

A DANGEROUS QUESTION AND ORGANIC CHURCH

by Neil Cole

Think about what questions you've been asked about your church. Questions come up like "What church do you go to? How big is your church? Where is your church? What kind of music do you have at your church? What denomination is your church? Who is the pastor at your church?" I find that we often ask about things that may seem important, but we usually aren't getting at what matters most. These are things *about* churches. But what *is* a church?

I came to a point, after trying to plant churches for some time, where I asked the Lord one of the most dangerous questions I have ever asked: "Okay, Lord, so what is a church anyway?" I say it was a dangerous question because asking it forced me to admit that I had been trying to grow something without knowing what it was.

Our Vision of Church: Limited by Our Experience

To help find the best answer, I went to my peers and leaders, asking them in all sincerity, "What is church?" When I asked the question, however, it caused others to reflect and realize that they might not really know what church is either. Oh sure, we all know what our experience is. We all know what our traditions are. We speak as though we obviously know the answer to this question. But in reality, we found that many of us hadn't taken a moment to ask the question. Rather than starting with the question of what church is, we had been asking how we can make churches get bigger or better, or how we can start more of them.

The temptation is to define "church" according to our own experience. We think we know something because of familiarity. By defining "church" this way, we are assured that we are always right, but this is a cheap solution that perpetuates all our current problems. It is much more vital to look at the Scripture with honesty and courage as we try to define "church." Once we ask the question, however, we must be ready to expect the unexpected.

While as seminary student, I was given a definition of church that was really more of a description. Church was explained as embodying these five characteristics:

1. A group of believers gathered together regularly...
2. That considers itself a church...
3. That has qualified elders present...
4. That regularly practices the ordinances of baptism and communion as well as church discipline...
5. And that has an agreed-on set of doctrinal beliefs and evangelistic purpose.

These are all good qualities for any church to have. Most of our churches, in fact, would meet these standards. But my question was still with me, so I turned the question inside out by asking what is missing from this list of five things. Since that time I've put the same list and question before a lot of groups. "What is missing?" After a few minutes of responses, I generally tell them what I think is missing if they haven't already found it.

Jesus is missing!

One of my respected mentors, a theologian and career missionary, told me that Jesus is assumed to be in the definition because it is *believers* who are gathered. My response was, “Why would you verify that qualified elders are present but assume that Jesus is present?”

This assumption betrays a problem in our churches, a serious one. The church is often more about the people and the institutions that gather in the name of Jesus than it is about the reality of the risen Jesus, alive and active with His people.

Seeing Jesus

As the world looks at our churches, particularly in the West, it sees only what people have done or what programs they are doing. The world is not impressed. In response, we scheme and plot and plan, “What can we do to make our church more appealing to the people in our community?” This is, once again, the wrong question. It’s as if we we’re trying to boost God’s approval ratings. It is God’s name that is at risk, not ours, and we are not responsible for protecting His reputation. He can handle that, by Himself, just fine.

A better question is, “Where is Jesus seen at work in our midst?” Where do we see lives changing, and communities transforming simply by the power of the Gospel? Where do we see fathers restored to a life of holiness and responsibility? Where do we see daughters reconciling with fathers? Where do we see addicts who no longer live under the bondage of chemical dependency? Where are wealthy businessmen making restitution for past crimes that went unnoticed? These are the questions that lead people to recognize the living presence of Jesus, loving and governing people’s lives as their King. When people encounter Jesus, alive and present as King, they get a taste of God’s Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

If Jesus is missing in our understanding of church, He will likely be missing in our expression of church as well.

What a Church is: Jesus Followed

I 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.

Granted, this is quite broad, but I like a broad definition of church. The Scriptures don't give a precise definition, so I'm not going to do what God has not done. I want something that captures what the Scriptures say about the Kingdom of God. In one of only two places where Jesus mentions church in the Gospels, He says, “For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst” (Matt 18.20). His presence must be an important element of church.

To a church that has lost sight of its true love, Jesus says these harsh words: “The One who walks among the lampstands, says this...remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent” (Rev 2.1,5). To a disobedient and unhealthy church, Jesus threatens to remove the lampstand (representing the church) from the presence of Jesus. The presence of Jesus is crucial to what church is. His presence is life; His absence is death. He is the most essential portion of who and what we are. He should be the most important thing about us and the most recognizable aspect that the world sees.

In many of the churches in the West, ministry is done *for* Jesus, but not *by* Jesus—and therein lies a *big* difference. If we evaluated our churches not by attendance or buildings but by how recognizable Jesus is in our midst, our influence would be more far-reaching and our strategies would be far more dynamic. Unfortunately, it's possible to do all of the things that make up the five qualities of traditional churches but fail to demonstrate anything of the person or work of Christ in a neighborhood. But if we start our entire understanding of church with Christ's presence among and working with us, then we will expect to see much more.

Organic Church

We've come to refer to some of the ideals of church planting movements as an "organic church." By organic, I don't mean that it is pesticide free. It's a matter of churches being alive and vibrant as living organisms.

The core reality is not how the followers are organized, disciplined or helped. The core reality is Jesus Christ being followed, loved and obeyed. Christ alive, forming spiritual families and working with them to fulfill His mission, is the living reality of the organic church. The church really is an embodiment of the risen Jesus. No wonder the Bible refers to the church as the body of Christ.

Christ First

Mike Frost and Alan Hirsch have challenged the way we order our thinking about Jesus and the church. Typically, we think of church as something to mobilize so that people will come to Jesus. Instead, Jesus leads people in mission, who in turn bring forth fruitful churches. Frost and Hirsch show the right sequence for our thinking by beginning with Christ. They say that clear Christology will inform our best missiology, which in turn leads to the most fruitful ecclesiology.ⁱ

Christ comes first. He then commands us into His mission. The byproduct of our mission is His kingdom spread on earth via the building of His church.

I have come to realize that we should focus on planting Jesus, and let Jesus build His church and work through His church. Our command is to connect people to Jesus as their King. We are to extend the reign of Christ on earth. The byproduct of this work is church.

Organic Churches Reproduce

I think we are confusing the fruit with the seed. We must plant the seed of the gospel of the Kingdom and the fruit that will grow will be changed lives living out their faith together, and that's exactly what we mean by "church."

The true fruit of an apple tree is not an apple, but more apple trees. Within the fruit is found the seed of the next generation. Christ in us is the seed of the next generation. The difference this seed can leave in the soil of a people group is significant. We all carry within us the seed of future generations of the church. We are to take that seed and plant it in the soil of every people group under the authority of our King.

The difference this seed can leave in the soil of a people group is significant. If we put Christ and His kingdom first, we leave behind agents under submission to the reign of their King.

Cultivating Fruit in its own Culture

Our mission is to find and develop Christ followers rather than church members. There is a big difference in these two outcomes. The difference is seen in transformed lives that bring change to neighborhoods and nations. Simply gathering a group of people who subscribe to a common set of beliefs is not worthy of Jesus and the sacrifice He made for us.

We have planted religious organizations rather than planting the powerful presence of Christ. Often, that organization has very Western structure, with values not found in the indigenous soil. If we would simply plant Jesus in these cultures and help His church emerge indigenously from the soil, then a self-sustaining and reproducing church movement would emerge, not dependent upon the West and not removed from the culture in which it grows. Churches don't always bear the fruit that they should without being challenged, so it's important to "cultivate" them by equipping them to see Christ's life flourish in their society. Instead of ending up with groups that strive to be separate and removed from their culture, organic churches can be engaged and transformative of their culture.

Endnotes

ⁱ Frost, Michael and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, Hendrickson, 2003, page 209.

For more on organic church check out the book:

Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens by Neil Cole

Available at www.cmaresources.org/organicchurch

