

THE ORDER OF PAUL'S LETTERS

By Keith Malcomson

*These articles have been written as a response to **Pagan Christianity?** a book written by Frank Viola and co-authored by George Barna. It carries the sub-title of *Exploring the Roots of our Church Practices*. All quotes are from the book.*



“[Paul] penned thirteen letters in about a twenty-year time span. Nine letters were written to churches in different cultures, at different times, experiencing different problems. Four letters were written to individual Christians” (pg.226)

This is very true but we must also remember and in fact must emphasize that these epistles were written by the same man, under the inspiration of the same Holy Ghost, to the one blood-washed church. And more than that Paul states, repeats, clarifies and explains that what he taught in one church was no different than what he taught in others.

“For this cause have I sent unto you Timotheus, who is my beloved son, and faithful in the Lord, who shall bring you into remembrance of my ways which be in Christ, as I teach every where in every church.” (1 Cor.4:17). “And so ordain I in all churches” (7:17). “We have no such custom, neither the churches of God” (11:16). “...as in all churches of the saints” (14:33).

In this epistle to the Corinthians Paul realized that he must emphasize that he was not preaching a different gospel or a different interpretation and application of it in different churches, cultures and nations. The Gospel and true spiritual wisdom is not affected, influenced or adjusted by local custom. What Paul wrote in individual letters to individual churches or believers is what he believed and taught everywhere.

Order

Viola explains that when all of Paul’s letters and all of the New Testament writings, called the Canon of Scripture, were compiled and put together as one, they were placed in order of size which was the custom of the Greco-Roman world. As it

happens there were various different compilations which placed some of the books in different orders during the early centuries but none of them were in the chronological order now being proposed.

He goes on to state that a book written in the 19th century supporting this order which has been handed down to us as being “divinely inspired” has done much harm. He states that it is “...the present chaotic order, which blinds us from seeing the entire panoramic view of the New Testament.” (pg.227)

Viola is expressing that the order of epistles is not only “chaotic” in our Bible but that it is enough to blind us to the history of the first church, the glory of an ascended Christ and the Lord’s divine purpose. To infer that a correctly ordered layout of the books will bring such a panoramic view is far from true.

Maybe we should ask ourselves if the early church of the first century had a New Testament laid out in its correct chronological order? Did Paul labour to emphasise the necessity and importance of such in order to understand his wrings? Did Luke take pains in the *Book of Acts* to point out when and where each letter was written by Paul? Did John the last apostle of the Lamb and last author of inspired Scripture at the end of the first century at a time where apostasy had already set in urge the church to put Paul's letters in order? Of course not.

“What we need today is a theology built, not on the present arrangement, but on the chronological narrative of the New Testament.” (pg.227). Again the pressing need of this hour is not a correct chronological order but a fresh revelation of Jesus Christ. Remodelling the New Testament will not change men’s minds and hearts in some magical manner. The great

need is that believers would respond to the Word of God and obey it. A better theological understanding of the chronological order of New Testament books will not make the church more spiritual. It is a heart response to the Word not a mental remodelling. It is pure error to stress that theology or correct biblical teaching must rest or be built upon such chronology.

After asking a number of questions concerning the letter to the Galatians in connection to its geography, date, circumstances etc he says “All of these background matters are indispensible for understanding what our New Testament is about. Without them, we simply cannot understand the Bible clearly or properly.” (pg.231).

First of all we do not have all of the background details to each book in the New Testament. The greatest scholars with the best facts have disagreed on many points of chronology, even those scholars that Viola relies on most. It most certainly helps, gives insight and understanding to have such information but in no way is it “indispensible” in order to understand the Scriptures, to understand the Gospel, to experience a deep walk with Christ, to have a full grasp of what the church is and is to be, or to understand biblical doctrine as it is in Christ. To say that we “cannot understand the Bible” without such undermines Scripture itself.

I would of course encourage every preacher to understand such and teach it. I believe every believer should grow in their understanding of such background information. This is not a new thing in the Church. A great host of scholars have laboured in every generation on such background information in order to set each book in its correct context and in fact the whole New Testament in context. But if an individual lacks such they will not miss out. Christ Himself is the key, not a

special way of studying or of interpretation given to us by man. Truth and doctrine is held within Scripture itself not extra biblical facts and not in the background “story” important and true as they all are.

The Holy Spirit has written all we need for godliness in the actual text of Scripture. **We do not need a new breed of interpreters to hand us a secret key of interpretation. We have it; it is Christ and the Holy Spirit as our Teacher.** It is a reproach on the Holy Spirit to presume to think that extra Biblical information is absolutely necessary for a true grasp and understanding of the written Scriptures.

In the NT writings we are instructed to read and study the actual Scriptures. We are also given the means to come to a true and full understanding of these books, both individually and corporately. Paul says in I Cor.2:13: “Which things also we speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual.”

How does the Holy Spirit teach? Paul states here that it was by way of comparing spiritual things. The word “compare” means ‘to judge of one thing in connection with another, and then combine them.’ It is the act of discerning between different things in Scripture then bringing them together as one. Albert Barnes enlightens us when he states that it means, “to collect, join, mingle, unite together”; then “to separate or distinguish parts of things and unite them into one.” In the next verse Paul states “they are spiritually discerned.” This word “discerned” means to ‘scrutinize, investigate, interrogate, and determine.’ Believers are taught of the Holy Ghost as they compare scripture with scripture.

This is the very thing that Viola warns us against and instead replaces it with his theory of reordering the New Testament letters. “Proof texting, then, became the common way that we contemporary Christians approach the Bible. As a result, we Christians rarely, if ever, get to see the New Testament as a whole. Rather, we are served up a dish of fragmented thoughts that are drawn together by means of fallen human logic.”

Again in II Tim.2:15 we are instructed by Paul to: “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” To “study” means ‘make effort, be earnest; give diligence, and to endeavour.’ This studying is to take the form of “rightly dividing” the written Word of God. To rightly divide means the action of ‘one clean cut which dissects, expounds and opens up.’

Nothing is said by the apostles concerning knowing the “story” behind the epistles, or of knowing dates, or of knowing circumstances. But we are clearly taught that under the Holy Ghost we are to give mental effort to compare scripture with scripture. We are to study the Word of God itself.

“What is the remedy that will bring you into a living expression of the body of Christ for our time? The antidote begins with understanding the New Testament.” (pg.239). By “understanding” Viola means understanding the dates, facts and reasons connected with the individual books and the whole chronology of the New Testament. It would seem that a simple understanding of the actual Scriptures, a simple reading and acceptance of them, as well as a receiving of them as life and truth is not sufficient. According to their teaching for a church to truly become a living expression of the body of Christ they must understand these details.

According to Viola a manifestation of Christ's life in the local church depends on this!

The Example of Christ

When Christ worked quietly in Nazareth during His first thirty years and then in public ministry in Judea and Jerusalem until His death how did He respond to the Old Testament writings as handed down from previous generations?

Prior to Christ's day there were various groups within Judaism who made an issue of the chronological order of the books but there was no particular group which actually insisted on a perfect chronological order or carried such into performance. Both the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) were not in chronological order. The Bible Christ read from and quoted small portions from was not in its correct chronological order. I'm sure Mr Viola would not accuse Christ of proof texting!

If having a correct understanding of the chronological order of God's Word is so important why did Christ and His apostles not address this issue in relation to the OT? After all the OT was Christ's only Bible. If such would hide, obscure or in any way hinder a true vision of the "story" of the OT why did they not address it? If such was likely to distort the understanding of the ways of God, the knowledge of God and the practical function of God's people why do we not read of a revolutionary return by the first disciples to the correct chronological order of God's Word?

This is again another rabbit trail created by Viola which was taught to him first by Gene Edwards.

THE WORST DISASTER OF ALL

The statement ‘the worst disaster of all’ is given by **Gene Edwards** (Mentor to Frank Viola) as the title to the third chapter of his book *Beyond Radical*. As we look back over the history of the church what was the worst disaster of all? What was one of the fundamental things that hindered people from knowing Christ? Well, Edwards tells us.

“It is virtually impossible to really understand what the New Testament is saying and why. That is because (1) we approach it wrongly; and (2) in your New Testament Paul’s letters are not arranged in the order they should be. Change these two facts and we will all see a revolution.” (pg.41)

Edwards considers that the “future of Christendom” and a true “understanding of the New Testament” depend upon rectifying these disastrous problems. “No one can ever know what these...books say until they are read in chronological sequence...In such a chopped-up setting, never seeing the sequence of events, never knowing the story, all of us are left in the dark as to what the New Testament is revealing.” (pg.43)

Edwards goes on to expand on this and to strongly emphasize that the worst disaster in church history, or at least one of the primary ones, is that we do not know the “story.” The “story” is the all important thing; the vital thing; the upmost thing. More important than the Scriptures themselves or reading them, knowing them and studying them is the “story.” Interestingly when Edwards comes to relate the all important “story” with its vital facts, details and sequence he uses such phrases as “About nine months” and “About three months” (pg.44-45).

So this great scholar with the answer and key in his hand is no wiser or better informed than most of us. The closest he can get in detail to the “story” is “about” yet he states that “**The story binds us to reality.**” The knowledge of this “story” in his eyes is the “**safeguard**” for biblical interpretation. He emphatically states that “**For 500 years we have never taught the entire—very dramatic—story, in its entirety from one end to the other in dramatic, chronological order.**” (pg.47).

Well, if the “story” is so vital and if it is so disastrous to not know it I sure do want to know exactly what is the explanation and definition of the “story.” Is scripture itself the story? Is it Dr. Luke's wonderful *Book of Acts*? Are the Scriptures as given by the Holy Ghost not sufficient? What is the story? How do we attain such knowledge? Edwards tells us: “**...reading scripture in the way it was chronologically written and including the historical facts to fill in the gaps between books, thereby learning the story. Read the Bible in this new way and see if you do not discover a brand new Bible.**” (pg.48).

So the means to finding this “special story” is ‘Scripture plus; the Bible plus history; the Bible plus filling in gaps.’ A man must be wise and skilful enough to add historic fact to scriptural text in order to produce “the story.” This is the story that is all vital, and that all other scholars for 500 years have missed, and which is one of the “worst disasters” to miss.

So one more time his advice is: “**Find the order of the letters. Find the story of what happened in between. Then keep a clear conscience. Do that, and you will move beyond radical.**” (pg.49). According to Edwards this special understanding will give a man a correct understanding of the New Testament and will stop him making any mistakes in exposition. If we had time in this article it would be easy to show that 'Edwards

Story' has taken precedence over scriptural truth and facts. In his many books he replaces the inspired words of scripture with the new words of his story. This is dangerous. He now interprets scripture in light of his story. This is the very thing he accuses others of.

In his novels about the story of the early church, set in the landscape of Acts with information from the epistles he carefully and deliberately shows the apostles constantly standing telling the “story” to the early churches in place of giving forth the Word in preaching and teaching. It is obvious that the urgency of the apostles in his novels in telling “the story” is greatly lacking in what we read of the apostles in our New Testament.

Conclusion

I believe this very short response just highlights the error involved in how Viola and Edwards are using this issue of the NT chronology, and the manner in which they emphasize it in an unbiblical way, not to mention a contentious manner. To emphasize a doctrine, practise, principle or any other thing dogmatically which cannot be found in our Bibles and which was not dogmatically promoted by Christ or the apostles is to be contentious or a lover of arguments. It is a rabbit trail, a sidetrack and a distraction.

While I have delighted over the years since a child to piece together the context of the New Testament, to learn contemporary facts, and to understand and grasp where and when the epistles were written in the text of Acts, I utterly reject this doctrine which Viola, Edwards and others are promoting as being utterly unbiblical.

At best “the story” they create will be faulty; at worst erroneous. And if this be so then those who use it authoritively in approaching the written scriptures or in interpreting scripture will do the very thing they accuse others of doing. These new authors have certainly belittled genuine men of God and great scholars and their manner of studying scripture in their writings; yet they have created a story using extra biblical facts to create a new way to approach the Bible which was not used or taught by or in the early church.

Saints and scholars have laboured over the centuries to stay within the bounds of scripture and to study it as commended and commanded by Paul comparing scripture with scripture. All of their scholarship was submitted and subjected to the written Scripture. Now we are led to believe that such was only proof-texting and that a superior way is this “story telling” which includes things outside scripture. They add scholarship outside of scripture placing it on a level of authority with Scripture which is pure pride, arrogance, elitism and an utter break with the practise of the early church.

As I finish let us settle in our hearts that the only authoritative narrative of early church history is that clearly stated within the text of Scripture. That cannot be improved upon with authority or dogmatically pressed upon the church as a must. Let us yield again to the authoritative and accurate truth as inspired by the Holy Ghost and given to us in the written Scriptures.

