

Book Review: Organic Church, by Neil Cole

Review
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When you hear the term “house church,” what comes to mind? Maybe some place where Christianity is not free to go public, like China? But did you know that house church movements are also growing in the United States?

So we learn from Neil Cole, who is the executive director of Church Multiplication Associates and the author of *Organic Church*. *Organic Church* is the product of his own journey planting “spontaneous multiplication movements” resulting in hundreds of “organic” churches.[1]

WHAT IS AN “ORGANIC” CHURCH?

An organic church is essentially a house church. Cole prefers the former term because of pejorative connotations associated with the latter, and because he has found organic churches meeting in many places other than houses (23). Cole believes this new kind of church is the answer to the problem he sets up in his introduction: “there are many people in the United States who want to hear and believe in the message of Jesus but are not interested in the institution of the church as it is” (xxii). In fact, “all around the world, where church follows the Western institutional pattern, its influence is in decline” (xxiii).

Cole suggests a new approach to evangelism—instead of inviting the world to church and trying to make Sunday relevant (note his criticism of the seeker-sensitive model), “let’s bring Christ to people where they live” (xxvi). More memorably: “If you want to win this world to Christ, you are going to have to sit in the smoking section” (xxvii).

Most of the book is spent describing the organic church model, recounting Cole's experience, outlining principles for church planters, and supporting these principles with Scripture. One of the more significant chapters is chapter 12, where Cole provides five principles for starting churches that reproduce. These principles are rooted in his experience and based on Matthew 10 and Luke 10 (173): (1) the practice of prayer;



(2) pockets of people (finding a receptive *oikos* ["household"], which Cole defines loosely as a basic social unit); (3) the power of presence ("showing up"); (4) a person of peace (finding someone who can reach an entire *oikos*); and (5) a people of purpose (people who have had the gospel injected into their community rather than people who have been drawn out of their community).

EVALUATING ORGANIC CHURCH

Strong on Bible Reading, Prayer, and Depending on God

Overall, *Organic Church* is an inspiring book with many biblical emphases but with weak biblical foundations. The book is inspiring because of Cole's zeal. His passion to reach people with the gospel is contagious. He emphasizes prayer—he prayed for years that his mother would become a follower of Christ (168–69). He emphasizes reliance on the Spirit (89) and on Jesus Christ (49–53). And he emphasizes God's Word, warning us not to replace reading the Bible itself with reading books about the Bible or listening to others explain the Bible. In fact, in the Life Transformation Groups he developed, group members read about thirty chapters of the Bible each week (67)!

Strong on Membership and the Importance of Truth

This emphasis on Bible reading is one facet of his commitment to intense Christian discipleship and meaningful church membership. He notes, for example, that “we compromise the life of the church if we keep bad soil in our membership” (69).

Further, in a day when many “missional” evangelicals are hesitant to speak of truth, Cole writes that “divine truth in the heart is the start of everything. A transformed life, and consequently loving relationships and a life on mission, is the fruit of divine truth flooding the heart of a regenerate soul. It is the heart set free by the powerful atoning work of Jesus that is the starting place for all else” (116).

Finally, Cole both humbly and helpfully devotes an entire chapter recounting the mistakes he has made in ministry (ch. 13).

Weak Biblical Foundations

Unfortunately, however, the book has weak biblical foundations. For example, Cole spends an entire chapter addressing the organization and leadership of the church without ever referring the biblical descriptions of church polity or the even clearer prescriptions for church leadership (such as 1 Timothy 3).

Weak Understanding of the Church

More importantly, Cole has a weak understanding of the church, which surfaces both in his description of New Testament house churches and in his definition of the church. While the early Christians often met in their homes (Acts 2:47; Rom. 16:5; Col. 4:15; Phlm. 2), the first church in Jerusalem also gathered together at the Temple (Acts 2:46; 5:12). Paul’s pattern of evangelism usually began in the Jewish synagogues, not in households (Acts 13:5, 14; 14:1; 17:1–3, 10; 18:4; 19:8). And when an entire “household” (*oikos*) was converted and baptized in the NT (e.g., Acts 16:33), this was not simply a social unit but a group of dependents who lived under one roof.[2] We should not equate these converted households with house churches, in which people from outside the household would meet in a house for worship.

My point is: the picture is more complicated than Cole would have us think. Granted, some of this is quibbling about facts, but the details are significant because Cole presents organic churches as *the* way Jesus

intended for us to do church (41–44). To do this, he must stretch what the New Testament actually says about house churches. House churches have been helpful at times in Christian history and may still be helpful today, but Cole is wrong to argue that this is *the* biblical pattern for evangelism and church planting.

Weak Definition of the Church

Finally, we should consider Cole’s definition of the church itself. He is right to ask the question, “What is the church?” but his answer shows little awareness that Christians have been discussing the question throughout church history. Cole defines the church as “the presence of Jesus among His people called out as a spiritual family to pursue His mission on this planet” (53). There is certainly truth in this definition, but our Protestant forebears would have considered it biblically deficient, pointing to the importance of the right preaching of the gospel, the right administration of the sacraments, and church discipline. As David Wells observes, it is questionable whether many modern home fellowships, which used to *complement* the local church, will really carry out the duties of the church.[3]

In conclusion, you may find this book helpful if you are a church planter, particularly if you are considering urban ministry, but you’ll need to buttress it with books that have a more solid biblical ecclesiology.

By Kevin McFadden