

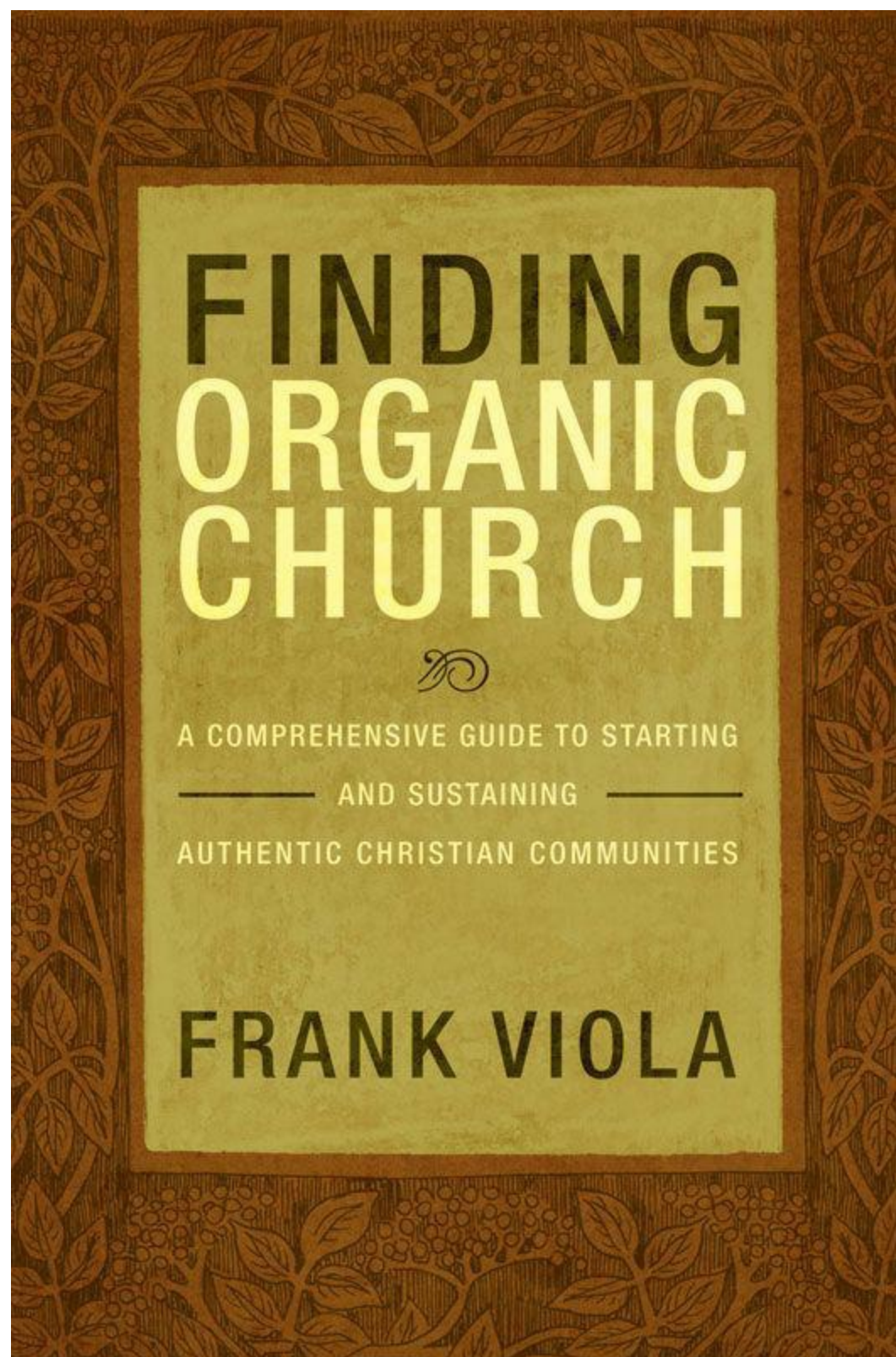


# FINDING ORGANIC CHURCH



A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO STARTING  
— AND SUSTAINING —  
AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

FRANK VIOLA



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ORGANIC  
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**FRANK VIOLA**

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transforming lives together

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# PREFACE

Since I've been writing about organic church life, people have consistently asked me two questions: (1) Where can I find the type of church that you write about? and (2) How does one plant an organic church?

This book is an attempt to answer both questions in a comprehensive way.

The principles set forth are not untested theories. You will not find armchair philosophy or bloodless abstractions within these pages.

Rather, the principles described have been hammered out on the anvil of experience—both positive and negative. They have been discovered through many mistakes (a good number of which are my own) as well as a number of accidental successes. They are also supported by the voice of Scripture.

I have often described myself as an observing biologist. For the last twenty-one years, I've watched organic church life take root. I've observed how it functions, what nurtures it, and what chokes it.

I will shamelessly admit that I don't possess all the answers. I'm still in school. I'm still watching the glories and gores of organic church life. I'm also still experimenting. I don't believe there are any experts in this business—only a catalog of failures and successes.

This book, then, is an attempt to present a theology of organic church planting, along with a number of practical helps for those who wish to embark on this journey.

Since I've been a Christian, I've made a number of observations regarding the problems endemic to the contemporary church—both traditional and nontraditional. These experiences have led me to the following conclusions:

1. Most churches, including a large number of house churches and simple churches, have strayed far afield from the experience of the body of Christ. The chief reason being that we have largely ignored what Scripture has to say about God's way of planting churches.

2. Many of the problems germane to both traditional and nontraditional churches could be resolved if we returned to the biblical witness of church planting and nurturing.

Granted, these conclusions are built on pragmatic observations. But they also carry the weight of Scripture to support them. And they are the motivation that provoked this book.

Four books precede this one in a series I've written on radical church restoration. The Untold Story of the New Testament Church is a narrative ecclesiology, rehearsing the story of the New Testament church in chronological order. Pagan Christianity (coauthored with George Barna) traces the origins of our modern church practices. It demonstrates



that most of our traditional church practices are without biblical merit and out of sync with the organic nature of the church.

Reimagining Church presents a living-color image of New Testament church life for the twenty-first century. [\[1\]](#) It's a detailed theology of organic church for our time. From Eternity to Here explores the eternal purpose of God—the grand mission that ought to govern our church life as well as our spiritual service. It presents the big sweeping epic of God's ultimate passion.

The book you hold in your hands picks up where From Eternity to Here, Reimagining Church, Pagan Christianity, and The Untold Story of the New Testament Church leave off. It takes a detailed look at how an organic expression of the church is born in a given place and how it can be sustained.

I highly recommend that you read the previous four books along with this one because many questions pertinent to the topic of organic church are answered therein. This book stands as the fifth in the series.

Throughout this volume, I'll be using the following terms interchangeably: church planter, apostle, Christian worker, itinerant worker, and apostolic worker. I will explain my reasoning for this later in the book. I'll also be using the term he to describe apostles. Not because I believe that only men can be apostolic workers, but merely because it's simpler to write "he" than "he or she." (I have no problem with the idea that women can engage in apostolic work. Junia is listed as an apostle in Romans 16:7, and Priscilla and Phoebe were a great asset to Paul's apostolic ministry.) [\[2\]](#)

That said, I have written this book for three different audiences.

First, it is written for those who wish to begin meeting in an organic way and would like some practical help for the journey.

Second, it is written for the scores of people who are involved in missional churches, incarnational churches, relational churches, emerging churches, house churches, simple churches, and even organic churches. (These are not synonyms; there are distinctions between each.)

Third, it is written for every person who feels called to plant churches—no matter what type.

The book is divided up into four parts. Part 1 explores the spiritual principles that govern church planting in the New Testament. Part 2 answers common objections to the points made in part 1. Part 3 is a practical guide for beginning an organic church. And part 4 deals with the health and development of organic churches. The footnotes supply detailed information as to how I came to various conclusions as well as source citations. I'm well aware that the paradigm shift that this book calls for will be hard for many mainstream thinkers to absorb. Yet I appeal to Scripture, experience, and New Testament scholarship to buttress my views, and I hope that my readers will seriously consider them.

In this connection, it's my contention that most Christians are stuck in the prevailing paradigms that dominate the religious world today. [\[3\]](#) Let me illustrate with a historical example.

In the mid-twentieth century, Swiss watchmakers had cornered the world market

share for watches. But that changed when one of their own countrymen came out with a revolutionary new idea: the quartz watch.

Ironically, when the idea of the quartz watch was presented to the Swiss manufacturers, they laughed at it. They concluded that it could never work, so they refused to patent the idea. Seiko Watch Corporation, on the other hand, took one look at the quartz watch, and the rest is history.

The power of a prevailing paradigm had so influenced the Swiss watch manufacturers that they couldn't understand the new concept of the quartz watch. Because the watch had no gears, no mainspring, and no bearings, they rejected it. Their present paradigm didn't allow for the new innovation. The net effect was that they lost the leading edge on watchmaking, and they were forced to lay off thousands of workers. It was all because the quartz watch didn't fit into their worldview. It didn't map to their paradigm. They didn't appreciate the new way because they were blinded by the old way.

In the same manner, I'm convinced that a paradigm shift concerning the practice of the church and church planting is needed if the body of Christ will be restored to God's original intention. Note that a recovery of both church practice and church planting are needed. And both elements must be kept together. As Roland Allen once put it,

People have adopted fragments of St. Paul's method and have tried to incorporate them into alien systems, and the failure which resulted has been used as an argument against the Apostle's method.[\[4\]](#)

What is needed is a recovery of New Testament church-planting principles to produce New Testament-based churches. Put another way, we need a restoration of the divine pattern for church planting in order to produce organic churches. Consequently, an entirely new paradigm must be embraced for both church practice and church planting. Again, Allen writes,

It would be difficult to find any better model than the Apostle [Paul] in the work of establishing new churches. At any rate this much is certain, that the Apostle's methods succeeded exactly where ours have failed.[\[5\]](#)

The rediscovery of the scriptural approach to church planting is an explosive dynamic that has the power to break traditional thinking and practice. For this reason, I pray that my readers will open their hearts wide to behold a new way—which is really an ancient way, handcrafted by God Himself.

Frank Viola  
Gainesville, Florida  
February 2009

[\[1\]](#) It should be noted that I am using the word church throughout this volume as it is used in the New Testament. "Church" is not a building, a denomination, or a religious service. Rather, "church"—translated from the Greek word *ekklesia*—embodies two ideas: community and assembly. The New Testament envisions the church as a close-knit community whose members share God's life and assemble together regularly.

[2] See Eldon Jay Epp, *Junia: The First Woman Apostle* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005). See also chapter 11 of this book and Acts 18:2–3, 18–19; 24ff.; Rom. 16:1–4, 7; 1 Cor. 16:19.

[3] A paradigm is the overall understanding or model that is accepted by an intellectual community. A paradigm shift refers to a drastic change in that understanding or model.

[4] Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), 5.

[5] Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), 147.

# INTRODUCTION

## RECLAIMING THE BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

It is the depravity of institutions and movements that given in the beginning to express life, they often end in throttling that very life. Therefore, they need constant review, perpetual criticism and continuous bringing back to the original purposes and spirit. The Christian church is no exception. It is the chief illustration of the above.

—E. Stanley Jones

The purpose of this book is very simple: to present the biblical narrative for church planting and to reclaim that narrative for our day.

### **Origin Determines Destiny**

The Bible puts a great deal of stress on origins. This is because in spiritual things, origin determines destiny. Therefore, the origin of a church will determine its destiny as well as its quality. Put another way, how a church is planted has a profound effect on the character, the effectiveness, and the future of that church. Consider Paul's words:

I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. (1 Cor. 3:6–13)

In this passage, Paul uses two metaphors to describe the work of church planting: planting a field and constructing a building. For Paul, church planters are farmers (they "plant" the church), and they are builders (they "build" the church).

It is from this passage that the term church planter is derived. A church planter is one who plants the seed, which is the gospel of Jesus Christ, out of which a church is born. On the term church planter, Charles Brock writes,

The term “church planter” is rather new to many people. A church planter is a person, national or foreigner, who sows the gospel seed in a way that a New Testament church comes to life and grows.[\[1\]](#)

Paul depicts the church as a field. But he also envisions it as a building. Yet it’s a building that is alive. When Paul speaks of a field, he’s not talking about an acre of dirt. He’s speaking of a cultivated field such as a field of wheat.[\[2\]](#) Consequently, both metaphors have in view the organic nature of the church. The church is a living organism.

Within this passage, Paul mentions three ingredients for planting healthy churches:

1. The competence of the one who plants/builds the church.

By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder. (1 Cor. 3:10a)

2. The materials used for building.

If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is.... It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man’s work. (1 Cor. 3:12–13)

3. The way in which the church is built.

But each one should be careful how he builds. (1 Cor. 3:10b)

### **The Mechanical vs. the Organic**

Tragically, many modern Christians have the benighted idea that starting a church is like assembling Lego blocks. One simply has to stick his nose in the Bible, extract from its pages the practices of the early church, imitate them, and voilà, a floatable “New Testament church” is created. I call this mechanical method of church formation “biblical blueprintism.”

Biblical blueprintism is built on a rather thin ecclesiology and a misunderstanding of the organic nature of church life. For this reason, it’s profoundly flawed.

An authentic church cannot be started by the bare hands of human beings—no more than a woman can be constructed through human ingenuity or imitation. A woman must be given birth. And once born, she must be nurtured to the point where she develops on her own.

Forgive the crass illustration, but lashing together two female arms and legs onto a torso and propping a female head on top will never produce a girl. To the naked eye such

a concoction may resemble a human being. But it will always lack the essential quality of humanness—which is life. And life is the product of birth. This principle holds true when we consider the matter of church planting.

Consequently, the “biblical blueprint” model is rooted in the notion that the New Testament is the new Leviticus. Advocates approach the Bible like an engineer approaches an engineering textbook. Study the structural principles and then apply them.

But church planting is not a form of engineering. And the New Testament isn't a rule book. It's a record of the DNA of the church at work. As T. Austin-Sparks says,

The fact is that, while certain things characterized the New Testament churches, the New Testament does not give us a complete pattern according to which churches are to be set up or formed! There is no blueprint for churches in the New Testament, and to try to form New Testament churches is only to create another system which may be as legal, sectarian, and dead as others. Churches, like the Church, are organisms which spring out of life, which life itself springs out of the Cross of Christ wrought into the very being of believers. Unless believers are crucified people, there can be no true expression of the Church.[\[3\]](#)

For us humans, the family is genetic to our species. There will always be a father, a mother, and children. This cannot be broken. It's written in the arteries of creation.

In the same way, organic church life—the experience of the body of Christ—is instinctive to our species as Christians. It's woven into the bloodstream of God's universe. Provided that certain raw ingredients are in place, body life will organically and spontaneously break forth in the midst of a group of believers.

The problem we face is in removing all the baggage so that body life can arise naturally and stay healthy. This puts us on a collision course with the biblical principles of church planting.

## **What Is an Organic Church?**

As I have stated elsewhere, I've been using this term for over fifteen years now. Today it has become somewhat of a clay word, being molded and shaped to mean a variety of different things by a variety of different people.

By organic church, I mean a church that is born out of spiritual life instead of being constructed by human institutions and held together by religious programs. Organic church life is a grassroots experience that is marked by face-to-face community, every-member functioning, open-participatory meetings (as opposed to pastor-to-pew services), nonhierarchical leadership, and the centrality and supremacy of Jesus Christ as the functional Leader and Head of the gathering.

By contrast, whenever we sin-scarred mortals try to create a church the same way we would start a business, we are defying the organic nature of church life. An organic church is one that is naturally produced when a group of people has encountered Jesus Christ in reality (external ecclesiastical props being unnecessary) and the DNA of the

church is free to work without hindrance. It's the difference between standing in front of a fan and standing outdoors on a windy day.

To summarize, an organic church is not a theater with a script. It's a lifestyle—an authentic journey with the Lord Jesus and His disciples.

The difference between organic churches and nonorganic churches is the difference between General Motors and a vegetable garden. One is founded by humans, the other is birthed by God. One is artificial, the other is living.

For this reason, church planters are like farmers and midwives.

<sup>[1]</sup> Charles Brock, *The Principles and Practice of Indigenous Church Planting* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1981), 12–13.

<sup>[2]</sup> The Greek word used in this passage literally means "a cultivated field." Interestingly, the New Testament is consistent in portraying wheat as a depiction of Christ and His people (John 12:24; 4:35; Mark 4:29; Luke 10:2).

<sup>[3]</sup> T. Austin-Sparks, *Words of Wisdom and Revelation* (St. Charles, MO: Three Brothers, 1971), 62.

# **PART ONE**

## **PLANTING THE SEED—BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES FOR CHURCH PLANTING**



# CHAPTER 1

## THE DIVINE PATTERN OF CHURCH FORMATION

We must return to the beginning, to the “genesis” of the church, to see what He said and did then. It is there we find the highest expression of His will. Acts is the “genesis” of the church’s history, and the church in the time of Paul is the “genesis” of the Spirit’s work. Conditions in the church today are vastly different from what they were then, but these present conditions could never be our example, or our authoritative guide; we must return to the “beginning.” Only what God has set forth as our example in the beginning is the eternal will of God.

—Watchman Nee

Over the last fifty years, there have been nearly one hundred books written on the subject of church planting. Some of these books have the subject nailed down to a fine science. But what is surprising is that few of them discuss the ways in which churches were planted in the beginning.

To my mind, it’s a profound mistake to ignore what we find in the book of Acts concerning the manner in which Christian communities were birthed in the first century. As Watchman Nee writes,

Never let us regard these early chapters of Acts as inapplicable today. Like the book of Genesis, the Acts of the Apostles reveals the beginnings of God’s ways, and what He did then sets a pattern for His work always.[\[1\]](#)

The New Testament presents four ways in which churches were planted in century one. These ways weren’t cultural fads or the nifty ideas of intelligent mortals. I believe they originated with God Himself.

### **The Jerusalem Model**

The first way occurred in the city of Jerusalem. Twelve apostles planted one church by the preaching of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:14—8:3). After a period of time, the church multiplied by “transplantation” or “migration.”[\[2\]](#)

Because this approach began first in Jerusalem, we’ll call it the Jerusalem Model. According to the New Testament narrative, after four years, the seeds of the Jerusalem church were scattered and transplanted all throughout Palestine.[\[3\]](#) Because of persecution, the believers in Jerusalem relocated to other locales, shared their faith, and churches sprang up as a result (Acts 8:1–8; 11:19–21). For a time, the twelve apostles

remained in the city.[\[4\]](#)

One of the outstanding characteristics of the Jerusalem dispersion is that all the Christians in Jerusalem had experienced organic church life before they relocated to form new churches. In other words, they brought to other regions their experience of Christ and the church. This is a vital point as we will later see.

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