

Neil Cole

Organic Church – Growing Faith where Life Happens



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Notes by Alison Morgan Jan 07

Foreword – Leonard Sweet

Story – pastor Jerry Middleton, in Muttonhole, nr Edinburgh, in clerical garb. Boys mending bike called across street: 'Hey mister, would you stop being a minister long enough to give us a hand?'

Neil Cole: 'if you want to win this world to Christ, you are going to have to sit in the smoking section'.

Preface

The Matrix – Neo wakes to find the real world is in fact made up. There's a red pill, opens our eyes to a more vivid reality, like Alice down the rabbit hole. It's like that for us – and the reality is the kingdom of God. The conventional church in US is not inviting – more vision statements, more Christian concerts, sermons, blueprints for bigger auditoriums. 'You will be amazed what people do for Jesus that they will not do for your vision statement'.

Introduction

We have a problem. 'We have reduced the gospel message so that it is inseparable from the institution of church'. Many are leaving the church to preserve their faith. Church attendance, though, isn't the barometer of how the church is doing. Transformation is the product of the gospel. We do Jesus an injustice by reducing his life and ministry to such a sad story as church attendance and membership rolls.

All around the world, wherever Church follows the Western institutional pattern, its influence is in decline. It is not the local church that will change the world – it is Jesus. Attendance at church doesn't change lives – Jesus in their hearts does. It's amazing how much effort and resources we expend on a single hour once a week. We've made church a religious show.

What would it be like if churches emerged organically, like small spiritual families born out of the soil of lostness, because the seed of God's kingdom was planted there? These churches could reproduce just as all living and organic things do. xxvi

PART ONE: ROOTS OF THE ORGANIC CHURCH

1. Ride out with me!

Nothing is impossible for the man who will not listen to reason – John Belushi (in the film Animal House)

Mt 16: who do people say that I am? who do you say that I am? 'Before one speaks about starting or growing churches, one simply must wrestle with this question: 'Who is Jesus to you?'. You must also find the answer from your Father in heaven rather than a how-to book or a seminar workshop. Church is spiritual. There is a sense of mystery and revelation about it. A church reflects its people's answer to that question.

Jesus goes on – 'you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hades will not overpower it'.

1. he builds it – not you
2. he owns it – not you
3. it's meant to grow, and bring new souls into the kingdom. Most creatures grow not by getting endlessly bigger but by reproducing.
4. it will face opposition. Ed Silvoso – the Bible doesn't say ignore the devil and he will flee from you...
5. it's unstoppable; not a fortress of protection with gates you go in through, but an offensive against the gates of hell. Starting a church in Long Beach – talking to Sean a drug addict, going with him to talk to his dealer – and

that's what set him free. He started a 3 am church in the supermarket parking lot he was a night security guard at. Our greatest significance is found in the darkness, not the light.

2. Awakening to a new kind of church

His story. Pastor of a normal church in S Californian suburbs. 8 years; planted 3 daughter churches. Then darkness intruded – a man hanged himself, a friend got depressed, a church member began a slander campaign, a moderator told him the church needed to repent of hidden sin. His mentor said he was being prepared for something. Everyone instantly apologised. A new leader emerged. He left to start Awakening Chapels (new churches) among urban postmoderns. They were small, in people's homes (the key is: healthy and reproduce, not small/homes). All were the result of planting the seed in good soil and watching the church grow organically. They started going to coffee houses to talk to people; planting seeds in each one – missional, not attractional (their original idea was to start a coffee house of their own). Each had on average 16 members; 'simple church' – ordinary, new Christians going to new coffeehouses and planting new churches there. 'The conventional church has become so complicated and difficult to pull off that only a rare person who is a professional can do it every week.. The organic or simple church.. is informal, relational and mobile'. It has no overheads, so is easily planted and spreads faster and further. It doesn't depend on trained clergy. Each church is made up of Life Transformation Groups – of 2 or 3 people who meet weekly to challenge each other to live an authentic spiritual life. They confess sin, read scripture, pray for others.

5 years later they had 68 churches, 5 generations of church, 5 additional networks birthed.

3. The zombie bride lives!

Vision of the US church, sick, ill, kept alive only by God. She thinks she's well, but she's deathly ill.

6 truths about church:

1. It's meant to be a living organism, not a static institution – God breathed life into mankind at the beginning of time (Gen 2.7), and he breathed life into his church at the beginning of a new age (Jn 21.21-3, Acts 2). His first command was, 'be fruitful and multiply'. Most of the metaphors/explanations of the kingdom use natural concepts to talk about the church – body, bride, branches, field of wheat, mustard seed, family, flock, leaven, salt, light. When the NT does talk about a building, it's one made of living stones (1 Pet 2.5). We need to learn from farmers, not corporations; we need to start in fields, not barns.
2. The church is more than a building – 4 times in the Bible it says God does not dwell in buildings made by human hands: a Tabernacle was the first dwelling place of God, then
 - David asked to build a temple but was refused; Solomon did build it, but said 1 Kings 8.27 that this building cannot contain God
 - Isaiah 66.1 – heaven is God's throne, the earth his footstool; there is no house we can build for him.
 - Acts 7.48 Stephen says God doesn't dwell in houses made by human hands, and quotes Isaiah. They kill him.
 - Acts 17.24-25: Paul in Athens – God does not dwell in temples made by human hands.
 - Jesus wasn't impressed by the temple.. The early church had no buildings for 300 years.. a building can become an artificial life support system.
3. The church is not to be found in a single location. John 4 – in spirit and in truth. We are always asking the question 'where' instead of the question 'who'.
4. The church is more than a service held once a week – we are the temples of Christ, Rom 12.1-2. Scripture contains nothing on how to hold services, but lots on how to live together as a spiritual family. William Law, C18: 'it is very observable that there is not one command in all the Gospel for public worship; and perhaps it is a duty that is least insisted upon in Scripture of any other' – what's there is the devotion that is to govern the ordinary actions of our life.
5. The kingdom of God is meant to be decentralised, but people tend to centralise. God always meant us to spread out and fill the earth – Noah got the same instruction as Adam, to be fruitful and multiply. When they tried to settle and build, they made Babel and God had to act. We have the same command to be fruitful and multiply – in Mat 28.19-20, the great commission. At the Transfiguration, Peter wanted to build... In Acts 1.8 they are told to spread out from Jerusalem; they stayed put. God forced decentralisation with persecution- Acts 8.1. They all went, except the apostles (the ones who were told to go!). God found new apostles (Acts 13.1-3). Acts 21 the old ones

oppose Paul. The churches in Antioch, Thessalonica, Ephesus are better representations of what God intended. Where did people find God in the OT? In the temple. When Jesus was alive, where did they find him? – where Jesus was. Now he's dead, where do they find God? Wherever his people are, because there the HS is too. This is why Jesus died...

6. We are each God's temple, and together we are all his temple. A new covenant – Ezekiel 37.26-8. We are a new nation of priests - ! Pet 2.8-9. We are his temple – 1 Cor 3.16; 6.19).

4. A dangerous question

Waitress wearing fish ring. 'Are you a Christian?' 'No, I'm a Pisces'.

Most people ask the wrong questions about church. What is church? We define it by our own experience. Most definitions leave Jesus out... A Korean pastor visited the US and summarised his observations by commenting 'it's amazing what you people can do without the Holy Spirit!'. Tozer once remarked that if the HS were removed from the churches in America on Saturday, most would go on next day as if nothing had happened. Jesus told the disciples to wait till the HS came; even after 3 years of training they weren't equipped without him. We should do the same... Leading a meeting of church leaders in Japan (no growth in 100 years) with no agenda (risky, Japanese like agendas). They began to pray. The HS came.

Organic church understands church as 'the presence of Jesus among his people called out as a spiritual family to pursue his mission on this planet'. 53. Not specific enough? The scriptures give no precise definition of church.

In many W churches, ministry is done for Jesus rather than by him. We should evaluate our churches not by attendance or buildings but by how recognizable Jesus is in our midst. Do teams leave their superstar watching on the bench? We should expect transformed lives.

It was to a church that Jesus said, I stand at the door and knock. He's still knocking.

PART TWO: THE ORGANIC NATURE OF THE KINGDOM OF God

Mark 4 – 3 parables demonstrate the organic nature of the kingdom.

5. Kingdom 101: you reap what you sow.. and you eat what you reap

You Christians look after a document containing enough dynamite to blow all civilization to pieces, turn the world upside down, and bring peace to a battle-torn planet. But you treat it as though it is nothing more than a piece of good literature – Mohandas (sic) Gandhi.

We can be brilliant at fertilizing, watering, cultivating, harvesting – but if we don't sow we will never have a harvest. Gal 6.7 we sow what we reap – if we sow the word of God, we reap the kingdom of God.

Story of a man who bought seeds from a travelling salesman – potatoes, beet, tomatoes, corn. All the plants came up the same – corn. We mustn't believe the promise of every package we can buy to make our ministry grow and our life become fruitful. We reap what we sow.

The parable of the sower.

We need good seed. We need good soil. The seed is the word of God; it's God's message that changes lives. Not messages *about* the word of God. He recommends that people read entire books of the Bible repetitively – 30 chapters a week. Then good soil. The soil is the people. If 2 out of 10 who accept the gospel bear fruit, he invests his time in those 2, and refuses to babysit the unfruitful 8. Our churches are full of bad soil – which is why surveys show no sig moral difference between those who attend church and those who don't in the US. This affects the way we do ministry – we must regain the art of wiping dust (bad soil) off our feet. 'Sean, perhaps we should both find something better to do with our time'.

Good soil is often found in the following places:

- Bad people – Lk 5.32 not the righteous but sinners
- Poor people – James 2.5 – the poor are chosen
- Young people – Matt 18 like this child
- Those searching for God, perhaps in the wrong places – Mt 7.7, seek and you shall find
- Uneducated and powerless people – 1 Cor 1.27, God has chosen the foolish to shame the wise
- The insignificant – 1 Cor 1.28-29, the things that are not, so that no man should boast

Bad soil is often found in the following places:

- Intellectuals, people of status and consequence – 1 Cor 1.26 not many were wise, noble, mighty
- Good moral people – Lk 5.31-32, those who are sick
- Wealthy people – Lk 18.24-5, camel through the eye of a needle

But cp Joseph of Arimathea, Barnabas, Saul, Count Zinzendorf, Wesley. Some respond from these sectors; but not many. How to find good soil? Ask the police where the problems are. Look in the paper for bankruptcies. Find the local 12 step recovery groups. Go to the crisis pregnancy centre or the abortion clinic.

6. An enchanted kingdom with magic seeds, fast growing trees, and a beautiful bride to rescue

Don't judge each day by the harvest you reap, but by the seeds you plant – Robert Louis Stevenson

Mark 4.26-27 like a man who sows seed, goes to bed, and it grows, and he knows not how. It grows all by itself. He puts the work into the sowing, not into the growing. Often we get it the other way round. The church invests few resources just in sowing. 1 Cor 3.6-7 it's God who makes things grow.

But we have to trust him. Often that means we have to take risks. We have to be in dangerous places where we need him to show up and deliver us. We don't need God to deliver us from arguments about the colour of the church carpet.

A question: *what is it that you intentionally do not do that fuels your success?*

His team chucks out innumerable resources, often because they depend on the expertise of professional leaders. They resist dependency on money, programs, and paid professionals.

We call it Acts of the Apostles – but really it was Acts of the HS. The HS is referred to at least 57 times in 28 chapters. If we want to experience Acts today, we must yield control to the HS. WE have to believe again, like children, in magic seeds and fast growing seeds.

7. We all began as zygotes

Imagine a situation in which we discovered 96% of women were no longer fertile and couldn't have babies. That's the case with the church in the US. No multiplication. But reproduction is natural.

What makes a good church? People tend to say things like good preaching, good children's work; and that bigger is better. But Schwarz (Natural Church Development) finds that smaller churches are healthier. We are entering the day of the small. We can't compete with the secular world – entertainment, buildings.

EM Bounds – *men are looking for better methods. God is looking for better men.*

All reproduction begins small, at the molecular level.

Mark 4.30-32 the parable of the mustard seed.

The Bible never instructs us to start churches. We are on the other hand told to make disciples who make disciples. The basic unit of kingdom life is a follower of Christ in relationship with another follower of Christ. 2 or 3 is the best number – cp Eccl 4.9-12 (cord which cannot be broken); 1 Tim 5.19 (2 or 3 witnesses); Matt 18.15-17 (reproving a brother); Matt 18.20 (where 2 or 3 are gathered; it's easier to coordinate 2 or 3 diaries); 1 Cor 14.26-33 (communication is easier); 1 Cor 13.1 (direction is stronger); 1 Cor 14.29 (leadership is stronger). And growth is easier – just add one more.

PART THREE: FROM THE MICROSCOPE TO THE TELESCOPE

8. Mapping the DNA of Christ's body

The kingdom was always meant to spread spontaneously – like seeds, or yeast (Mt 13).

Roland Allen suggests Paul had a strategy, a pattern he'd introduce everywhere when planting churches. Present author suggests the New Testament Discipleship Patter (NTDP) is the DNA of the church. It's a pattern that must be:

1. received personally
2. repeated easily
3. reproduced strategically

It should start orally, not with written materials. You should be able to write it on a paper napkin at a lunch appointment. Jesus gave us baptism and communion – simple, and not intended to be passed to professionals. He gave us the LP.

Paul's pattern was

- incarnational – Phil 3.17, follow my example
- viral – 2 Tim 2.2 the things you heard from me → faithful men → others also

- transformational – Rom 6.17, you were slaves to sin
- universal – 1 Cor 4.16-17, in every church

This can be simplified into 3 elements:

1. **Divine truth** – embodied in Jesus, John 1 → this is **Faith**
2. **Nurturing relationships** – love one another, Jn 15 → this is **Love**
3. **Apostolic mission** – go therefore..., Matt 28 → this is **Hope**

9. Epidemic expansion starts in the genes

Ivan Illich was once asked, 'What is the most revolutionary way to change society: Is it violent revolution or is it gradual reform?' He gave a careful answer: 'Neither. If you want to change society, then you must tell an alternative story', he concluded.

In chaos theory, chaordic is a term used to describe chaotic order – somewhere between chaos and order. Hock, the founder of VISA, says an organisation can dispense with command and control if it holds common purpose and principles. People will behave creatively in accordance with them.

This is how we find the created order of God's universe working.

It's also what we find in Acts. Can you be out of control and still have order? Yes. The church can be chaordic.

As in nature, DNA in the church provides the code necessary for control, order and form.

The body of Christ needs an endoskeleton (growing with the body) not an exoskeleton (providing safety and protection). As someone said, 'Our current systems are perfectly designed to produce the results we are now seeing'. Church structures and models (we love models) are like water pipes, designed to deliver water. But the water is the main thing. We should create structure only when necessary. Diagrams – a hierarchical chart of boxes; or an organic flow chart of interlinked circles.

In nature there are fractals, simple repeated designs found in the structures of life. Each unit has similar patterns and purposes. Eg a fern leaf – the same pattern repeats at plant level, leaf level, frond level.

Another way – we should copy from the master, not from a copy. Or, we should imprint on Jesus, not on other believers (Fly Away Home); but we get them taught and helped, rather than getting them into Jesus-style action. New believers should be deployed immediately in ministry. Paul accused the Corinthians of being imprinted on their leaders – Paul, Apollos, Cephas, Christ (1 Cor 1.12-17).

Leadership in an organic church doesn't prescribe the work, it describes it. There is order but not control. Authority is not delegated by the leader but distributed by him – it's Christ's authority. The strongest authority we can have is spiritual.

A church movement should be self-organized, self-governing, self-perpetuating. CMA (Church Multiplication Associates), his movement, works this way. Giving up control is the hardest part.

PART FOUR: THE EPIDEMIC KINGDOM AND HOW IT SPREADS

Mk 10 and Lk 10 give Jesus' plan – he gave the principles, he sent them out.

10. It takes guts to care for people

Schindler's List. We all need to be set free by Christ. 'All around us is the urgency of a moment of crisis, a moment in which we can rise to a task nobler than ourselves - or not'.

Jesus was travelling round an area the size of Puerto Rico, with 3m inhabitants and 200 places. He would have been busy... And yet 'he felt compassion for them' –Mt 9.36. Do we have this compassion when we meet lost people??

We must not separate the convert from the worker; they differ in maturity but not in spiritual empowerment. Jesus talks about sending workers into the fields for the harvest; and uses 'ecballo' – the same word used for the casting out of demons. It's a battle. New converts can be more effective; and yet we protect them from the task.

11. Me and Osama are close

You are only 5 or so links away from anyone. God knows all the links. Most people accept Christ through a relationship with someone they know. The NT uses the word Oikos to describe our relational communities – eg the household of

Cornelius, Acts 10. Paul had one in prison; it reached to Caesar, and members of Nero's family became Christians – Phil 4.22. Jesus used the word Oikos in Lk 10.5-7 – when you enter an Oikos...

A relational community is the best place for the gospel to spread. Within an Oikos, the keys to being a strong witness are:

- Time and availability
- A transformed life
- Hospitality
- Spiritual intuition
- Generosity

12. The how-to of spreading the epidemic

What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us – Ralph Waldo Emerson

Perspective changes the way we see our surroundings – eg 2 wolf bounty hunters, waking to see their camp surrounded by a pack of hungry wolves, eyes glittering in the firelight – wake up Jerry, we're rich!!

We are sheep amongst wolves – we have a shepherd. Lk 10 and Mt 10 – Jesus gives 5 principles which help us start churches that will reproduce:

1. Prayer – ask for labourers
2. Oikos – look for pockets of receptive people. People are tribal. Look for a strong sense of community (anywhere); use your spiritual antennae. Henry Blackaby – we should find out what God is doing and join him.
3. Power of presence – we have authority. There are 2 kinds of lost people – moths and cockroaches. Turning the light on tells you the difference – moths are drawn to the light, cockroaches will flee. We don't need resources, just ourselves – no purse, food, clothes
4. Person of peace – look for someone receptive to our message. Characteristics of such people: receptivity, relational connections, reputation (good or bad). Eg – the Samaritan woman; Cornelius; Garasene demoniac, sent after 10 minutes to 10 cities, the Decapolis...
5. People of purpose.

You can ask the non Christians who in the community needs the message of Jesus, and they will tell you – the family down the street, go there; I felt I should pray for you? He responds. You start a church in his house. Egs – Alexander in his care home. Kevin on campus at his college.

PART FIVE: THE CALL TO ORGANIC CHURCH

13. Falling with style

Success is how high you bounce when you hit bottom – Gen George Patton

Failure is only the opportunity to begin intelligently again – Henry Ford

He failed his first church planter assessment.. His first go was a glossy brochure high impact launch with baseball clinics, inaugural services, good leaders. It failed within a year. The next was a cell church under the guidance of Ralph Neighbour. It was fine – it became a network of small organic churches. Then he got stuck – no potential churchplanting leaders. He did one himself, in his home. It went from there. Lessons learned in the early days:

- Start small and begin in the harvest, not with a team of Christians
- Allow God to build round others
- Empower others from the start
- Let scripture, not your assumptions, lead
- Rethink leadership – you don't need maturity, just empowerment
- Create immediate obedience in baptism and let the one doing the evangelizing do the baptism
- Settle your ownership issues...

14. Tales that really mattered

20 years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbour. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover. – Mark Twain.

Stories.
'I believe we are leaving the day of the *ordained* and ushering in the day of the *ordinary*.'