

Leading Edge

A Resource for Leaders of Healthy Churches

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Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens By Neil Cole

A summary (mostly in the author's own words) and a couple of questions.

Introduction

On April 14, 1970, the men aboard Apollo 13 discovered that something had gone terribly wrong. They did not have enough oxygen or propulsion to get them home. "Houston," they signaled, "we have a problem." Today the church can say the same. The local church has become so undesirable that many, even among the convinced, are rejecting it altogether. "Heaven, we have a problem."

Using simple components already on board the space capsule, the spaceship crew and the team of NASA experts found a creative solution to bring the astronauts home. In much the same way, God has already given us all we need, too. The solutions are right in front of us, if we only have eyes to see and ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

Part One: Roots of the Organic Church

Chapter 1: Ride Out With Me

The church that Jesus builds is unstoppable (Matt. 16:13-20).

- *It is meant to be growing.* This doesn't mean that every local church should keep getting bigger and bigger. Most warm-blooded living things grow to a point and then reproduce. This is how the body of Christ is to grow.
- *It can also expect opposition.* One sign of a healthy church is that she faces hostility.

Chapter 2: Awakening to a New Kind of Church

My family and I were commissioned to start something new in Long Beach, California. We were sent to start new churches, which we called Awakening Chapels. We would settle for nothing less than a church multiplication movement.

In our first year, we began 10 new churches. In our second year . . . 18 churches. The next year, we added 52 new starts. In 2002, we averaged two churches a week being started and had 106 starts. We estimate that close to 400 churches were started in 2004. At the time of this writing, there have been close to 800 churches started in thirty-two states and twenty-three nations around the world in only six years.

The churches we were starting were small (averaging sixteen people) and simple. The term *simple church* began to gain popularity, because we value a simple life of following our Lord and avoid many of the complexities of the conventional church. We want to lower the bar of how church is done and raise the bar of what it means to be a disciple.

Chapter 3: The Zombie Bride Lives

1. *The church is a living organism, not a static institution.* When the NT uses a building as a metaphor of the Church, it is quick to add that it is made up of living stones (1 Pet. 2:5).

2. *The church is more than a building.* Someone once said that we shape our buildings and then they shape us. In fact, you don't even need a building to be bound to this thinking. A church in India often met outside and would roll out a rug where everyone met. One of the leaders recounted a time when after one of the service was completed, the kids were running around. One child happened to run across the rug, and a parent grabbed him by the arm and sternly told him, "Stop running in church!" Our problem is not in bricks and mortar; it is in our minds.
3. *The church is not to be bound to a single location.* We are always asking the wrong question: where? All along, the right question is who? Where you worship is nothing compared to who it is you worship (John 4:20-24).
4. *The church is much more than a one-hour service held one day a week.* The only time *worship* and *service* are put together in Scripture . . . it is a twenty-four-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week expression of Christ's life in us (Rom. 12:1-2).
5. *The kingdom of God is meant to be decentralized, but people tend to centralize.* God has always intended for humankind to spread out and fill the earth with his glory. The church has been given the command to spread out and fill the earth as well (Matt. 28:19-20).
6. *We are each God's temple and together we are also his temple (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19).*

Chapter 4: A Dangerous Question

When it comes to church, most people are asking all the wrong questions. Rather than starting with the question of what church is, we start by asking how we can make it bigger, or better, or start more of them. In our organic church movement, we have come to understand church as this: the presence of Jesus among his people called out as a spiritual family to pursue his mission on this planet.

Part Two: The Organic Nature of the Kingdom of God

Chapter 5: Kingdom 101: You Reap What You Sow . . . And You Eat What You Reap

According to Mark 4:1-20 (the parable of the sower), Jesus teaches that to plant the kingdom and see it grow and bear fruit, two things are absolutely necessary:

1. *Good Seed.* Planting the right seed in the right soil is not optional; it is mandatory in order for the kingdom to grow naturally. The seed is the Word of God. There is no substitute for God's Word. In my training, I recommend that people read entire books of the Bible repetitively as a regular discipline. In our Life Transformation Groups (LTGs), we read around thirty chapters of the Bible each week.
2. *Good Soil.* I am convinced that we have made a serious mistake by accommodating bad soil in our churches. The Bible tells us who will tend to be responsive the God's word (good soil) and who will tend not to be (bad soil):

"Soil" that tends to produce

- Bad people ("publicans and sinners")
- Poor people
- Young people
- Those searching for God
- Uneducated and powerless people
- The insignificant, the discriminated against, and the nobodies

"Soil" that tends not to produce

- Intellectuals, people of influence, and those of high social status
- Good "moral" people
- Wealthy people

Chapter 6: An Enchanted Kingdom with Magic Seeds, Fast Growing Trees, and a Beautiful Bride to Rescue

Too many of us experts think we know all about how the work of our ministry is supposed to grow. The consequence is that the mysterious and miraculous element of the kingdom is replaced. We sacrifice pure, organic growth for hard work and little results. In Mark 4:26-29 (the parable of the seed), Jesus describes the work as casting out seed, going to bed at night, and rising in the day. The soil produces the growth "all by itself."

The reality is that as long as we invest in human-driven efforts, we will never see what we all really want to see. To keep church simple and able to reproduce, we have resisted all sorts of dependency upon money, programs, and paid professionals.

Chapter 7: We all Began as Zygotes

Jesus taught that the kingdom of God must start small and grow via multiplication to have great and expansive influence (Mark 4:30-32).

We are not to start churches, but instead to make disciples who make disciples. That is actually the way churches are started, at least in the New Testament.

The basic unit of kingdom life is a follower of Christ in relationship with another follower of Christ. The micro form of church life is a unit of two or three believers in relationship. Let's face it: if we can't multiply a group of two or three, then we should forget about multiplying a group of fifteen to twenty.

Part Three: From the Microscope to the Telescope

Chapter 8: Mapping the DNA of Christ's Body

In the organic world, DNA is the internal code that maintains the integrity of each multiplied cell. In the expansion of the kingdom of God, DNA maintains the strength, vitality, and reproductivity of every cell in Christ's body. The DNA is the pattern of kingdom life, from the smallest unit (the disciple in relationship to Jesus and others) to the largest unit. The pattern is the same and its expression remains constant.

Paul Kaak and I have come to understand the DNA of the church to be simplified to three things:

- Divine truth (the Bible)
- Nurturing relationships
- Apostolic mission (John 20:21)

It is quite tempting to add "good" stuff to the DNA. Unfortunately, whatever we add to the three basic components ends up doing two bad things: it dilutes the three, and it elevates the additives to the same stature. It is better to let the DNA remain in its simplicity.

Chapter 9: Epidemic Expansion Starts in the Genes

How do you organize a decentralized, rapidly expanding, spontaneous movement without killing it in the process?

1. We must have more faith in Christ's DNA—divine truth, nurturing relationships, and apostolic mission—than in our own human structures and controls.
2. Structures are needed, but they must be simple, reproducible, and *internal* (not immediately visible, more flexible, and growing with the life of the organism) rather than *external* (like the exoskeleton found in insects and crustaceans that is hard, inflexible, and growth limiting).
3. In organic church thinking, it is imperative that you create structure only when necessary.
4. Organization must be secondary to life and must exist to help support the organic life of the body. Organization can support emerging life; it can never start it.

5. To have a leadership structure that grows with the body, we need to have a design that maintains its own integrity no matter how many times it is multiplied. In nature, fractals (simple repeating patterns) provide us a good example to follow.

Leadership in an organic church multiplication movement never prescribes the work but instead describes it, allowing great diversity and multitudes of expression, all containing and contained by the original DNA. There is order but not control.

What is it that really binds people together in a movement? My belief is that if it is anything other than common commitment to truth, common familial relationship, and common sense of mission, it is a weak organization that will eventually die a slow painful death.

Part Four: The Epidemic Kingdom and How it Spreads

Chapter 10: It Takes Guts to Care for People.

We have made a terrible mistake by separating the convert from the worker. They are not two, but one. Each new convert is a new worker. Start the new believer in the process of gaining maturity sooner rather than later. Do not delay the journey to maturity because the person lacks maturity.

Chapter 11: Me and Osama are Close

The Gospel spread throughout the known world in the first century in a single generation. It did so through relationships. The word the New Testament often employs to describe our relational communities is the Greek *oikos*. *Oikos* is one's social web of relationships.

Although God has made the *oikos* the most natural setting in which to be a witness, it can also be a difficult spiritual environment, particularly for those who have been believers for a long time. Jesus said, "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and among his own relatives and in his own household" (Mark 6:4).

Chapter 12: The How-to of Spreading the Epidemic

In Matthew 10 and Luke 10, we can uncover five principles that help us start churches that reproduce.

- Practice of prayer (Matt. 10:38; Luke 10:2)
- Pockets of people. Jesus taught his disciples to spot a receptive *oikos*.
- Power of presence. All the power of heaven and earth goes with you wherever you go.
- Person of peace. Jesus said to look for and even inquire about someone who would be receptive to our message of peace. When we find such a person, we are to stay there and reach his or her entire *oikos*.
- People of purpose. Jesus instructs us that when a pocket of people receive your message of peace via a person of peace, it will rest upon them, and they become the church in their own rich soil (Matt. 10:11-13).

Part Five: The Call to Organic Church

Chapter 13: Falling with Style

I want you to know that not only have we made mistakes but in fact we have learned more by failure than by success. Looking back, here's some of what I've learned from my mistakes, and what I would do differently as a result:

1. *I would begin in the harvest and start small.* Don't start with a team of already-saved Christians. We think that having a bigger and better team will accelerate the work, but it doesn't.
2. *I would allow God to build around others.* Don't start in your own home; find a person of peace and start in that home.
3. *I would empower others from the start.* Don't lead too much.

4. *I would let Scripture, not my assumptions, lead.* Question all your ministry assumptions in light of Scripture, with courage and faith.
5. *I would rethink leadership.* There is not a ceiling of maturity that people need to break through to lead. Set them loose immediately, and walk with them through the process for a while.
6. *I would create immediate obedience to baptism.* Baptize quickly and publicly and let the one doing the evangelizing do the baptizing.
7. *I would settle my ownership issues.* Stop being concerned about whether “your” church plant will succeed or not. It isn’t yours in the first place.

Chapter 14: Tales that Really Mattered

This chapter contains real stories of real people who are ordinary followers of Christ, living the reality of a kingdom life.

SOME QUESTIONS

I agree with—in fact, I am challenged by—much of what Neil says in this book. In particular,

1. I agree that our answer to Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?” is vitally important to church life (chapter 1). I have concern at this point, however, that we don’t come down too one-sidedly on the “already” side of the “already/not yet” manifestation of the kingdom. (E.g., We already experience the blessings of the age to come but not yet in their fullness.) Neil sees correctly that if we don’t take the “already” seriously, it can lead to weakness. It is also possible, however, to push the “already” too far—into an ugly and unbiblical triumphalism.
2. I agree that we need to go back to Scripture to surface a definition of “church” that is simple, basic, and transferable (chapter 4).
3. I agree that Neil is on to something important in his discussion of good and bad soils (chapter 5). On the other hand, I must confess that while it is creative, his exegesis of the parables of the kingdom sometimes seems a little forced.
4. I agree with Neil’s basic statements about church structure in chapter 9.
5. I agree that we need to get on with evangelism and that the *oikos* principle is strategic.

That said, I do have a couple of questions.

1. Neil says that the “huge megachurches of this past century will be looked upon as an anomaly, not the norm, of our time in history.” I agree that megachurches are not the norm, but as John Vaughan and others have pointed out, they are hardly an “anomaly . . . limited to our time in history.” Very large congregations have existed in nearly every period of the church’s history. (See the chapter entitled “A Selective History of Large Churches, Past and Present,” in *The Large Church*, by John Vaughn.)
2. This leads to a second question: Is there a place for the concept of “celebration” in Neil’s view of simple, or organic, churches? There is some biblical rationale for this in Heb. 12:22-24 and Rev. 4-5.
3. I wonder whether Neil has correctly applied the “all by itself” principle in Mark 4:28. The passage doesn’t indicate that the man in the parable didn’t do anything at all or that he only does “spiritual” things (like fast and pray). In fact, he tends the soil (see the previous parable); he sows seed; and he puts the sickle to the crop. The point of the parable is that life and growth comes from God, not that there is no place for farmers or the wise use of agricultural methods. This, of course, is the same point that Paul makes in 1 Cor. 3:5-6. Actually, both Jesus and Paul seem to have had a “strategic plan”: e.g., develop a ministry team, work in carefully selected population centers (for Jesus, this was rural Galilee; for Paul, it was urban centers), present the gospel to the Jew first, etc. It’s too easy to pit reliance on God against human endeavor. (Though I would agree that “purely” human endeavor is ruled out by John 15:5.) However, as Jesus modeled with the Twelve and Paul clearly states in 1 Cor. 3:9, “we are God’s fellow workers.” We do have something to contribute, in dependence on God.

4. Along this line, I was gratified to see that Neil recognizes the validity of common grace principles found in the business arena, so long as they are tested by Scripture. This comes out in his reference to a quote from Dee Hock in Chapter 9 (on p. 124 of his book). Following this quote, Neil writes: "This is not just some new business management theory. These ideas [of Hock's] are based on a careful study of the created order of God's universe. It also appears that some of these principles were true of the church as described in Acts."
5. In light of Paul's practice in Acts of waiting to appoint elders in his churches and his plain statement in 1 Timothy 5:22, I also have some concerns about setting leaders "loose immediately" to lead (as recommended in Chap. 13).

For the most part, I am excited about this important book. I highly recommend it.

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