



Reframing

How the organic church makes followers of Jesus

By Frank Viola



Although discipleship is a hot-button issue right now, there's nothing new about it. Historically, the emphasis placed on this fundamental part of the Christian walk has moved in waves.

The word *discipleship* took on new popularity after Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship* was published in English in 1948. Parachurch organizations began to emphasize "making disciples"

rather than just converting souls. Thus modern discipleship programs were born. But soon people began to see these programs as legalistic. Young believers eventually burned out from the rote and rigors of regimented prayer, Bible study, confession of sins and weekly witnessing. What began as an exciting prospect turned into religious duty and drudgery. Accusations of lukewarmness arose, fueling the perception of legalism.

On the heels of this came a shift toward extreme grace that infiltrated the early days of the Jesus movement. This reaction bred a segment of Christendom who swung the pendulum of legalism to the other side and were highly undisciplined and morally lax.

The "discipleship/shepherding" movement's emergence in the early '70s sought to correct this problem of "greasy grace" by swinging the pendulum back to the earlier

Discipleship

ways of discipling young Christians. This time, however, it added a line of theology built on a stringent view of submission to authority. The result wasn't pretty. Many lives were devastated by top-heavy, high-handed, authoritarian leaders who wielded power and control under the banner of "submission to authority."

Almost 40 years later, today's youth know little about these earlier movements nor the roots of modern "discipleship." In fact, that term has taken on another wind. Yet history and its cyclical patterns teach us this sober lesson: Whenever Christian leaders observe a waning in the faith commitment of young believers, they assume that the antidote is "discipleship" as a method and program.

A Modern 'Reframe-ation'

For the last two decades I've been involved in the organic church phenomenon that's sweeping across the world. I wrote extensively on organic church life in my book *Reimagining Church*, but here's a brief overview:

Organic churches meet much like the New Testament assembly did. They have no clergy or professional pastors and typically don't own a building. They often meet in homes or occasionally in rented spaces. The members participate in all of the church's decisions. In corporate meetings, every member is active, functioning according to his gifts. Leadership is present, but it doesn't dominate, control or usurp, and it is exercised by everyone in the church.

Members know each other deeply and live a shared life in Christ. This authentic community is one of the hallmarks of organic churches. Yet perhaps their most outstanding feature is the emphasis on the indwelling Christ and the belief that Jesus is the only head of His church. This belief isn't simply a theological proposition; it's the practical experience of all authentic organic churches.

One of the most striking observations I've made over the last 21 years is how disciple-making operates in an organic church compared to a more traditional/institutional church. Those who stress the importance of discipleship today take their cue from Jesus' exhortation to His disciples to "make disciples of all the nations" (Matt. 28:19). Yet a significant follow-up question to that commission is rarely asked—namely, *how* did the 12 make disciples? The answer is telling.

The 12 didn't set up discipleship classes or programs. They didn't put one Christian above another in a hierarchical chain of command. They didn't create accountability groups or unmovable regiments for observing spiritual disciplines. Instead, they planted vibrant Christian communities all across Palestine. Likewise, Paul of Tarsus made disciples by planting Christian communities throughout the gentile world. To the early believers, Christian community was the only discipleship "program" that existed, and it was sufficient.

My point: The way the 12 made disciples was the same way Jesus made

disciples. To wit, Jesus lived with a group of men and women for three and a half years. During that time, they shared their lives together under the headship of Christ. Jesus, the 12 and some women all experienced authentic community with Jesus as the center of their community life.

In the same way, the men whom Jesus commissioned planted authentic Christian communities all across the world, and within such communities, disciples were naturally made. Those communities were organic rather than institutional.

Organic Disciple-Making

It's impossible to separate the *ekklesia* from Jesus Christ; it's His very body. And according to the New Testament, you can't separate discipleship from the *ekklesia* any more than you can separate childrearing from the family. In organic churches today, each member becomes "discipled" simply by being part of the shared-life community. Here are some of the features of organic church life that explain how this occurs:

1. Spiritual formation is tied to knowing Christ deeply with others. Organic church life doesn't include religious duty, programs and methods. The focus is on knowing Jesus. Organic churches recognize that Christ is alive and can be known profoundly. They understand God's goal is to "form Christ" within the believing community (see Gal. 4:19).

Extra-local church planters give organic churches a rich revelation

of Jesus through their spoken ministry. They also offer members practical ways of knowing Him—both individually and corporately. Because of this, members often pursue the Lord together during the week. Knowing Christ together is a large part of their shared life.

2. Spiritual growth occurs naturally in the context of Christian community. The responsibility for discipleship doesn't rest on the individual in the organic church. Spiritual growth isn't an individual pursuit. Organic churches by definition are shared-life communities. Members are intimately involved in one another's lives. Hence, they seek the Lord together during the week, often in pairs or threes. They use Scripture together, not as a means to gain academic knowledge or sermon material, but as a means to learn Christ and fellowship with Him in the Spirit.

Organic churches understand that Christians are "new creatures." Every creature or species has a unique habitat. When a species is removed from its native habitat, it either dies or some of its natural functions turn dormant. As new creatures in Christ, Christians have a native habitat: the *ekklesia*—a shared-life community that gathers by, to, through and for the Lord Jesus. Spiritual growth occurs when God's people live in their native habitat. And that's exactly what authentic organic churches afford.

3. Transformation takes place by the every-member functioning of the body in regular corporate meetings. Organic churches do not have the typical Sunday morning order of worship in which a minister preaches a monologue to a passive congregation. Instead, their meetings are marked by open participation. Every member functions and shares. He plans with others as a group, prepares in private and then brings something wonderful of Christ to share with everyone else. In an organic church, corporate meetings are the place to give rather than to simply receive (see 1 Cor. 14:26).

It's easy to assume these meetings would be chaotic. But extra-local church planters equip organic churches to prepare and share the Lord in meetings that are "done decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40). The result is an unveiling of

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Christ as He is "assembled" by members of the body in a visible way.

Mutual exhortation in regular Christian gatherings is a major key to spiritual growth (see Heb. 10:24-25). It's written in the bloodstream of the universe: If you don't function, you don't grow. And if you don't give, you don't receive. Organic churches are strong on mutual exhortation and encouragement because everyone participates in the gatherings.

4. The marker for discipleship is living by an indwelling Lord rather than by trying to imitate His outward behavior. An organic church can be defined as a group of people learning to live by Christ together. Consider how our Lord lived while on earth: God the Father indwelt Jesus by the Holy Spirit; and Jesus lived by His indwelling Father.

After Jesus ascended, He came back to earth in the Spirit to take up residence in all who trust in Him (see John 14:16; Rom. 8:1-11). For this reason Paul calls Jesus a "life-giving Spirit" (1 Cor. 15:45). Therefore, what the Father was to Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ is to you and me. He's our indwelling Lord. The Lord declared, "As the living Father sent me, and I live because the Father, so he who feeds on

Me will live because of Me" (John 6:57). Paul later wrote, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20).

Organic churches, therefore, do not strive to be like Jesus. That only leads to failure and frustration. Jesus Himself said that without the Father, He could do nothing (see John 5:19). Jesus then said to us, "Without Me, you can do nothing" (15:5). The members of an organic church are focused on learning how to live by the indwelling life of Christ. And therein lies what being a follower—a disciple—of Jesus is all about. It's not about trying to imitate His outward actions. It's about imitating how He lived His peerless life—by the indwelling life of God.

Essentially, discipleship boils down to learning how to live by Christ. Jesus' followers live by the life of their Master, just as He lived by His Father's life. This, in fact, is the taproot of organic church life.

The practical fruit of all of the above is simply amazing. The sense of guilt, condemnation and religious duty dissipates, eclipsed by a love affair with the Lord Jesus, where each member is secure in His unconditional, relentless love for him or her. That love spills over to God, to one another and to the lost. Further, their chief passion in life is to know Christ and to express Him together with their brothers and sisters.

The organic church has no clergy; yet every member is a conduit of divine life and shares it with the rest of the body. The organic church has no discipleship programs; yet every member's relationship is an outflow of the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son through the Spirit. The organic church has no sacred buildings; yet each living room becomes the boundary between heaven and earth where God in Christ is encountered and expressed visibly.

This is the environment in which authentic discipleship takes place naturally and without effort. ■

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