



Why Organic Church Is Not Exactly a Movement

If the driving force of any movement or phenomenon is not Jesus Christ, we are building castles in the air. A response to "Long Live the Organic Church."

Frank Viola | posted 1/13/2010 11:34AM

Words are funny things. Sometimes a word can get into the drinking water of a subculture and morph into clay. A word becomes clay when it loses its universal meaning and becomes molded and shaped to mean different things to different people.

Enter the phrase *organic church*.

Organic church, or "organic expression of the church," or "organic church life" are terms that owe a debt to one man who's rarely mentioned in these discussions—British author and teacher T. Austin Sparks. As far as I know, he is the first person to use this term, and he used it often.

When T. Austin Sparks employed the word *organic* to refer to church, he was not speaking of a system, a method, a technique, or even a movement. Instead, he was speaking of the particular expression a church takes when she is living according to her God-given nature as a living organism.

Note his words:

God's way and law of fullness is that of organic life. In the Divine order, life produces its own organism, whether it be vegetable, animal, human, or spiritual. This means that everything comes from the inside. Function, order, and fruit issue from this law of life within. It was solely on this principle that what we have in the New Testament came into being. Organized Christianity has entirely reversed this order.

Taking my cue from Sparks, I've been using the terms *organic church* and *organic expression of the church* since 1993.

For Sparks, myself, and many others, *organic church* refers to a body of believers who are learning to live by the indwelling life of Christ together. And out of that living, the church takes on a certain expression. That expression is marked by some of the following features: the every-member functioning of the body, the centrality and supremacy of Jesus Christ, consensual

decision making, open-participatory gatherings, and passing through seasons (meaning the church is not tied down to ritual, but moves according to the season she finds herself in).

Today the phrase *organic church* is in vogue, but it has been converted to clay.

Some mold it as a method of church to win souls and change the world for Christ, a sentiment that harkens back to D. L. Moody and J. R. Mott. These advocates see the church as a soul-winning station. Its chief mission is the evangelization of the world.

Others mold it as a synonym for *house church*. A house church is simply a group of Christians that meets in a home for their corporate worship. That can take countless forms and expressions. House churches can range from institutional services in a living room with pews firmly bolted to the floor, to glorified Bible studies, supper-fests, "bless-me" clubs, healthy Christian communities, or first-rate cults.

As I've often said, meeting in a home doesn't make you a church any more than sitting in a donut shop makes you a police officer (no offense to police officers; the better part of my family is in law enforcement!). There's nothing magical about meeting in a home. And the living room, while a great place to gather, should never be the Christian's passion.

Consequently, those who are regarded as voices of what some are calling the organic church movement do not all agree on what the church is, nor how she expresses herself on the earth. Nor do they see eye to eye on God's ultimate intention.

That said, organic church is not a monolith, and therefore, it cannot rightly be called a movement.

I believe it would be more accurate to say that there is a phenomenon today where countless Christians are leaving institutional forms of church and exploring non-traditional forms of church in pursuit of authentic, shared-life community.

I've been gathering in organic expressions of the church (as defined above) for the last 21 years. And from my observations, many of the people who are leaving the institutional form of church presently are leaving because they are following a spiritual instinct. They are saying and thinking, "There has got to be more to Jesus Christ and his body than this." Or as Reggie McNeal once put it, "A growing number of people are leaving the institutional church for a new reason. They are not leaving because they have lost their faith. They are leaving the church to preserve their faith."

Some are calling this a move of God. Others see it as a departure from God's will (for them, leaving the institutional form of church means leaving church itself). And of course others are calling it a movement.

Nevertheless, here are a few observations regarding the drive to experience organic church life. Note that this is how the terrain looks from my hill. I'm looking at the backs of the rocks while others may see their fronts:

1. The return to more organic forms of church (church as organism rather than church as institution) is nothing new. The U.S. has had two such phenomena already. One occurred in the late '60s and early '70s. Many young people in America were coming to Christ and finding authentic community. It was later hijacked by an authoritarian movement that smothered and killed it. The other occurred in the late '80s and early '90s.

2. The impulse to return to organic church life has happened historically in other times and places. You can find it among the Radical Reformers, the Anabaptists in particular. It had a beautiful start in Plymouth, England, with what later became known as the Plymouth Brethren, and still later in China among those who were tagged the Little Flock. (Each ended up in a different place from where they began, but that's another discussion.)

3. All of the above streams of the Christian faith didn't set out to change the world. That wasn't their governing motive. They instead consecrated themselves to please the Lord and to make a home for him on this earth. They sought to return to the centrality of Jesus Christ and the living experience of his body. As a result of that, some of them had a profound influence on their surrounding societies. But that wasn't their goal.

4. Movement mentality always seems to seep into any genuine move of God. I'm defining movement here as the idea that big is better and numbers mean success. Historically, the church of Jesus Christ passes through seasons. Some of those seasons are marked by revivals where many souls are brought into the kingdom of God. At such times, it's almost effortless to lead people to Christ. But while revivals produce numerical growth, they do not produce depth. We are wise to observe that Paul planted approximately 13 churches in his lifetime. The apostle was far more concerned with building quality—"gold, silver, and precious stone"—than he was with amassing big numbers (see 1 Cor. 3).

5. Historically, movements become monuments (or they go off the rails) when Jesus Christ is not front and center, the beating heart and foundation. When some other thing—even a good thing like trying to change the world, saving souls, or multiplying churches—replaces the pursuit of Christ, we lose our way.

All told: There is a phenomenon going on today. Perhaps a move of God's Spirit (?). But it's nothing new. It's simply a repeat of past currents. What will determine its success, longevity, and quality is not any human technique or method. The cutting-edge must be Jesus Christ as the only foundation, the centrality, and the supremacy. I am keenly aware that virtually every Christian bulbously claims that Jesus is the center of what they're doing. But listen to the rhetoric carefully, and you'll discover if it's Christ or some other thing that's being pushed and promoted.

So many things can replace our Lord. But God's eternal purpose—that which has been in his heart since before time—will never be fulfilled if our first rattle out of the box is a new way of doing church, a method for multiplying churches, or a technique to change the world. God's purpose will only be restored if we blindly and singularly make Christ our pursuit, our life, and our motive. Everything else will flow out of that.

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