

**WHAT IS ORGANIC CHURCH?**  
**AN INTERVIEW WITH NEIL COLE & FRANK VIOLA**  
by Keith Giles

***Introduction:***

When I approached Neil Cole and Frank Viola about the possibility of hosting this interview on my blog, they were both in agreement about one thing: This is not a debate. It's a dialog between two brothers who see different sides of the same coin.

As you may know, both Neil and Frank are seen as thought leaders in the area of organic church. However, the very term itself isn't always very clear. Sometimes we need to stop and define our terms before we engage in a dialog so that everyone understands what we're actually talking about. That's the purpose of this interview between Frank and Neil. We hope to engage in an encouraging dialog concerning the Church.

I'm blessed to know both Neil (who wrote the forward to my book, "The Gospel: For Here Or To Go?") and Frank (who has been kind enough to correspond with me on occasion). So, as I began to see that both were attempting to talk about Organic Church in different ways, I thought it would be helpful to everyone if we could hear their perspective on certain terms and clear things up a little for everyone.

Since this isn't a debate, we're not seeking to declare a winner. Hopefully you will learn something from both participants engaged in this dialog. Comments are welcome, but they will be moderated. Both Neil and Frank have agreed to respond to questions in the comments section as much as they can.

Thanks,  
Keith  
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*As simply as you can, define what "Church" looks like to you in practical terms. (Looking for an example of how an "Organic Church" would function - how a typical meeting might look - in your version of "Organic" church). What is your definition of "Organic Church"?*

**Neil:** Many scholars attempt to describe church with a list of ingredients that they believe are found in the New Testament. Here is a typical list: a group of believers that gather together regularly and believe themselves to be a church. They have qualified elders and practice baptism, communion and church discipline and agree on a doctrinal foundation and have some sort of missional purpose.

I have no problem with these ingredients being a part of church, though not all of them are indeed biblical (no where in the NT does it say that we have to consider ourselves a

church to be a church—that is a cultural reaction to calling bible studies or parachurch organizations churches. There are also NT churches that have not had elders appointed yet on the first missionary journey—Acts 14:21-25). I believe that this understanding of church is missing the most essential ingredient: Jesus! If we can define church without Jesus than we can do church without Jesus and that is a tragedy at best and treason at worst.

In CMA, we have defined church this way: *The presence of Jesus among His people, called out as a spiritual family to pursue His mission on this planet.* Church begins and ends with Jesus among us. All the typical ingredients listed to describe church were in the upper room in Acts chapter one but the church really began in Acts chapter two when only one other important ingredient was added: the Spirit of God showed up! God among us is what makes us any different from the Elks Club.

For us church functions like a family, and family is not just for an hour and a half one day a week. We eat together and live together. We do get together, but not only for serious meetings. We meet up during the week for coffee or a meal and hold each other accountable to following Jesus in Life Transformation Groups. My spiritual family often get together to reach out to others, at cafes or with release time outreach at elementary schools and in the marketplace where we all work. We also go to the movies or on hikes together during the week.

Church is not an event, a place or an organization; it is a family on mission together. We must emphasize this shift in understanding. As such we are not defined by a meeting, though we do meet. When we meet we do not have a routine that must always be done. But for the sake of helping people get a feel for the ebb and flow of our lives I will try to describe what our time is usually like when we do get together.

When we do have meetings, we do not presume to have an agenda, but to gather, listen to God and one another. We worship, sometimes with music. About half of the songs we have are original songs written by people in our movement. In our meetings we do not have a set list of songs that are rehearsed, but rather we sing the songs that He puts on people's hearts as the Spirit leads. We sing until we feel like we have changed our perspective of things from having been in His presence. We may then keep singing if that is what He leads us to do, but often we share next what is going on in our lives.

We have a little poem (not the height of poetry by any means) that is usually said by anyone in the group to start the share time. We do this so that even young kids can lead in the church and when people start a new church they know what can get the interaction started:

*Does anyone have praises or prayer requests, a word from the Lord or a sin to confess?*

We all share what God is saying and doing in our lives and we all pray for what is happening. This could be all we do for the entire evening as well.

We usually open the Bible, read a passage and discuss it. Right now we are going chapter-by-chapter through Acts but this is not routine and we often turn to something else at the leading of the Spirit. We do not have any preparation for this time, as we are

not the ones in charge, Jesus is. Our time in the word, however, is not simply pooling ignorance because of the following reasons:

1. We are all listening to the Head of the church and He is not ignorant, and
2. Because of Life Transformation Groups, most of us are all reading large volumes of scripture throughout the week repetitively and in context, so our observations in the scriptures are actually quite insightful.

The Spirit of the Lord working in each of us is the teacher, and we are all learners.

When a good question arises or even some false teaching, a leader of the group does not usually step forward and decide the issue for everyone. Rather, we pray and ask the Lord to help us out. Then we ask what insight the Spirit may have given to each of us. The body responds, not the pastor. This empowers everyone to react to false teaching or to find solutions to difficult questions, not just then but anytime. We are also quite comfortable with three little words: *I don't know*.

We usually pray and sing and eat until it is time to head home. We may also watch the Lakers play a game or go to a movie. Hope that helps some. As you can see we are not set on a routine and do not have a formal agenda, though we do have some consistent but very flexible patterns.

Oh, and we do not have an offering that is passed in my own church. Some of the churches in CMA do, but we do not have that as a set responsibility of church. What we do have is generous people of God who give, not just money but property hospitality and time, to those who are in need.

**Frank:** I'm of the opinion that the New Testament only knows one kind of church, and it's organic. The ekklesia is a living organism not an institutional organization.

I've been using the word "organic church" or "organic expression of the church" for over 16 years. And I give credit to T. Austin-Sparks for the phrase. For Sparks and I, an organic church is a group of Jesus followers who are discovering how to live by Divine life together and who are expressing that life in a corporate way.

Jesus said "as the living Father has sent me, and I live by the Father, so he who partakes of me shall live by me." Paul echoed these words in Colossians when he said that the mystery of the ages is "Christ in you," and that "Christ is our life" (see also Gal. 2:20; Rom. 8:9-17).

Consequently, when God's people learn how to live by the indwelling life of Christ together, a certain expression of community life naturally emerges. So for me, the word "organic" has to do with life – God's life. The organic expression of the church comes up from the soil; it's not mechanical. While it has organization (or an expression) – as all living organisms do – the organization (or expression) comes about naturally from the life, not through human manipulation, religious ritual, or legalism.

Put another way, organic church life is very ancient. It precedes Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Instead, it finds its headwaters in the fellowship of the Triune God before time. When humans touch that fellowship together, experience it, and make it visible on

the earth, you have the life of the ekklesia, i.e., organic church life (1 John 1:1-3; John 17:20-24).

I left the institutional church 22 years ago and have gathered with numerous organic expressions of the church (completely outside the religious institutional system) ever since. I've seen a lot during those years – experimented with a lot, experienced some of the high glories of body life, the difficulties and struggles, and have made lots of mistakes as well. I'm still learning and discovering.

Regarding what an organic expression of the church looks like, here are some of its characteristics:

\*The members meet often, not out of guilt or obligation, but because the Spirit draws them together naturally to fellowship, share, and express their Lord (*ekklesia* literally means an assembly or meeting).

\*Jesus Christ is their living, breathing Head. The members make Christ profoundly central, preeminent, and they pursue and explore His fullness together. In short, the church is intoxicated with the Lord Jesus.

\*They take care of each other, have open-participatory meetings where every member functions, make decisions together, and follow the Spirit's leading for outreach and inreach, both in their proper season.

\*They are learning how to live by Christ and express Him corporately in endless variety and creativity to both the lost and the found.

\*The condemnation and guilt is gone. The members experience the liberty and freedom that is in Christ, experience and express His unfailing love, and are free to follow Him out of genuine love rather than guilt, duty, obligation, condemnation, shame and guilt – the typical "tools" that are used to motivate God's people.

\*They are missional in the sense that they understand "the mission" to be [God's eternal purpose](#), which goes beyond human needs to the very reason why God created the universe in the first place. And they give themselves wholly to that mission. (I'll speak more on the eternal purpose later.)

\*After the foundation of the church is laid, it is able to meet on its own without a clergy or human headship that controls or directs it. The church can sustain herself by the functioning of every member; it doesn't need a clergy system for direction or ministry.

These features are contained within the spiritual DNA of the ekklesia no matter where or when she is born. For they are the attributes of God Himself, the source and headwaters of body life.

Regarding your question about what an organic church meeting looks like, that's really impossible to answer. The reason: authentic organic churches have an infinite way of expressing Christ in their gatherings.

Perhaps the best I can do is describe a few meetings that one of the organic churches that my co-workers and I are presently working with have had recently. None of these descriptions will do the gatherings justice, but perhaps they may give some impression of what a good meeting looks like (not all meetings are good by the way – some are unmentionable! :)).

Last month, the church had a meeting that it prepared for over the course of a month. The church broke up into groups of 3 and began to pursue the Lord Jesus outside of the meetings during the week.

The members all came together at a scheduled day and time to worship, exalt, and reveal Christ. The theme of the meeting was Jesus Christ as the Land of Canaan. The meeting included a full banquet feast, which was really the Lord's Supper (first-century style). The church feasted and then each group began to share Christ as the Land.

One group shared how the vine and the fruit of the vine were a shadow of Jesus. Another group shared Christ as the olive oil; another shared Christ as the milk and honey. Another shared Him as the wheat. Sprinkled throughout the sharing – which was incredibly rich – were prayers, declarations, songs, all of which were spontaneous.

This meeting went on for over 3 hours. It was a gully-washer. No human being led or facilitated the meeting. There were also elaborate creations and visual displays in the meeting place made by the church that went along with the theme.

I didn't attend this particular meeting, but the reports I heard were amazing. People were profoundly touched. Visitors who came were blown out of the water. They had never seen a group of Christians put Christ on display like that, and without anyone leading, giving cues, or facilitating. The depth of insight, richness, and reality of Christ coming through the believers was without peer. Jesus Christ was revealed, declared, unveiled, glorified, and made visible by the every-member functioning of His body.

On another occasion, each member of the church took a name of the Lord in Scripture. (e.g., Bread of Life, Lion of Judah, Sweet Rose of Sharon, the Great Shepherd, Alpha and Omega, The Branch, etc.). During the week the members sought the Lord concerning the name they selected and came to share Him together in the gathering. The meeting was electric. Christ was revealed in a multitude of different ways. New light was shed on each of His names, all pointing to His glorious Person.

Another meeting was a rather unique way of expressing the Lord through Colossians. The church had immersed herself in the book of Colossians for four months (in some very creative ways). They then planned a meeting where they reconstructed the Colossian church.

Each member acted out a character from the Colossian church. Some created their own names (some names were quite comical). Others played the part of some of the



Colossians mentioned in the New Testament (Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, etc.) For weeks the church broke up into pairs to plan and prepare for the gathering. They then had an entire meeting where they reconstructed the situation in Colosse. If you had walked into that meeting, you were seeing the Colossian church dramatized. People even dressed up for their parts.

At the end of the meeting, someone who played Tychicus came into the gathering with a letter from Paul and read the whole letter to the church. Incredible light was shed on the letter, as it addressed all the problems that the Colossian church (through drama) was shown to have had. We all awed at the Lord as Paul presented Christ in this magnificent epistle.

I could multiply many more examples, but I hope you get the drift. Note that the people who are part of these churches aren't spectacular Christians nor are they professionally trained. They are "the timid, the weak, the lame, and the blind" . . . just like I am. Ordinary believers without any special titles, degrees, or formal theological education. In this way, they are much like the early believers we read about in our New Testaments (the exception being that most of us are able to read and write). :)

Some meetings are planned with a theme that the Lord gives the group (as the above examples). Other times the meetings are completely spontaneous without any planning or direction. But spiritual preparation normally takes place, else the meetings will be rather poor. The meetings are the overflow of the spiritual life of the community; hence, all the believers come to give rather than to receive. (In the institutional church system, this order is reversed.)

Again, these meetings have no leaders present directing, facilitating, or coordinating. The Spirit takes that job. I'll add that I've seen unbelievers visit these sorts of meetings where no one said a word about "being saved," and the unbeliever would fall to their knees and profess that "God is here, and I want to know Him!" Strikingly, this comes straight out of the New Testament (see 1 Corinthians 14).

Also, the churches have all sorts of meetings – some for decision-making, some where the men [creatively bless the women and vice versa](#), some for the children, some for specific prayer, some for fun, some to share the gospel with the lost, some for spiritual training and retreats, etc. But everything is "in season." (The seasonal nature of the body of Christ is a special feature of organic church life. All life forms pass through seasons. This element is virtually unknown in organized Christianity.)

Note also that the churches I'm speaking of have been equipped to know the Lord together, to pursue Him together, to express Him with unlimited creativity, and to function in a coordinated way under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Part of this equipping is "detoxification" from a religious and institutional mindset, and being equipped to know Christ in profound depths. (One of the most common remarks that people make when they get involved in this kind of church life is, "I thought I knew the Lord well; but I now realize I didn't know Him well at all.")

Thus the normative passivity that flows through the bloodstream of the typical pew-sitting Christian has been drained out of them. Instead, they've been captured by a

vision and an ongoing experience with the Lord Jesus that has dramatically affected them. I've been changed by the experience. Yet what impresses me just as much or more than the meetings is the remarkable way the believers take care of one another in organic church life. But that's another story.

*As you understand it, how would you describe one another's definition of this same term? (I'm looking for how you two understand each other's positions here)*

**Frank:** I'm really not sure as Neil and I have never discussed this. But my impression is that the term "organic church" for Neil boils down to rapid multiplication of Christian groups with the goal of trying to win lost people by going to the places where they spend their time. It also includes a method of discipleship in very small groups which includes Bible reading and personal accountability questions. This may or may not be accurate, but it's my impression.

Neil and I have shared the conference platform on two occasions, and from hearing him speak, it seems to me that the major difference is one of emphasis. I also think he may emphasize the church scattered where I tend to emphasize the church gathered. But in my world, the church gathered is nothing like an institutional church "service." For us, the gathering of the ekklesia is related to God's highest intention, i.e., His eternal purpose.

God has had an "eternal purpose" that's been beating in His heart from the beginning of time, long before humans fell. That purpose is what provoked Him to create, and He's never let go of it. The eternal purpose of God isn't the salvation of humans or to make the world a better place. (Remember, the Fall hadn't occurred when He created.) There was something else He had in His heart before He said "let there be."

That purpose has to do with obtaining a bride, a house, a body, and a family, all of which are by Him, through Him, and to Him. The purpose of God is not centered on the needs of humanity, but rather, to meet a desire in God Himself. So God's end is to have a bride, a house, a body, and a family in every city on the planet. The ekklesia – properly conceived and functioning – indeed benefits humanity and blesses the world that God made; but His goal for her is higher than that.

Having Christ formed in us is an important aspect of God's purpose (Rom. 8:28-29; Ga. 4:19). But for us, we don't use any of the typical discipleship methods to accomplish this. Instead, we have learned how to encounter the Lord Jesus in Scripture together, to seek His face, to fellowship with Him, to be in His presence, and to share and express Him to one another.

This typically happens in groups of two and three during the week (sometimes in the early mornings), but also in the corporate gatherings. I call these groups "pursuit teams" – teams that pursue the Lord. The focus is not on us but on Christ. Paul said that we are transformed by "turning to the Lord" and "beholding His glory" – so that's a large part of our church life experience (2 Cor. 3:16-18). In short, we experience together – in pursuit teams and as a church – perceiving and following the Lord's indwelling life,

allowing God to shape us by it. That, to my mind, is what spiritual formation/transformation is all about.

Watchman Nee once pointed out that when the Lord called people to His work, their God-given ministries were often prefigured by their secular occupations.

For instance, when the Lord called Peter, he was casting his net and bringing fish onto the shore. What was true in the natural ended up being true in the spiritual. Peter's ministry centered on fishing for men. His emphasis was evangelism, and he brought many lost people to Christ (just think of Pentecost in Acts 2).

When the Lord apprehended Paul, he was building tents. And his future ministry reflected this. Paul was more of a spiritual builder, a "master builder" as he put it in 1 Corinthians 3. His emphasis was to build the church into the fullness of Christ. So Paul spent most of his time grounding and enriching the believing communities to gather under the Headship of Christ, establishing them deeply into Christ, unveiling to them God's eternal purpose – or "the whole counsel of God" as he once put it.

When the Lord apprehended John, he was mending a torn net. We see in John's later writings (1 John, 2 John, and 3 John) that he is bringing the church back to center . . . back to first things . . . back to "the beginning" of Christ as life, love, and light in a time when these elements had been lost. The tent that Paul built was falling apart during John's day, so John prophetically began to repair it by restoring God's original thought, bringing His eternal purpose back into view.

So Peter casts the net, Paul builds the tent, and John mends the tent. All three men were Christian workers in the Lord's vineyard, but each had a different emphasis and disposition.

In my observation, Neil is a lot like Peter. His major focus seems to be going out to the sea, casting the net, and bringing the fish on dry land and encouraging God's people to do the same. Some have described my on-the-ground ministry to be more like Paul's – the building of the tent – the constructive work of building the house of God to fulfill the eternal purpose "from eternity to here." By contrast, my writing ministry in books like *Pagan Christianity* and *Jesus Manifesto* are very much along the lines of John's ministry of repairing the torn net.

Whether that's accurate or not, here's my point. The ministries of Peter, Paul, and John are not to compete with one another. Instead, they are to complement one another. The body of Christ needs the ministries of Peter, Paul, and John. And each person needs the other.

That's how the terrain looks from my hill, anyway.

**Neil:** From my reading, I assume that Frank and I are pretty close to seeing church as a body connected to the Head. Jesus is the main thing for both of us and we both emphasize that in our teaching. If there is a difference I believe that Frank exalts the purpose of the church and I tend to emphasize the purpose of disciple-making. Not that



we don't both teach both, but we do have our own priorities. These could be simply different focus rather than a difference of opinion. How organic church starts and multiplies is probably different in our minds.

*Does the model of church really matter? Isn't it more important what fruit is produced or how the people in the church grow spiritually?*

**Neil:** Well, I tend to agree with this statement, but...if reproduction and multiplication is desired, model of church is an important consideration. More complex models will not empower ordinary people nor reproduce easily. Another important consideration is that many models tend to usurp the leading of Jesus with our plans, personalities and programs.

The more scripted the church is the less spontaneity will be possible. We cannot expect Jesus to lead if we are all busy maintaining the script and all our time together is scheduled down to the fraction of every second.

This may step on a lot of toes but a performance with preaching on Sunday mornings (or Saturday for some) is not conducive to a changed life or a responsive body. If the body wants to have a gathering where they praise, preach and pass the plate, fine, but if that is your sole model of church and where you think the most important work is done and then you have a bankrupt model of church. Our society today is reflective of that bankruptcy, and we must make some changes now. It is the fourth quarter and we are down by twenty...it is time for a shift. I believe that organic church is not a model but a mindset that can work in any model...but will work better in some models than others.

I also believe that any model that is built upon a hierarchy of leadership is probably less healthy in most aspects. When a few are responsible to hear from God and tell the rest what God is saying the church is separated from God by a middle-man and that is not what Jesus died and rose to birth. We are all priests in His kingdom and we all have direct access to God. None are more spiritual, more connected or more responsible for the advancement of the Kingdom, but all are agents directly connected to the King Himself.

**Frank:** For me, organic church is a shared-life in Christ; it's not a model. It's not about a new structure; it's about a new relationship with the Lord Jesus. One that is real, intimate, deep, and corporate. A common remark that my co-workers and I hear from people who attend our conferences is, "I came here to learn how to 'do organic church,' and instead, I received a revelation of Jesus Christ."

The idea that church is an "event" or an "organization" was foreign to the New Testament believers. For them, the ekklesia was a community of people who lived a shared-life together in Christ and who gathered together regularly to express the fullness of Jesus. Their minds thought in terms of "us" and "we" rather than "I" and "me."

Their identity was tied to their union with Christ and their bond with one another. They pursued their Lord together, expressed Him together in regular meetings, took care of one another, married one another, and buried one another. Think of it as an extended household . . . a new polis (city) that is blind to race, social status, economic standing, etc. They were a new kind of humanity . . . a new civilization . . . the "third race" as the ancient Christians called themselves, where all earthly distinctions, separations, and barriers were not recognized.

The church was a colony from heaven . . . a community of "resident aliens" on this earth . . . the corporate manifestation of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself . . . a microcosm of the kingdom of God . . . the house of the living God where the heavens and the earth intersect and meet . . . the foretaste of the New Jerusalem and the aftertaste of the fellowship of the Godhead that has been going on from before time. In short, a local church that is functioning properly is Jesus Christ on the earth (see 1 Cor. 12:12). And therein do you have yet another definition of organic church.

For those who are burdened for evangelism and being missional to a post-Christian country (as the USA now is), the ekklesia – when she's functioning the way God intended – is the greatest evangelist on the planet. There's nothing that bears witness more to the reality of Jesus as the world's true Lord than a group of believers who share their lives together and demonstrate what the kingdom of God looks like. This point is completely overlooked by those who would argue that the expression (structure) of the church doesn't matter.

By contrast, today's Christianity is very individualistic – this is true both in and outside the organized church. But authentic Christianity is intensely corporate and therein was their power and testimony.

A careful reading of the Gospels, Acts, and the Epistles shows no distinction between being a Christian, being saved, being a disciple, and being a functioning member of a local body of believers. (I've discussed this point at length [in another place](#) where I added a plea to learn our history regarding modern discipleship methods.) Note that when Luke describes how Paul and Barnabas planted the church in Derbe, he says they preached the gospel to the city and "made many disciples" (Acts 14:20-21, NASB & NKJV).

The organic expression of the church in a given place is the true habitat of every child of God. Separating spiritual growth ("discipleship") from the ekklesia (properly functioning) is like separating child-rearing from the family.

This again touches evangelism. One of the young men in an organic church that I relate to was a leader in a very large para-church organization that's known for evangelism. About a year ago, he said to me after one of our gatherings, "I just go back from one of our leadership conferences and the more they talked about saving the lost, the more disinterested I was. I come to these meetings here and while nothing is said about evangelism, I'm so excited about my Lord that I want to share Him with others. There's no guilt or duty in it at all. I'm fired up about Him."

Properly conceived, the ekklesia is the environment in which we live, move, and have our beings. While it will never produce perfect Christians who are beyond making mistakes (we will all make mistakes on this side of the veil), their depth in Christ is unmistakable. So for me at least, it's not about a different model, but about a different habitat.

Those interested in learning more may want to take a listen to an audio excerpt where seven members of a fairly new organic church answered common questions about organic church life at a recent conference (Threshold 2010). The excerpt contains only one question that they answered (there were 7 questions in all). The question was: How has your relationship with Jesus Christ changed since you've been part of organic church life? People can listen to it [here](#).

*How do you define - and better yet practice - the idea of leadership in the model of church you promote?*

**Neil:** Leadership is not about a position, an office, or a title, it is influence. Leadership is not functioning as a delegated decision-maker for an absentee King. We are servants that distribute empowerment rather than delegate it. Leadership is all about connecting people to the King and allowing them to listen and follow His word. We do not need more servant leaders; we need more servants...period. Many leaders don't mind being called a servant; they just don't like being treated like one. To lead is basically to go first and let others follow your example. Often in the NT the words, "go before" or "stand before" is used to describe our leaders, but unfortunately they get translated as being above or over the others.

There is a form of servant that exemplifies maturity and can point to spiritual children and even grandchildren in their lives. We need more of these servants in the body. Their role is to equip others to function in the likeness of Christ together. These are apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers (Eph 4:11). They do not do the work but equip others to do it. For example: Evangelists are not called simply to reach the lost, but to equip the church to do so. Teachers are not called to teach the saints, but to equip the saints to teach. All are saints, so of course evangelists evangelize, that gives their equipping even more authority and practicality (besides, I can't imagine an evangelist who wouldn't). A teacher is good at teaching, but needs to be very good at training others to teach. We need to rediscover this type of leadership if we are going to change ourselves, and then the world.

**Frank:** In my experience and observation, leadership in an organic expression of the church seems to fall into three categories:

1) It's expressed through itinerant traveling ministry where Christian workers lay the foundation for a new church, equip the believers to know the Lord deeply, to function together, to build community, and to have open-participatory meetings where Christ is made the visible, functioning Head. Their leadership is strong in the beginning, but then it literally leaves and moves to the periodic. You find this sort of leadership all over the New Testament in the ministries of Paul, Peter, Timothy, etc.

2) It's expressed by consensual decision-making where the believing community plans how they will pursue and reveal Christ week by week, how they will handle problems, and how they will take care of one another and serve the lost in their city.

3) It's expressed by the different giftings that will organically emerge in the community in time. Eventually shepherds will emerge who will care for those with needs, overseers will emerge who provide oversight, teachers will emerge who will bless the church with the ability to unveil Christ from the Scriptures, exhorters will emerge and function according to their giftings, etc. In other words, each person will lead according to their unique gifting. In this way, all believers lead in their own way.

The goal of each expression of leadership is to lead the church to Jesus Christ, the true and only Head of the body.

The interesting thing is that in this type of church life, we don't use labels or titles. So the reality of the gifts and ministries are present, but in most cases, we don't earmark or point them out. (Sometimes those who are engaged in itinerant ministry will acknowledge who the overseers are, but this is dependent on the specific situation of a particular church).

In my experience, the believers in these types of churches are so busy pursuing and expressing the riches of Christ that "leadership" never comes up as an issue or subject. Jesus is their Head, and they seek to know and follow Him together. That's about as much time they spend talking about leadership in the churches. It's really a non-issue.

I have the impression that it was this way for the early Christians too. Just count the number of times the words "elder", "shepherd", or "overseer" are mentioned in the New Testament, and then count the number of times Christ is mentioned or referred to. That says volumes, I think.

*Which scriptures would you point to as being reflective of your views concerning organic church?*

**Frank:** I've come to the conclusion that there are only two subjects in the entire Bible: Jesus Christ and His church. Everything else can be juiced down to those two realities.

Someone may object by saying that God the Father and the Holy Spirit are the subjects of the Bible. But remember, the fullness of the Godhead dwells in Christ. God is Father because He has a Son. The Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, and He has come to manifest and glorify Christ. Biblically speaking, there is no God outside of Jesus Christ. God is known in and through the Son.

Jesus Himself said that "all Scripture testifies of me." So Genesis 1 to Revelation 22 is an unfolding of Christ and the church on every page. I add "church" because the church is never separate from Christ – it is His body and bride. She is depicted through many of the types of the Old Testament, such as all the brides of the Patriarchs, the tabernacle, the temple, the nation of Israel, etc.

Jesus Himself incessantly talked about the church. In fact, He did so more than He did the Kingdom of God. If you're only counting the word ekklesia you'll completely miss this.

Jesus never used the word "Trinity" or "Godhead," yet every time He spoke of His Father and the Spirit, He was talking about the Triune God. In the same way, every time you see that little band of Twelve men and some women who lived in community with one another with Christ as Head, you're looking at the prototype – the earthly embryo of the ekklesia – that Jesus Christ said He would build. And when the Lord spoke of the vine and the branches, "my brethren," the light of the world, the salt of the earth, etc. He was referring to the church. If we understand what the Kingdom really is, we'll discover that after the ascension of Christ, the Kingdom came in, with, and through the church.

So for me, it's not a matter of going to certain proof texts to build a model for church. It's seeing the whole sweeping, epic saga of the biblical drama from Genesis to Revelation. And that drama is all about the Triune God known and expressed through Jesus Christ and His eternal quest for a bride, a house, a body, and a family (which is the church). I unfold this thesis in *From Eternity to Here*, which seeks (in an admittedly frail way) to unveil the eternal purpose of God – the mission to which we are all called – throughout the entire Bible.

Once our eyes are opened to see His eternal purpose, we suddenly have a new Bible in our hands and a new vision of the Lord before our eyes. The Bible turns from black-and-white to Technicolor, and the Lord becomes infinitively greater to us.

**Neil:** Wow, um, all of them? All scriptures are profitable for training in righteousness. In our training, we point to the parables of Christ a lot (especially Mark 4). Jesus' usage of the word church in Matthew is important to us (2xs). Ephesians is a powerful treatise on church for us as well. Acts is foundational of our view of a church multiplication movement. The letters to the seven churches in Revelation is also very important to us.

*Have you ever met one another in person and/or read one another's books?*

**Neil:** To my knowledge, we have met twice, emailed a couple times and talked on the phone once. I have read *Pagan Christianity*, *How to Start a House Church*, and *Finding Organic Church*. I skimmed *Reimagining Church*, but haven't read it entirely yet. I think *Pagan Christianity* is Frank's best work and we carry it in our online store. I am grateful that he invested the time to produce this seminal work. Thanks Frank. I have also listened to a couple of his talks online, visited his website a few times and read some of his articles.

**Frank:** We've met face-to-face twice at conferences, but we didn't have much time together. So far I've read one book by Neil and several articles. We have a number of



good mutual friends. I have a lot of respect for Neil and am thankful for his contribution to the body of Christ.

I've made this statement to a few people, but I'll say it publically for the first time. I'd love to see a Summit that includes all those who are pioneering and influencing the missional church movement/ phenomenon to be locked in a room together for 3 days. The first day would be an informal "get to know one another" time, very casual and relaxed. The next day, each person would have a solid hour to share their heart, their burden, their vision, and their present work with everyone else. A time of questions from the group and answers would follow.

We would all get to know one another better as people rather than from a distance as authors and speakers. If no homicides occurred during those 3 days :), it seems to me that the worst case scenario would be that we'd all better understand one another and what makes each of us tick. That alone would be worth the time, in my judgment. In the best-case scenario, we'd all be sharpened, adjusted, and perhaps we'd even see some co-laboring going on in different degrees. And a lot of misunderstanding, assumptions, and confusion would disappear.

I am pessimistic that someone could actually put such a Summit together; but if they were able to, I'd move heaven and earth to attend and participate. (I'd even offer to help with the planning.)

Incidentally, Pagan Christianity is fairly well known, but it's not my most important or best work. It's just the first half of a conversation – the deconstructive part. Its objective is to blow the rocks out of the quarry. But that's all it does. Reading it by itself is like listening to the first fifteen minutes of an hour-long phone conversation, then hanging up the phone – never knowing what was said afterward. For this reason, Pagan was never meant to be a stand-alone book. It's part of a multi-volume series. My most important and best book (hands down) is From Eternity to Here with Jesus Manifesto perhaps tied neck-and-neck.

*What do you see as the most striking differences between your version of "Organic" church and the other person's version? Why does it matter?*

**Neil:** Frank does not seem to be as favorable to multiplication movements as I am. I gather that he sees church taking a long time to mature to the place where it can give birth to another church, while I see reproduction as able to occur much faster. Ironically, we both point to Acts to support our point of view.

I believe Frank teaches that one must be part of an organic church to start one and that an apostle must be involved. I think that is probably one of the best ways, but not the only way. It seems to me that Frank teaches that apostles start churches and that not everyone can do it. I tend to go the opposite direction and teach that anyone can start a family. Not everyone is an apostle and not everyone can lay a foundation for a church multiplication movement, but they can certainly reach their friends and start a spiritual family. Anyone that has Christ in them has what it takes to start a spiritual family. Some

families are less inclined to reproduce rapidly and start a movement, because an apostolic and prophetic foundation is necessary for this.

I also see that an apostolic foundation can be extended without the apostle needing to be present. Colossians, Hieropolis and Laodicea were begun by Epaphras but it was Paul who laid the apostolic foundation so he could write to them as their apostle even though they'd never seen his face (Col. 2:1-3).

I see maturity for people and the church to be a life-long process so I believe that the church can reproduce throughout that process, even in the first year. We have experience in this as well. I have personally started probably six or seven churches, but grand-parented and great-grand-parented dozens more. Our training has catalyzed the start of thousands of churches. The church I currently am part of has been in existence for ten years and sent off 35+ church planters all around the world. It has birthed other networks and has several generations of churches.

Frank emphasizes the spiritual life together connected to Jesus, and I admire that. We do as well, but we tend to emphasize apostolic mission much more in addition to the presence of Jesus and our nurturing relationships. I see church as the fruit of disciple-making, not the other way around. Our life together is better because each of us is connected to Jesus, each other and our mission to the world. We refer to this as the DNA of organic church, which stands for Divine Truth, Nurturing Relationships, and Apostolic Mission. We teach emphatically that all components of the DNA must be in every part of the church from the smallest unit of disciple in relation to another disciple. We teach that the components should not be supplanted, supplemented or separated. The organic life of the church springs from the DNA at work in the heart of disciples together.

**Frank:** I think the only way we can accurately answer that question is if Neil and I sat down for several hours to discuss our views, observations, and experiences.

I'm pretty convinced that Epaphras was a "sent one" who received training from Paul in Ephesus, then went back to his hometown in Colosse and planted a church there that met in Philemon's home and in two other nearby cities in the Lycus valley. I detail this account elsewhere with documentation, but that's a short riff.

Regarding church multiplication, I'll simply say that I believe in the multiplication of the church (I usually call it "transplantation"). But I don't regard it as a template or metric of anything.

In my experience and observation, as well as my study of the New Testament, a specific church should follow the Lord's leading on when and how to multiply. Like so many other things in organic church life, discerning the season is imperative.

Consequently, when and how to multiply a church is more of an art than a science. It's dependent on the art of hearing the Spirit and rightly perceiving the season. Thus it will differ depending on the season of a particular church's life, the spiritual maturity and development of the group, the kind of foundation that has been laid, and many other

variables. If these elements are ignored, multiplication can easily lead to quick dissolution of one or both groups. That's been my observation anyway.

It's also not wise to push toddlers outside of the home and expect them to reproduce. So again, I'm of the opinion that there's a danger of making multiplication a method, a science, or even a goal. I believe the goal should be God's eternal purpose, the heavenly vision that Paul labored under and that provoked him to plant and nurture organic believing communities.

Regarding church planting, I don't believe that an organic church can only come into existence by the hand of those who are called to plant churches. Organic church life can occur spontaneously . . . and it often does. As I write these words, it's taking place right now among numerous college campuses across this country. The students who are touching and tasting it don't know exactly what it is (except that it's glorious), and they are probably not calling it "organic church life." Yet the problem is that body life (the way I've been describing it) is extremely fragile, and it doesn't last very long. It invariably dies within a short period of time. It either dissolves or it devolves into an institutional form and a clergy figure emerges to take it over.

Its chances of survival are much better if there is experienced outside spiritual input that knows how to center the group on Christ, help prepare and navigate it through the inevitable pitfalls, and give it the kind of equipping to sustain it in a spiritual way without human organization or control. This sort of spiritual input can take many forms, but the traveling ministry of broken, experienced, Christ-centered, humble, and non-sectarian itinerants who eventually leave the group to the Lord is one of the most common in the New Testament narrative. It of course isn't a panacea (nothing is), but it can be a tremendous benefit.

As for the subject of movements, that's too big of an issue to go into here, I think. And it's quite complicated. (I plan to address it in the future.) I'll just say that numbers don't impress me at all. I grew up in a movement that stressed numbers and "counting." The problem came with exaggerating the data (which is the scourge of virtually every movement – whether Christian or nonchristian). To get the "accurate/real" figure, you had to cut it in half and divide by two [Symbol] Einstein couldn't be more correct when he said, "Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted."

I believe this applies to the work of God.

All told, my impression is that Neil and I probably agree more than we may disagree. Both of us are often associated with "the house church movement," yet I get the impression that we share a common feature here. Neither of us makes the home our center. The living room isn't our passion. As I've often said, meeting in a home doesn't make you a church anymore than sitting in a donut shop makes you a police officer. :)

While a house has many advantages as a gathering place, there's nothing magical about meeting in a living room. Not all house churches are "organic" (the way I've been using the word) – so "organic church" is not a synonym for "house church." I suspect that Neil would agree with this.

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### *Conclusion*

If you have any further questions, please post them in the comments at [www.KeithGiles.com](http://www.KeithGiles.com) or at <http://subversive1.blogspot.com/2010/09/what-is-organic-church-neil-cole-frank.html> and Frank or Neil will respond when they can.

Again, comments will be moderated. Please do not take an argumentative tone, or attempt to respond to something that another commenter has posted.

I want to thank both Neil and Frank for taking the time to respond to these important questions and help provide more clarity on such an important topic.

Frank Viola: [www.ptmin.org](http://www.ptmin.org)

Neil Cole: [www.cmaresources.org](http://www.cmaresources.org)