



Organic Church. I've been using this term for around fifteen years now. Today it's become somewhat of a clay word, being molded and shaped to mean a variety of different things by a variety of different people.

T. Austin-Sparks is the man who deserves credit for this term. Here's his definition:

*God's way and law of fullness is that of organic life. In the Divine order, life produces its own organism, whether it be a 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.*

The phrase, "the organic expression of the church" was a favorite of Sparks'. I've yet to find a better phrase to improve upon it.

By "organic church," I mean a non-traditional church that is born out of spiritual life instead of being constructed by human institutions and held together by religious programs. Organic church life is a grass roots experience that is marked by face-to-face community, every-member functioning, open-participatory meetings (opposed to pastor-to-pew services), non-hierarchical leadership, and the centrality and supremacy of Jesus Christ as the functional Leader and Head of the gathering. Put another way, organic church life is the *experience* of the Body of Christ. In its purest form, it's the fellowship of the Triune God brought to earth and experienced by human beings.

To use an illustration, if I try to create an orange in a laboratory by employing human ingenuity

and organizational skills, the 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.

In the same way, whenever we sin-scarred mortals try to create a church the same way we would start a business corporation, we are defying the organic principle of church life. An organic church is one that is *naturally* produced when a group of people have encountered Jesus Christ in reality (external ecclesiastical props being unnecessary) and the DNA of the church is free to work without hindrance.

To put it in sentence, organic church is not a theater with a script. It's a lifestyle-a spontaneous journey with the Lord Jesus and His disciples.

*The Traditional Church.* By this I mean a church that is created by human organization, chain-of-command styled leadership, and institutional programs. It's marked by a weekly order of worship (or mass) officiated by a pastor or priest. It's controlled by a top-down hierarchical organization and sociological slots (called "offices") that people fill.

The traditional church has often been called "the institutional church," "the organized church," and "the audience church." Congregants watch a religious performance once or twice a week, and then retreat home to live their individual Christian lives. Leadership is hierarchical, and Christians are divided into "clergy" and "laity" (or their equivalent-"pastors" and "laymen").

Granted, some traditional churches have small group meetings outside of weekly church services where members get a taste of community life. But this community life is not the driving force of the church. And a hierarchical leadership structure is in place in the small group gatherings. Someone is always "in charge," and the group is ultimately under the authority and restrictions of the pastor or priest.

We can think of the difference between organic churches and traditional churches this way. When God's people assemble together on the basis of the organizational principles that run General Motors and Microsoft, we call it a traditional (or institutional) church. But when God's people assemble together on the basis of the life of God, we call it an organic church.

***Frank Viola***