

**The Special Office in the Church:  
A Defence against the views of Radical Restorationist and Organic Church  
proponent Frank Viola**

## INTRODUCTION

The desire to be biblical in all things is very much to be lauded, since Scripture is to be the rule for our faith. This desire to be biblical is worked out also in the way we do church. The accretions of superstitions and unbiblical rituals in the medieval era were largely removed during the time of the Reformation.<sup>1</sup> The Anabaptists were of the opinion however that the Reformers did not go far enough in their reform.<sup>2</sup> Since then, various restorationist movements like the Stone-Campbell movement have attempted to reform and return the church back to what they suppose the first century church looks like.<sup>3</sup> Pentecostalism and its variants are another incarnation of the restorationist impulse, an impulse which is different from the Reformed impulse in desiring to jettison tradition altogether instead of critically engaging it.<sup>4</sup>

One of the latest incarnations of the restorationist impulse is the movement promoted primarily by Frank Viola, the “Organic Church” movement, which claims that most of what is found in modern Christianity is actually pagan in its roots.<sup>5</sup> Viola rejects almost all aspects of the

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance Carlos M.N. Eire, *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1986)

<sup>2</sup> William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism* (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975, 1996), 9-15

<sup>3</sup> David Edwin Harrel, Jr., “Restoration and the Stone-Campbell Tradition,” in Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams, eds., *Encyclopedia of the American Religious Experience* (3 volumes; New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1988), 845-58

<sup>4</sup> Grant Wacker, “Pentecostalism,” in Lippy and Williams, 933-45. There is a strong nature-grace dualism in restorationist movements, as it will be shown shortly

<sup>5</sup> Frank Viola and George Barna, *Pagan Christianity: Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices* (Carol Springs, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2002, 2008, 2012), xxxiii- xxxiv. Frank Viola disputes the labeling of “restoration,” preferring the term “revolution” instead [Frank Viola, *Finding Organic Church: A Comprehensive Guide to Starting and Sustaining Authentic Christian Communities* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009), 127-9]. However, since all of them aim to restore what they believe to be the New Testament Church model, Viola’s “revolution” movement is merely another form of restorationism, and his rejection of the term “restoration” is merely Viola’s disagreement with those other forms of restorationism on what going back to the New Testament Church model would actually look like.

Institutional Church, in favor of a particular house church model without liturgy or any hint of clergy.<sup>6</sup> Together with George Barna, he advocates for spontaneity in every meeting and every-member ministry, in which every believer will join in contributing to church gatherings through the use of song, skit, “short teachings, revelations, and prophetic words” among others, as the Holy Spirit supposedly leads each member during church meetings.<sup>7</sup>

The desire to be biblical is indeed good. However, just because something claims to be biblical does not necessarily make it so. Do the restorationist teachings of Frank Viola actually better approximate the teachings of Scripture, or do they rather represent a departure from the teachings of Scripture?

In this paper, I will look specifically at Frank Viola’s view on the special office of the church with an emphasis on the minister and elder. I contend that Viola’s rejection of the special office is contrary to history and the teachings of Scripture, and is actually much more pagan than the “pagan” practices he is decrying.

#### VIOLA’S VIEW OF THE SPECIAL OFFICE OF MINISTER/ ELDER

Viola decries the idea of any form or appearance of the clergy/ laity distinction. In his view, the New Testament elders, shepherds or overseers are mere depictions of “horizontal relationships that includes exemplary action,” and the titles given to people are for recognizing them for “their service and spiritual maturity.”<sup>8</sup> Viola charged that the clergy/ laity distinction “has divided the believing community into first- and second-class Christians,” and “perpetuates an awful falsehood ... [that] some Christians are more privileged than others to serve the Lord.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Viola and Barna, 47-143

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 261

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 110

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 136

In this light, the “pastoral office has stolen ... [the] right [of other believers] to function as a full member of Christ’s body” and “has distorted the reality of the body, making the pastor a giant mouth and transforming you [the laity] into a tiny ear.”<sup>10</sup> Viola blames the influence of “paganism” and especially that of Constantine for transforming the New Testament organic church into the institutional church with its attendant “glorification of the clergy.”<sup>11</sup> Elders, overseers and pastors therefore were originally meant to have merely functional advisory roles in the church, not sociological special offices with real authority.<sup>12</sup>

#### PROLEGOMENA: HISTORY AND THE NATURE/ GRACE PARADIGM

On church history, Viola opines that the early church has become corrupted so quickly that even the church fathers are suspect.<sup>13</sup> The church fathers had quickly corrupted the church with their pagan philosophies and practices which they bring over into the Church, as early as in the late first century AD, and thus are not reliable indicators on how the New Testament Church actually functions.<sup>14</sup> While certainly chronological closeness does not necessarily indicate greater fidelity to the New Testament model of the Church, yet positing apostasy on such a scale this close to the apostolic era seems to be a stretch of the imagination. Are we to suppose that members of the church who saw and heard the apostles as children would not protest the radical transformation and syncretism of the church that supposedly happened during the period immediately after the apostles?

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 136

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 120

<sup>12</sup> Frank Viola, *Reimagining Church: Pursuing the Dream of Organic Christianity* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2008), 169-73; Viola, *Organic*, 99-102

<sup>13</sup> E.g. Viola and Barna, 61

<sup>14</sup> E.g. *Ibid.*, 110

Far more insidious it seems is Viola's antithesis between nature and grace.<sup>15</sup> In Viola's arguments, anything that reeks of Greco-Roman culture probably is. For example, Viola claims for the headwaters of the sermon the orations given by the Greek wandering teachers called the sophists.<sup>16</sup> Firstly in response, such is to commit the logical fallacy of guilt by association, as if mere similarity implies that those practices are just as pagan.<sup>17</sup> Secondly, such assumes a grace annihilating nature paradigm, in which things concerning the church have no relation whatsoever with the natural world, the spiritual with the secular. Thus, there must be a uniquely "Christian" way of everything. Such is a denial of Common Grace, in which the natural men do have some sense of what true religion demands, albeit corrupted by Sin.

#### PROLEGOMENA: THE FALSE HEAD/ HEART DICHOTOMY

Viola further compounds his hermeneutical error in positing a false dichotomy between the head and the heart.<sup>18</sup> 'Head knowledge' it is claimed is "merely cerebral" and thus of little use for service in the church, which requires the 'heart knowledge' of "hands-on experience in the crucible of body life."<sup>19</sup> Biblically however, the Bible uses the 'head' and 'heart' interchangeably, with the heart being the seat of the mind and the will.<sup>20</sup> Theologically, saving knowledge, in faith, consists of knowledge (*notitia*) and assent (*assensus*) to such knowledge combined with trust (*fiducia*).<sup>21</sup> Saving knowledge is not just cerebral; not mere assent to a set of

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<sup>15</sup> On the relation between nature and grace, see Thomas Aquinas, *Nature and Grace: Selections from the Summa Theologica of Thomas Aquinas* (Library of Christian Classics Vol. XI; trans. and ed. by A. M. Fairweather; Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press); Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Salvation: Union with Christ* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 209-11; Herman Bavinck, "Calvin and Common Grace," translated by Geerhardus Vos, *Princeton Theological Review* 7 no 3 (1909): 437-65

<sup>16</sup> Viola and Barna, 89-90

<sup>17</sup> This is often coupled with the logical fallacy of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, since the inference is made that the practice is taken over (in time) from pagan sources.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 215-8

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 216-7

<sup>20</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *Faith and Saving Faith* (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1983), 66-79

<sup>21</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 503-504, in Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology: New Combined Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996); J. Gresham Machen, *What is Faith?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1946),

abstract propositions, but also a confidence in the object of that knowledge Jesus Christ. For both these reasons, Viola has created a false dichotomy between the ‘head’ and the ‘heart,’ whereas the biblical contrast is between mere assent and fiducial assent; between mere profession and true confession.

Viola uses this false dichotomy to play into his denigration of the intellect. While certainly intellectual knowledge alone is insufficient, it is nevertheless necessary; more than cerebral knowledge is needed for service in the church, but certainly not less than that.

This anti-intellectualism, together with Viola’s denigration of almost all of church history and his nature-grace dualism, sets the stage for Viola’s rejection of the special office of the elder and minister, and the promotion of his idea of the “organic” every-member ministry in its place.

## ORGANISM AND ORGANIZATION

One of Viola’s key points towards his vision of the organic church is his belief that the Church is an organism not an organization.<sup>22</sup> While conceding that some form of institution is necessary, Viola attacks the institutional church due to its highly structured nature, among others.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the presence of structure can be said to be the *sine qua non* of being an ‘institutional church’ or ‘organization’ as Viola calls it, since Viola criticizes churches that meet

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46-48; Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 726; Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 583.

<sup>22</sup> Viola, *Reimagining*, 13, 16

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-8

in homes where meetings are structured too.<sup>24</sup> In place of structure, Viola advocates for totally spontaneous, “creative” and “fresh” leading by the Holy Spirit at every church meeting.<sup>25</sup>

That the church is an organism, the Body of Christ, is certainly true (1 Cor. 12). However, Viola is in error to pit the imagery of the Church as organism against the imagery of the Church as organization; Scripture teaches both.<sup>26</sup> In the language of Scripture, the Church is made up of living stones built into a spiritual house (1 Peter 2:4). The Apostle Peter here mixes the organic metaphor (‘living,’ ‘spiritual’) with the architectural metaphor (‘stone,’ ‘house’). The Church is thus both living and structured, and the Scriptures do not see those two metaphors as being incompatible with each other.

Viola’s aversion to organization and structure stems from his nature-grace dualism, and a belief that structure necessarily stifles the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>27</sup> Along this line, he utilizes 1 Corinthians 12-14 as the *locus classicus* as to why the church should be seen as an organism and not an organization.<sup>28</sup> However, when the false dichotomy is rejected, this passage does not actually reject an organizational view of the Church. In the context of 1 Corinthians, the apostle Paul is giving regulations (structure) for the exercise of the spiritual gifts. The Holy Spirit after all is a Spirit of order and peace not of disorder (1 Cor. 14: 33), so spontaneity is actually not sanctioned by Paul but rather prohibited.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, in the Old Covenant era, God works

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<sup>24</sup> Viola, *Organic*, 115-9. Viola articulates the “unbiblical features” in the order of worship as follows: (1) “They are officiated and directed by a clergyman,” (2) they make the sermon central,” (3) the people are passive and not permitted to minister” (Viola and Barna, 73). All these are issues of structure.

<sup>25</sup> Viola and Barna, 78-9

<sup>26</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol. 4: Holy Spirit, Church and New Creation* (trans. John Vriend; ed. John Bolt; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 329-32

<sup>27</sup> Apart from holding to a nature-grace dualism, there is no reason why the Holy Spirit cannot work through structures, especially since He Himself has ordained those structures in the first place.

<sup>28</sup> Viola and Barna, 50, 55, 59, 80, 82, 97, 103. Viola quotes 1 Corinthians 12-14 and Hebrews 10:25 again and again for this idea of the church being an organism, stating that those texts described the “normative church meeting.” (*Ibid.*, 103)

<sup>29</sup> The “disorder” (ἀκαταστασία) spoken of here is one which reigns when structure is missing from the service.

through the structured priesthood of Israel, so there is no reason why we should rule out *a priori* that God cannot still work through structures, especially since the early church did organize their activities.<sup>30</sup>

#### AN ANALYSIS OF VIOLA'S EVERY-MEMBER MINISTRY TEACHING

As it has been seen earlier, Viola's rejection of the special office is due to the "pastoral office ... ha[ving] distorted the reality of the body, making the pastor a giant mouth and transforming you [the laity] into a tiny ear."<sup>31</sup> Viola's use of the Body metaphor as the Central Dogma of his ecclesiology is the rationale for his promotion of every-member ministry, and his rejection of the special office flows from this promotion of every-member ministry.

It is certainly granted that the Body metaphor is biblical. However, governing Viola's use of the Body metaphor is the presupposition that functioning as part of the Body of Christ necessarily implies that everyone should be involved in the church meeting in an active role contributing to the activities in the meeting. However, why should the Body metaphor necessarily lead to such a conclusion? James 3:1 for example states that not many people should be teachers, which imply that "restricting" who can or cannot be teachers is certainly the right time to do, and such a restriction has nothing to do with not letting the Body function.

Viola raises the text of Ephesians 4:11-16 and the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers as his rationale for promoting every-member ministry.<sup>32</sup> The problem is that the

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<sup>30</sup> Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman, "Introduction," in Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman, eds., *Perspectives on Church Governments: 5 views of Church Polity* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2004), 3. Viola does not dispute that some structure may at times be present in the New Testament church (Viola and Barna, 88). The question however is upon what basis does he characterize the events with some structure as being "sporadic," and "special" and thus not applicable to the church (*Ibid.*, 88), while other events described in other texts are considered "normative" for the church. It seems his nature-grace dualist framework is the filter used to categorize the described events in the New Testament church.

<sup>31</sup> Viola and Barna, 136

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-8, 128

doctrine of the priesthood of all believers does not “make everyone into church workers,” but rather “turned every kind of work into a sacred calling.”<sup>33</sup> The problem with Viola’s understanding of the priesthood of all believers is that his understanding of calling is too small, being limited by his nature-grace dualistic mindset to the realm of the spiritual. Believers can and should function as a body, but that functioning is not just a “spiritual” functioning within a church meeting, but rather functioning as the Body of Christ in the world. The paradigm of service Viola embraces is fundamentally sinful, fixating on the restriction in the special office instead of the liberty and general nature of the general office. Viola is like Adam and Eve in the garden, who focuses on the one forbidden fruit instead of seeing the many fruits that God has given for food. He thus errs in seeking to make the functions of the special office general, while downplaying the general office of believers to serve God and their neighbors in the world.

Ephesians 4:11-16 seems to promote every-member ministry, with the phrase “to equip saints for the work of ministry” (Eph. 4:11b ESV) in the text of the ESV. However, as T. David Gordon has shown, such a rendering of the original Greek is not the natural reading of the text.<sup>34</sup> The text is better rendered “to perfect the saints for works of service.” The context of the passage, which is the giving of people functioning in those capacities by God for the good of the church, makes better sense if the focus is on the people of God receiving gifts from God, instead of them being equipped to offer God good works.

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<sup>33</sup> Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 19. Also, “the priesthood of all believers simply denied any ontological divide between clergy and laity before Christ, the only mediator. However, this in no way eliminated the necessity of public offices in the church.” (Horton, *Christian Faith*, 748)

<sup>34</sup> T. David Gordon, “‘Equipping’ Ministry in Ephesians 4?” *JETS* 37 no. 1 (March 1994): 69-78

On the issue of ministry, the two major competing paradigms are disputing who the active partner(s) in ministry are.<sup>35</sup> In the biblical paradigm, God is the active partner. God comes to serve His people; God saves us; God gives offices to serve His flock. As it begins in Ephesians 1:3, God has already blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing! Everything is from God; even our meetings every Lord's Day is for our benefit, for God being self-sufficient does not need anything from us.

The alternate paradigm held by Viola sees men and women as the active partners in a church meeting. God is worthy, so therefore serving God is a great privilege. In this paradigm, to restrict most of the people from contributing to the activities in a church meeting is to relegate them to second-class Christians. God is seen like some kind of celebrity, and restricting people from serving Him is to rob them of the privilege they should have as members of His body. It is no wonder that Viola sees the special office as robbing "[the] right [of other believers] to function as a full member of Christ's body."<sup>36</sup>

The problem with every-member ministry is not that believers are to be passive in church, but that the direction of ministry is wrong from the start. The biblical direction of ministry is God ministering to His people, and then they serve their neighbors. God does not need our ministry; we need His. Also, we are a full member of Christ's body not by serving God, as if He is like the dumb idols who need anything from us (Acts 17:25), but we are a full member because God the Father has elected us, Christ died for us, and the Holy Spirit applies redemption to us, all without us having to "serve" God.

## THE SPECIAL OFFICE VINDICATED

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<sup>35</sup> "In other words, if the church is not "a place where certain things happen"... , but is merely "a people who do certain things," then "our works take precedence over God's works in salvation." (Horton, *Christian Faith*, 886-7)

<sup>36</sup> Viola and Barna, 136

Viola's case against the special office is argued from the nature of the church as an organism, from the priesthood of believers, and from the calling of every member ministry. As the church is an organism, so it is said to have no structures and thus no special offices. In response, the church is an organism but it is also an organization, with Viola's antagonism to structure seen as based upon his nature-grace dualism. As all believers are called to the universal priesthood, so it is said that all believers are equal and no special offices must exist. In reply, the priesthood of believers does not turn all believers into church workers, but rather that they can now serve God in the world. Here again, Viola's nature-grace dualism shrinks the idea of service to be within the church only. Thirdly, as the case is argued for every-member ministry, and then arguing that the functioning of special office would stifle it, so the reply is made that every-member ministry is actually contrary to Scripture, and that the paradigm Viola works with is one that has Man working for God, instead of God in His grace giving gifts to Man.

Since God gives gifts to Man (Eph. 4: 8, 11), one thing God continues to give are people to perform the functions necessary in His Church, functions which correspond to offices in the church. Special offices of the Church refer merely to those called, not those made ontologically superior over fellow believers in the Church. Just as God called Moses, just as God called the prophets, what differentiates special office believers from general office believers is the call of God, *extra nos*, and that only. Here too, those schooled in the things of Christ are better fitted to the special office, because education in the things of God is a gift to His Church, not something to be sneered at. Over and against Rome, there is nothing inherently superior in special office bearers of the church. Over and against the Anabaptist and their Restorationist heirs, the Holy Spirit does not work independent of Christ and His Word.<sup>37</sup> It is all nice and fuzzy to say with

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<sup>37</sup> Bavinck, *Dogmatics*, 332

Viola that the church is to be guided by Christ and the Holy Spirit, but how exactly is such guidance received? If Christ has indeed given His Church gifts, of which the special office is one of them, and seminary education another, it is foolishness to claim that we know better than God how He would guide us this day in our church meetings.<sup>38</sup>

Denying a nature-grace dualism, we recognize that church government is necessary this side of heaven because of human depravity and the Fall.<sup>39</sup> Viola's idea of elders only possessing an advisory role, does not work in actual life.<sup>40</sup> An advisor without real authority has nothing to offer when the opponent insists on rejecting his advice. Such advisors are helpless when a wolf comes inside and draws most of the people in the "organic church" away to him, and who refuses the advice of those non-office "elders." Viola's "organic church" model therefore does not seem able to handle the issue of dealing with false teachings within the church, with Viola's own social trinitarianism being proof.<sup>41</sup> It is in this light that those in special office have real authority within their designated callings, so that Christ can rule His church in the present.<sup>42</sup>

## CONCLUSION

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<sup>38</sup> This is not to mention the inherently subject nature of such "guidance." How can one know whose interpretation of the Spirit's guidance is right? Viola has noted the short shelf life of a house church (Viola, *Organic*, 120-5), yet his advice is merely to try harder, categorically claiming that failure of any house church is "because they were not founded upon a revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ, or "they ended up straying from the centrality of Christ" (*Ibid.*, 121). Short of any objective standard, this kind of explanation sounds like shifting the goalposts around to fit the case

<sup>39</sup> David W Hall, "The Pastoral and Theological Significance of Church Government," in David W. Hall and Joseph H. Hall, eds., *Classic Readings in Reformed and Presbyterian Church Government* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1994), 13

<sup>40</sup> Viola, *Organic*, 99-102; Viola, *Reimagining*, 169-72

<sup>41</sup> Viola, *Reimagining*, 35, 108-9. Another issue is the error of allowing women in ministry [Del Birkey, "The House Church: A Missiological Model," *Missiology* **19** no 1 (Jan 1991): 71], a position in open violation of Paul's teaching in 1 Tim. 2:8-15 (c.f. my paper on the text submitted for the Pauline Epistles course: Daniel H. Chew, *Gender Roles: Ordained order of mankind towards the Creator*, unpublished essay)

<sup>42</sup> E.g. In Titus 1:11, elders are to silence false teachers. There is no way for advisors without authority to silence false teachers. Advisors also can't command (1 Tim. 4:11, 5:7, and can't rule (1 Tim. 5:17)

The “organic church” model by Viola, while it sounds liberating, does not work.<sup>43</sup> Its rejection of the special office creates anarchy in those church bodies, an anarchy that either ends in the dissolution of the body, in some form of authority figure rising in that local gathering, or even in people seeing Frank Viola as their *de facto* pope and leader of their movement. Nature abhors a vacuum, and an evisceration of special office will only introduce leadership back into the equation, just that this time around it is cloaked in the mask of having no leaders but Christ. Formerly, the leadership is seen and thus accountable. In the latter case of the “organic” church however, the leadership is nameless and thus not accountable. Far better it is actually to follow God’s plan in church polity, which hold those in office accountable before God and their fellow men, with checks and balances in place to protect against abuse.<sup>44</sup>

Viola’s rejection of the special office is thus contrary to the teachings of Scripture. While Viola charged the institutional church with being pagan, ironically, it is his view of church that is more pagan. In reaction to the perceived institutionalism borrowed from institutional Greco-Roman religions, Viola’s organic church model sounds more like the Gnostics in its rejection of institutions. By trying to avoid paganism, Viola’s “organic church” model drifts further away from the teachings of Scripture on this topic into mysticism.

God rules His Church by His given office bearers. Safety and protection is to be found in the order instituted by God and Christ. Let us keep and honor those in special office therefore, for it is given for the good of God’s people.

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<sup>43</sup> The high failure rate is even admitted by Viola (Viola, *Organic*, 120-5)

<sup>44</sup> David W Hall, “Significance,” in Hall and Hall, 14-19

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