therefore cease all argument as a pointless exercise. Of course, proponents of this nonsense are never consistent in their application, nor can they be.

Viola objects to the use of what he calls “dialectic” or “Greek logic” in understanding or interpreting Scripture. Since Viola specifically mentions Peter Abelard (1079-1142) in this connection, we know that he has in mind the Aristotelian dialectics or logic which was popular in the medieval age.⁴ This includes the Socratic method, which he ironically cites favourably in his initial provocation/invitation to question Christian tradition.⁵ Without unnecessarily detailed distinctions, most basically this refers to the method of argumentation which tests a hypothesis by demonstrating whether or not it leads to contradiction and sometimes further inquiring whether its premises are false.

Viola claims that Paul used this method only when witnessing to unbelieving Greeks but this method is used throughout Scripture.⁶ There are many, many examples of this. When some denied the resurrection of the dead, Paul demonstrates the falsity of this precisely by deducing the necessary logical conclusions of such a position and showing that those conclusions contradict the truth.

Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen: And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain. Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ: whom he raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not (I Cor. 15:12-15).

⁴ Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 205.

⁵ Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 4.

⁶ Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 205. Footnote 35 reads, “This [dialectic] shouldn’t be confused with the approach of the apostle Paul, who may have used Greek logic to reason with the Greeks and rhetoric to communicate with them but did not use dialectic (Greek logic) to understand or interpret Scripture.”

This example proves three things. First, Paul employs this method to demonstrate the truth to believers *in the church*. Contrary to Viola, it was not restricted, therefore, to a tool “to reason with the Greeks” but “to understand or interpret Scripture.” This method is, therefore, not merely “pagan,” but actually biblical and apostolic. Second, it demonstrates that we ought also to examine and test doctrinal claims by intelligently and carefully carrying them to their logical conclusions, in order to expose and identify erroneous teachings. Third, it proves that the law of non-contradiction was uncontroversially accepted in the early apostolic church as a means to distinguish between truth and falsehood. In other words, Paul and these Christians understood that anything which contradicts the truth is by that very fact to be identified as a lie. Contrary to Viola’s imagination, this is the very nature of truth: “I have not written unto you because ye know not the truth, but because ye know it, and that *no lie is of the truth*” (I John 2:21).

Christians can identify lies only because we know the truth. The apostolic doctrine is that, when we hear anything that is contrary to that truth, we know it must be a lie. This also means that we must be diligent to grow in our knowledge of the truth. This is not a new doctrine but an ancient one: “To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them” (Isa. 8:20).

Here the lie is identified as that which is “not according to” the law and the testimony. Because God is in complete agreement in Himself with no internal inconsistencies or contradictions, anything that is not according to His Word is therefore untrue. This also demonstrates not only that we have this responsibility to examine whether what is spoken is according to God’s Word but also that we are able to do this successfully. Isaiah directs his hearers “to the law and the testimony,” because he knew that they could thereby easily recognize that the “wizards that peep, and that mutter” were not speaking according to the law (Isa. 8:19).

Consider the argumentation of the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews, how he understands and interprets the Old Testament Scriptures by this same method. He demonstrates that “perfection” was not “by the Levitical priesthood” because that would contradict Psalm 110:4 which promised that “another priest should rise after the order of Melchisedec” (Heb. 7:11). He

House - Churchism: Panacea or Poison?

shows that the first covenant was not “faultless” (Heb. 8:7) because that would contradict Jeremiah 31:31-34. He proves that the sacrifices of the Old Testament could not take away sins because that would contradict the law which required that they were offered repeatedly (Heb. 10:1-3, 11).

How did the early church deal with the error of the Judaizers? These men claimed, “Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). The Jerusalem council deduced the logical conclusions of this teaching and showed that it contradicted the witness of the Spirit in the Scriptures that prophesied the salvation of the Gentiles (Acts 15:15-17).

By this same method, the Almighty spoke directly to Job to show him his error of presuming to know God’s purposes in a lengthy *reductio ad absurdum* argument (Job 38). These repeated, emphatic questions are rhetorical and designed to show Job that his thinking would result in these absurdities, if carried to its logical extremes.

Therefore, although popularized and employed by unbelieving pagans (as it still is today), what Viola derides as “Greek logic” is nothing more or less in principle than a reasoned application of the law of non-contradiction, which for Christians is firmly based upon the unity or simplicity of God. When Viola rejects this method, he rejects the God of truth who cannot lie. The reason pagans understand, describe and use this law of non-contradiction as the basis of human reason is due to the natural light which remains in every man for the purpose of leaving him without excuse (*Canons III/IV:4; Belgic Confession* 2, 14; John 1:9-10; Rom. 1:18-25).

Yet this irrational concept is not peculiar to Viola, who does not have good company in his opinion: Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) was one of the strongest proponents of the rejection of logic. Ironically, the rejection of logic can be traced back to *pagan* philosophers (e.g., the Skeptics who denied that there was an absolute distinction between truth and falsity),⁷ and probably even further back in history since the brute irrationality of men suppressing the truth in unrighteousness began with the Fall. This association proves nothing by itself but it is worth noting that Viola’s opposition to what he calls pagan thinking is itself pagan by his own criterion.

⁷ Gordon Clark, *Ancient Philosophy* (Hobbs, NM: The Trinity Foundation, 1997), p. 228.

Many evangelicals today make the same claim, as do many in Reformed churches. Certain local evangelical leaders have attempted to convince me that mutually contradictory propositions can both be true together, “like two sides of one coin,” “railway tracks which run in the same direction, yet never meet” or “seeing in colour instead of only in black and white.” Such analogies are not recent or unique. This would be more amusing, if it was not for the fact that many people take this nonsense seriously, as if the height of humility, holiness and faith was to believe in irrationality. This “railway-track” description of theology is a ploy commonly used to avoid answering difficult questions; a cover under which to hide inconsistent (and, therefore, false) teachings. It is a necessary and cherished tool for evangelicals who are trying to include as many different conflicting views as possible under their umbrella.

Since (if accepted) this is really the ultimate strategy to defend any falsehood, it has been employed time and time again to protect errors from exposure to the truth. For example, J. K. van Baalen, a minister in the Christian Reformed Church, used this strategy to defend “common grace” in 1922:

Interestingly, van Baalen did this [i.e., brought the charge of rationalism] in connection with his own defense of a “two-track” theology. By a two-track theology van Baalen meant that theology runs on two parallel tracks which never meet. Or, to abandon the metaphor: theology consists of two lines of truth which cannot be harmonized. Common grace is one of these lines; other doctrines of the Reformed faith are the other line. To deny common grace was to deny the existence of two tracks by attempting to bring all the doctrines of faith into a consistent and harmonious unity. That effort was rationalism in van Baalen’s opinion.⁸

Herman Hoeksema wrote at length in a series of *Standard Bearer* editorials against the same position promoted by R. B. Kuiper, another Christian Reformed minister.⁹ Instead of the *division* of the faith, as this view teaches,

⁸ Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth’s Sake: A Doctrinal History of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: RFP, 2000), p. 200.

⁹ E.g., Herman Hoeksema, “Single or Double Track Theology?” *Standard Bearer*, vol. 39, issue 20 (September 1, 1963), pp. 460-461.

House-Churchism: Panacea or Poison?

the Bible speaks of “the unity of the faith” (Eph. 4:13). If theology is fundamentally divided and inharmonious, then God is fundamentally self-divided and inharmonious. However, “We all believe with the heart, and confess with the mouth, that there is one only simple and spiritual Being, which we call God” (*Belgic Confession* 1). A fragmented theology denies God’s simplicity. To have a “two-track” theology is really to have two separate conflicting faiths. This destroys the unity of the church for, if theology is inherently divided, then how can we obey the admonition to “speak the same thing,” having “no divisions among” us, and being “perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (I Cor. 1:10)? The true church is “one body,” and has “one Spirit,” is called in “one hope,” with “one Lord,” “one faith,” “one baptism,” and “one God and Father of all” (Eph. 4:4-6). Because of the ubiquity of this madness, this fundamental subject must be analyzed further.

What is logic? Even to attempt to answer this question is to imply the fundamental reality of the universal laws of logic. The question itself suggests it for it is a question of definition. To define a thing is to say what a thing is by placing it in a general category and differentiating it from the other things which may be included in that category. It is to say what a thing *is*, necessarily in distinction from what it is *not*. A definition is only possible by means of the universal law of non-contradiction—which is the most basic law of logic, for all the other laws are special cases of this fundamental law. Definitions undergird the very basis of any form of meaningful, rational communication, which is a capacity that God has given to us as rational creatures and for the abuse of which He will strictly judge us (Matt. 12:36-37). What is being written in these pages is communication only insofar as the reader understands the definitions of the words that are used. Therefore, to attempt any form of communication at all, as Viola does, is implicitly to affirm and concretely to assert all the laws of logic.

This old pagan philosophy of irrationality has recently been called post-modernism.¹⁰ It is not exactly the idea that nothing is true (which is nihil-

¹⁰ See an excellent analysis of postmodernism in John MacArthur’s book, *The Truth War* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007). In listing the tools of postmodernism, MacArthur includes “the undue exaltation of mystery and paradox.” The *BRJ* has previously chided Phil Johnson, the editor of *The Truth War*, for this “undue exaltation” in defence of the well-meant offer of the gospel and God’s supposed love for the reprobate.

ism, although it certainly inevitably ends up there) but the idea that many contradictory propositions may all be true together. This has been summed up in the phrase “holding the truth in tension.” In today’s culture, such a phrase does not sound nonsensical. It sounds piously humble to many people because they mistakenly think, according to the spirit of the age, that to confess any kind of certain knowledge is the height of presumptive arrogance. This is an attitude toward humility which has been cultivated by popular liberals (e.g., Rob Bell) who deny God’s revelation to man because they deny its infallibility.

When a controversy involving Gordon Clark (1902-1985) and Cornelius Van Til (1895-1987) arose on this very subject in connection with the “free offer” theology, Clark’s opponents defended their teaching that there were irreconcilable contradictions in Scripture. They claimed that these were only paradoxes in this sense: although man could never resolve these contradictions, God could. Herman Hoeksema observed at the time,

However, even now one begins to wonder whether the real question in this controversy is not whether God, but whether his revelation to us in the Scriptures is comprehensible, that is, can be logically understood by the mind of man. Dr. Clark’s position is that all of Scripture is given us that we might understand it, that all of it is adapted to our human mind, so that even though there be many things in that revelation of God which we cannot fathom, there is nothing in it that is contrary to human intelligence and logic. And the opponents appear to deny this.

And if this should be the real, underlying issue, if the complainants take the stand that Scripture reveals things that are, not above and far beyond, but contrary to, in conflict with, the human mind, it is my conviction that the complainants should be indicted of heterodoxy, and of undermining all sound theology.

Either the logic of revelation is our logic, or there is no revelation.¹¹

¹¹ Herman Hoeksema, *The Clark-Van Til Controversy* (Unicoi, TN: The Trinity Foundation,

Inconsistent Rebellion Against Systematic Interpretation

Viola's view of truth necessarily colours his view of Scripture and his interpretive methods. That Scripture itself accords with our logical reason can easily be shown by the fact that all Scripture is profitable for us (II Tim. 3:16), and that the church can only be edified by clear, understandable, intelligible words (I Cor. 14:5-20). Jesus Christ is the truth (John 14:6). Upon truth, all our salvation rests (Ps. 69:13; John 8:32; II Thess. 2:13). This necessarily means that there is no lie in God (Num. 23:19; John 3:33; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18; James 1:17) for He is the God of truth (Deut. 32:4; Ps. 31:5, Isa. 65:16). And what is a lie but that which contradicts the truth (Isa. 8:20; Rom. 1:25; I John 2:4, 21)?

This is not mere Greek philosophy, as Viola tries to paint it, but it is exactly what the Bible itself teaches as the rule for its own interpretation. Therefore, anywhere we find contradiction, we have found a lie. To deny this is really the mother of heresies ("undermining all sound theology," as Hoeksema observed) because, if a lie cannot be known by its contradiction of the truth, then the truth can never be distinguished from lies.¹² Then there can be no revelation and no certain knowledge of God and, therefore, no salvation (John 17:3).

One verse in particular is illustrative of how wrong this view of Scripture is. II Corinthians 1:18 says, "But as God is true, our word toward you was not yea and nay." First, notice that Paul insists here that his word, and that of his co-workers, was not insincere: It did not carry a double-meaning or contradict itself and there was no tension, disharmony or uncertainty in it, for it was not an ambiguous yes and no. It is conclusive that he says this here in order to assure the Corinthians that he was sincere in expressing his intention to return to them. If this is the case with Paul's word here, then it is also the case with all the apostolic doctrine. But notice more fundamentally, second, that the reason he did not speak insincerely, ambiguously or meaninglessly to them is because God is true. If God is true, we may not tell people things that are self-contradictory because that is dishonest (II Cor. 4:2). God's perfect consistency with Himself is the standard for our honesty. Anyone teaching theology which involves contradictions (such as the "free offer") is thereby being dishonest.

2005), p. 19-20.

¹² Hoeksema, *Clark-Van Til*, p. 20.

In his book, *The Johannine Logos*, Clark illustrates the point that even the name *Logos* (a Greek word from which we get our word for logic, which is often translated in John 1 as “the Word”) given to Jesus Christ proves that the knowledge of God revealed in Christ is rational and logical, even that the knowledge of God within Himself before the foundation of the world is rational and logical.¹³ Since man is rational and thinks logically (even since the Fall he has retained this glimmering of natural light), the reason he cannot receive the revelation of the truth of God is not an intellectual problem but a spiritual, moral one. It is because he is at enmity with God (Rom. 8:6-7) and a child of the devil by nature (John 8:43-47).

Certainly since the Fall, fallen man has employed his logic only in the pursuit of sin and, therefore, it is right and necessary to condemn rationalism, if it is defined as a belief system based on man’s natural reason. The practice of studying the Bible logically to understand how it fits together as one harmonious whole is not rationalism but is the basic Reformed hermeneutical principle that Scripture interprets Scripture. Interpreting Scripture through the lens of modern science, as the theistic evolutionists do, *is* rationalism. Interpreting Scripture with Scripture is not; it is what the Reformers called the *regula Scripturae*, the rule of Scripture. *Westminster Confession* 1:6 accurately captures the Reformed view of the proper use of logic with Scripture:

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in scripture, *or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from scripture*: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.

Viola illustrates his rejection of this, not only by his absurd aversion to logic but also by the method he claims to have used to produce his doctrine of the church. Viola spends a lot of ink objecting to “proof-texting,” the vile practice of snatching a single verse out of context in order to twist it to support something

¹³ Gordon Clark, *The Johannine Logos* (Jefferson, MD: The Trinity Foundation, 1993). This book begins very well, and surveys and answers critics very helpfully, but Clark makes errors later in the book (regarding the nature of faith, and even the person and natures of Christ) which would prevent me from recommending it wholeheartedly.