



ORGANIZATIONAL

VS.



ORGANIC

BY FRANK VIOLA

Countless evangelical and mainline churches have the following sentence in their mission statements, “The church is an organism, not an organization,” or words to that effect. But what does that mean exactly, and what does a church that both believes and practices “church as organism” look like?

I’ve talked a lot about this over the years, and in my book *Reimagining Church: Pursuing the Dream of Organic Christianity*, but what I think people often want are practical examples of this—of the difference between an organic church and an organizational church. Here I would like to break down some key distinctions between a church that operates according to its organic nature and instincts (a la, “an organic expression of the church”) and a church that operates primarily as an institutional organization (a la, an “institutional” or “organized” church).

Before we plunge into the differences, let me point out that the term “organic church” is in vogue right now.

In this regard, it’s popular for any and all different types of churches to use this term to describe themselves. It’s not dissimilar to the term “missional church.” Both “missional” and “organic” are clay words. They are being shaped by different writers in different ways. Sometimes very different ways.

All told, the experience of the Body of Christ is organic. That is, it springs from life ... God’s life, rather than by human organizational methods.

Clearly, the church we read about in the New Testament was “organic.” That is, it was born from and sustained by spiritual life instead of constructed by human institutions. To use an illustration, a lab-created orange would not be organic. But if I planted an orange seed into the ground and it produced an orange tree, the tree would be organic.

To put it generally, the difference between an organized church and an organic church is the difference between standing in front of a fan and standing outdoors on a windy day. It’s the difference between General Motors and a vegetable garden.

## ISOLATING THE DIFFERENCES

Getting more specific, let's isolate some of the main differences between an organic expression of the church and an organized (or institutional) form of the Church:

### ORGANIZED CHURCHES

- + The form of the church precedes the life of the church. Thus, the church begins with clergy, staff, programs, rituals, etc.
- + Sustained by a professional clergy or minister.
- + The clergy seeks to energize the laity.
- + Limit many spiritual functions to the ordained.
- + Render the bulk of their congregants passive during church services.
- + Members associate church with a building, a denomination, or a religious service (Sunday morning typically).
- + Unified around a shared set of customs or doctrines.
- + Sustained by programs.
- + Need finances to survive— their main costs are building overhead and clergy/staff salaries
- + Leadership is hierarchical.
- + Decisions are made by the clergy or a specially elected “board.”
- + The pastor is the leader and minister of the church.

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- + The form of the church follows the life of the church—just as the form of the human body springs out of the life of the human.
- + There's no clergy or professional minister.
- + Don't recognize a separate class (laity).
- + Recognize all members as acting priests.
- + Allow and encourage all Christians to function in the meetings of the church.
- + Affirm that people do not go to church; they (together) are the church. This isn't being “theologically correct.” It's the actual experience of the members
- + Unified around Christ alone. There is no other test of fellowship.
- + Sustained by relationships built on Jesus Christ.
- + Are not dependant on a building. There are no clergy salaries. Resources are spent on “the poor among you” and extra local work.
- + Leadership comes from the entire body. Church planters equip the church in the beginning, elders (when they emerge) oversee the church together.
- + Decisions are made corporately by consensus.
- + Shepherds are plural. They are a gifted people who care for the flock.

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- + There's a strong focus on attendance to services, maintaining the building, and increasing the budget. What Dallas Willard calls the ABCs (attendance, buildings, cash)
- + The church does essentially the same thing week after week, month after month, year after year. It's locked into a ritual.
- + Gifts are viewed as offices, and people are put into those offices at the very beginning.
- + It's typical for members not to know one another very well, only seeing each other at weekly church services.

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- + The focus is on pursuing Jesus Christ corporately in face-to-face community. Everything else springs out of that .
- + The church passes through seasons. It is not locked into a ritual.
- + Gifts are not seen as offices, but as functions. They emerge naturally and organically over time. They come up out of the soil, and are typically not titled.
- + There's a close-knit community. Members are like family to one another. They live a shared life in Christ.

## TOWARD THE EXPERIENCE OF ORGANIC CHURCH LIFE

Let's look more deeply at the organic nature of the Church.

All life forms have a DNA—a genetic code. DNA gives each life form a specific expression. For example, the instructions to build your physical body are encoded in your DNA. Your DNA largely determines your physical and psychological traits.

Since the church is organic, it too has a DNA—a spiritual DNA. Where do we discover the DNA of the church? I submit that we can learn a great deal about it by looking into God Himself.

We Christians uniquely proclaim a triune God. In the words of the Athanasian Creed, “The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, yet there are not three gods, but one God.”

The Godhead is a Community of three, or a “Trinity.”

The Scriptures portray the multifaceted relationship of Father, Son and Spirit in the richest and deepest language imaginable. Within the triune God we discover authentic community—an eternal, complementary and reciprocal interchange of divine life, divine love and divine fellowship.

Amazingly, this same relationship has been transposed from the divine key into the human key. It has moved from the eternal God in the heavenlies to the church on earth, the Body of Christ.

A common question I get asked is, “Sure, the church is organic, but it must have organization right?”

My response is that this is the wrong question. Every life form has an expression

or form. And it always has predictable ways of behaving. Your physical body is an organic entity, but it clearly has a form. And there is a certain organization within that form. However, the important question is, “from where does the organism derive its form?”

Is the form organic—innate to its life and nature –or is it imposed from the outside?

Because the church is organic, it has a natural expression. Just like the physical body does. Accordingly, when a group of Christians follows their spiritual DNA, they will gather in a way that matches the DNA of the triune God—for they possess the same life that God Himself possesses.

Consequently, the DNA of the church is marked by the very traits that we find in the triune God—mutual love, mutual fellowship, mutual dependence, mutual submission, mutual ministry and face-to-face community.

While the seed of the Gospel will naturally produce these particular features, how they are expressed may look slightly different from culture to culture. For instance, I once planted an organic church in the country of Chile. The songs they wrote, the way they interacted with each other, the way they sat, what they did with their children, all looked different from organic churches born in Europe and the United States.

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However, the same basic features that reside in the DNA of the church were all present. Never did any of these churches produce a clergy system, a sole pastor, a hierarchical leadership structure or an order of worship that rendered the majority passive.

In nature, there’s a flowering shrub called the bigleaf hydrangea. If you take the seed of that shrub and plant it in the soil of Indiana, it will yield pink flowers when it blooms. But if you take that same seed and plant it in the soil of Brazil or Poland, it will produce blue flowers. Even more interesting, if you take the same seed and plant it in another type of soil, it will yield purple flowers.

The bigleaf hydrangea, however, will never produce thorns. It will never bear apples. And it will never grow tall like a pine tree. Why? Because these features are not within the DNA of the seed. In the same way, the church of Jesus Christ—when planted properly and left on its own, without human control and institutional interference—will produce certain features by virtue of its DNA. Like the bigleaf hydrangea, the church may look different from culture to culture, but it will have the same basic expression wherever it’s allowed to flourish. ②

**FRANK VIOLA** is the author of numerous books on the deeper Christian life and radical church reformation, including *Reimagining Church*, *Pagan Christianity*, and the new release *From Eternity to Here* which explores the unfolding drama of God’s Eternal Purpose (Grand Mission). Check out his website, which has many free resources, at [www.FrankViola.com](http://www.FrankViola.com)