

## The Coming “Crash” of Organic Church(?!)

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*“Make us glad according to the days Thou hast afflicted us, And the years we have seen evil. Let Thy work appear to Thy servants, And Thy majesty to their children. And let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us; And do confirm for us the work of our hands; Yes, confirm the work of our hands.” (Psalm 90:15-17)*

Psalm 90, traditionally known as “the Psalm of Moses” speaks to the transitory nature of human existence when compared with God’s “eternality”. Simply put, human existence is but a breath when compared with Him Who rules over eternity. It is only fitting, in a human kind of way, that the Psalmist would end his Psalm with a cry for permanence amidst the transitory existence of this life. “. . . confirm for us the work of our hands; Yes, confirm the work of our hands.”

O.K., there is a point here. A couple of them, actually. I’ll try to make them as simple as possible. Organic movements become organizational monuments for a very “biblical” reason - the longing of the human heart for permanence. Movements tend to naturally progress from organic to organizational for the simple reason that people seek stability, even permanence, amidst the transitory comings and goings of this pilgrim existence. Even in matters spiritual, the human heart longs for a stable place to hang it’s hat and call “home”. The idea of “organic” tends to be equated with that which is temporary, not to mention that which is unorganized, and there is something about the human psyche that seems predisposed against both things temporary and things disorganized. Even Wolfgang Simson’s latest production, The Starfish Manifesto, represents an attempt to nail the Jello of organic church to a tree of stability and structure. How successful he will be is yet to be determined, but like Moses (and a long line of saints since) the urge for organization over disorganization and permanence over transience is there beckoning all of us.

Yes, I know I said that there were a couple of points to be made here (as my daughter would say, “Wait for it dad, wait for it”). But just to confuse and frustrate you I’m going to hold the point and take a moment to explain where all this originated. I recently read Mark Galli’s article in Christianity Today Online entitled “Long Live Organic Church!” (Posted at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/januaryweb-only/11-41.0.html> ). You should read the article for yourself, but I want to make a few comments and observations. Galli’s overarching “thesis” is that Organic Church is a good thing, but that it is headed for an eventual, even inevitable, crash: “That the organic church movement will crash, I have no doubt. Every renewal movement in church history has either derailed immediately or produced temporary renewal at the expense of long-term unintended consequences.” Needless to say, this news (or prediction) will come as a splash of cold water in the face of most (if not all) current practitioners of organic church, including those of us involved in the organic house church movement. Some will respond with indignation and denial, others with surprise and questions. But before we over-react and reject Galli’s observations out-of-hand I think we should a few moments to listen to what he has to say. For this reason, I want to respond with, well, some reflection.

As I see it, Galli’s argument boils down to this. The organic church movement will “crash” at that point where its promoters and practitioners realize that their efforts are not resulting in the widespread “transformation” of “church” which was promised at the outset of the organic church movement.

*“. . . when the organic church movement has run its course—maybe in this generation, or maybe in two or three—then what? What will become of those who have given their best years and their hard earned fortunes to the cause only to see that the world is not, in fact, transformed, or that they have sown the seeds of some bitter unintended consequence? Or what if the church never quite gets it and reverts to its old institutional self? I fear they may become bitter at the church and at God. It would be perfectly understandable if they did. It is a terrible thing to be disappointed by God when you’ve sacrificed all to promote what you think has been his purpose.”*

**Enter The Borg.** Whether or not Galli realizes it, he has made an important point (just not the one he probably intended to make). In many ways, “institutional evangelicalism” resembles “the Borg” of StarTrek fame. You remember the Borg: “You will be assimilated. Resistance is futile”. Just as Western American

culture has assimilated most of evangelicalism and created churches resembling spiritual “WalMarts”, so evangelicalism has become well known for (and very adept at) assimilating church renewal movements. Anybody here remember “The Purpose Driven Church”? Was the church “transformed” by it? Not really. A bunch of church splits and a lot of used books later it has been assimilated into institutional church growth theory and the Borg have move on in search of their next target: Organic Church. This reality should serve as a cautionary tale to those organic church practitioners who think they are making inroads with mega-churches and other traditional institutional church structures. Be warned: teaching and imparting (or, better yet, modeling) organic church principles to an institutional audience does not mean that structures will be “transformed” (however we define that), or that your values will be widely adopted. And it is naive to think otherwise. Why? Well, partly because of the inherent conflict between structure and values.

**Structures vs Values.** As I have said before, we should never change a structure before we change a value. At the end of the day, we tend to structure our spiritual lives around the values we hold important. Institutions maintain their structure because they choose to maintain the values which gave rise to the structure. To the extent that organic church values support the current institutional structure, they will be well received, even adopted. Where organic church values challenge or conflict with institutional church structures, those values will be ignored or rejected. Remember, biblically speaking, new wine and old wineskins seldom work well together.

**Obedience Versus Results.** William James (January 11, 1842 – August 26, 1910) was a pioneering American psychologist and philosopher who is remembered for his philosophy of “pragmatism” which looked at the “cash value” of an idea. To oversimplify, he emphasized “results” or the tangible “cash value” of ideas. What was “true” was measured by what “works”. Without offering his readers the benefit of an explanation (such as I just offered you), Galli reduces the choice between institutional church and organic church to a choice between obedience and the pragmatism of “results”. Hidden and unexpressed in the discussion is the reality that this war of words will be won by whoever gets to define “results”. Western Christianity has consistently defined “results” in terms of numbers and size; the number of people on your staff, the number of people involved in your programs, the size of your building, the size of your budget. The Christian publishing business measures “success” by the “results” of selling at least 25 thousand copies in the first year of publication. You may have written the greatest book since the Bible, but if it won’t sell 25 thousand in its first year, forget it. These are “tangible” results which are easily measured. And if the techniques you employed “worked” to produce those “results”, how can you say that they are “wrong” or even (heaven forbid) “disobedient”. Isn’t it obvious that God’s will is a big church campus with lots of buildings filled to overflowing with lots of people doing lots of spiritual activities? And it must have been God’s will to sell a billion copies of the worst and most trite end-time series of books in the history of Christian publishing. Right? (Sorry. Couldn’t help myself. Bad dog, bad dog. Stop that! No apologies offered to the fans of “Left Behind”). But, alas, I digress. So let’s get back to the point. The real challenge here, and not just for the organic church movement, is to find a different “metric” for defining and measuring “results” in the context of the Church. On the other hand, Mr. Galli recommends that we change our focus from “results” to “obedience”. While I understand and agree with his underlying point, it begs the question of defining “obedience”. And to frame the discussion in terms of “obedience” is somewhat disingenuous and self-serving. I mean, does anyone actually know a leader (or leaders) in the evangelical institutional church who are there because of an openly expressed desire to be DISobedient? Nope, me neither. So let’s move on.

**A Uniquely Western Perspective.** But there is an “organic church obedience” with “results” which Galli doesn’t talk about in his article on organic church. Like most of us, Galli’s perspective is uniquely Western. And in the postmodern Western Church practitioners of organic church are indeed fighting an up-hill battle against well entrenched religious institutionalism impelled by a “spirit of bigness”. The Borg aren’t in the habit of surrendering. But what about elsewhere in the world? Wolfgang Simson likes to tell the story of “Sarah”, a Vietnamese woman who, beginning in 1976, led the growth of an organic house church movement in Vietnam which, in a 4 year period of time, saw some 18,000 baptized converts (See The Starfish Manifesto at page 16). Not bad results for simple organic obedience. And this is NOT an isolated occurrence. Similar organic church growth stories have been documented in other countries such as China and India.

**The “Crash” of Organic Church?** It is quite possible that Mr. Galli’s concern for the coming “crash” of organic church is valid, based upon 1) the experience of Western churches co-opting renewal movements,

2) the preoccupation of western church practitioners with “results” (defined in terms of numbers) and 3) Mr. Galli’s limited information regarding what God is doing elsewhere in the world through organic churches. In other words, Mr. Galli many need to get out more. But at the same time Mr. Galli’s concerns should serve as a cautionary tale for all western-oriented organic church practitioners who think that successful results, even widespread “transformation”, will come from teaching the Borg our latest organic principles or techniques. Just because the Borg have agreed to publish our books and promote our workshops doesn’t mean we won’t be assimilated. They have a lot more experience at this than we do. They may just be saving us for last.

## **Epilogue**

Generally speaking, church growth movements don’t “crash”. They simply become large collections of used books - yesterday’s conference materials - another contribution to “the evangelical Borg collective”. Will organic church, including the organic house church movement which is close to my heart, fare differently? That will depend on several things.

Wolfgang Simson might say it will depend on whether or not the practitioners of organic church have completed the personal process of apostolic migration (See The Starfish Manifesto at page 118). All I can say at this point is, “You either get it or you don’t”.

I could argue that it will depend on the outcome of the on-going deterioration of our postmodern culture and it’s “anti-institutional Christianity” bias that is bankrupting institutional evangelicalism from the inside out and driving more and more people to seek authentic biblical faith outside the four walls of the Church. While Mr Galli appears familiar with the problem of “ministry burn out”, he seems to fail to connect the dots of the postmodern decline of the church and understand that this is one of the major on-going factors giving rise to the organic church movement.

I might also argue that any future “crash” of organic church will depend on the willingness and ability of organic church leaders to steer a true course which emphasizes and practices organic values over organizational structure while facing the reality of Psalm 90 where we began this discussion. People long for a degree of stability, even permanence, in the midst of life’s transitory realities. The challenge of organic church is how we meet that longing and provide that stability without becoming “institutionalized”.

Finally, I would argue that Mr. Galli has, perhaps, missed God’s greater Kingdom purpose for the organic church movement. What if God’s Kingdom purpose in raising up the organic church movement is NOT to renew or transform the existing institutional church. What if in His higher wisdom (Isaiah 55) His plan is to raise us a new organic structure which can serve as the channel for the River of His Spirit in these last days before Jesus returns? What if His plan is not institutional renewal but a genuine spiritual outpouring of historic proportions which will permanently alter both the spiritual landscape and the structure of His Church in these last days?

## **Common Characteristics of Church Renewal Movements**

In light of Mark Galli’s article on the coming crash of the organic church movement I thought it might be appropriate to offer you the opportunity to compare the organic church movement with the common characteristics of church renewal movements. The following characteristics were compiled by Dr Paul Pierson, professor of missions history at Fuller Seminary. Personally, I think these suggest that Mr. Galli is a little out of touch with the long-term nature of historic Church renewal movements - such as the current organic church movement. As you reflect on the current state of organic church, may you find the following characteristics encouraging:

The list of factors observed in revival and renewal movements throughout history is flexible and some of these can be combined, but here is a list.

- They always begin on the periphery of the institutional church

- They are motivated by a transforming experience (grace) of God by an individual or group.
- The result is the desire for a more authentic Christian life that often leads to concern for the church and world.
- Face to face groups for prayer, Bible study, mutual encouragement are important.
- New methods of selecting and training leaders become important. These are less institutional, more grass roots and lay oriented.
- There are theological breakthroughs, that is, rediscovery of aspects of the Biblical message that have been forgotten or overlooked by the Church, usually they involve a focus on the gifts of every believer.
- There is a leveling effect, distance decreases between clergy and laity, social classes, races, men and women, and denominations.
- The movement is countercultural in some ways, often because it reaches out to those who have not been valued by their society.
- Consequently there will be opposition by many in the dominant culture and church.
- There will often be manifestations of spiritual warfare. such movements sense the reality of evil and the need to recognize the victory of Christ in the cross and resurrection.
- At times there will be unusual manifestations of the power of the Holy Spirit; healings, visions, glossalalia, miracles. etc.
- More flexible structures of church and mission will be needed and often emerge, different from traditional structures.
- The movement will be led to significant recontextualization of the Christian message, which will be communicated more widely by lay persons to those outside the church.
- New music is often a characteristic.
- Biblical concepts ignored by the traditional church but relevant to the hearers are often discovered.
- There will be a growing concern for the marginalized, often expressed in ministries of compassion.
- At a later stage this often leads to concern for broader social transformation.
- As the movement matures there will be concern for the renewal of the broader church.
- As the movement continues to mature many will see themselves not only as part of the particular movement but as citizens of the Kingdom of God, transcending their own movement.
- Finally, every movement is less than perfect and often messy at the edges and sometimes, at the center. This is inevitable as long as sinful humans are involved.