

## **ORGANIC MISSIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY: Incorporating the Kingdomic Ontology of the Church**

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This is an ecclesiological treatise for the organic missional church. If historical ecclesiology has hardly distinguished between the institutional church and the organic life of the church, this treatise seeks to tread on a fresh path (albeit finding its cues from mainstream traditional ecclesiology). Much of historical ecclesiology has indeed acknowledged that the church is, as mentioned in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, a “society structured with hierarchical organs and the mystical body of Christ” and “the visible society and the spiritual community”. However, in the same instance, the observation of these seemingly organic definitions seems to have been done through thoroughly institutional lenses. In other words, the distinction between the church institution and the church organic is not perceived in as great a measure as I deem necessary. It is as if the church institution takes itself to fully and visibly embody both the organic and the institutional church.

*This ecclesiological effort seeks to take precisely the converse approach by peering at the church institution from the viewpoint of the organic missional church, and articulating an ecclesiology therefrom.* If traditionally, the institutional church held the sole prerogative of examining and validating the legitimacy of the organic missional church, it is now crucial that the organic missional church articulate an ecclesiology from its perspective. This is difficult since the organic missional church remains undefined and its form is unpronounced. Also, this effort would entail the risk of emerging with an ecclesiology that makes the church sound like it consists of two distinct entities with bipolar concerns – this may not necessarily be wrong, but it nevertheless is not the purpose or the point of this ecclesiology.

The point of this ecclesiology is that over decades and centuries, faithful followers of Christ who have sought to embrace in deep measure the vision of the Kingdom have found themselves at odds with the church institution although being ardently connected to the soul of the Christian story. They often wonder what it is about themselves that causes them to love God and his church so deeply, and yet being unable to find themselves a “fit” and a deep sense of belonging in the institutional church. For them, the institutional church often seems to have compromised the cause of the Kingdom. Further to that, if the institutional church has compromised the cause of the Kingdom, why does God – in his sovereignty – still allow for its existence? Why not simply dispense with the institutional church, leaving just the organic missional church – those who supposedly hold Kingdom concerns as utmost priority – in existence to participate in his eschatological vision? It is hoped that this treatise will be of help in at least partially mitigating this concern by providing some concrete answers.

### **I. The Institutional Church and the Organic Missional Church**

John Calvin, in his ecclesiology for a Protestant Church which had miserably failed to attain reconciliation with the Roman Church, spoke of the visible and the invisible church. He spoke of these two dimensions of the church within a context of tension and emerging from his concept of election. Within the visible church are the wheat and the tares, but the invisible church consisted only of the elect. The church consisted of two levels, the first being the lower dimension that is visible but constitutes a mere reflection – a shoddily inferior reflection – of the higher dimension of the church. The higher dimension of the church consisted of the elect, those who were true followers of Jesus Christ.

Arising from Calvin’s theology, the Christian would almost immediately resonate with the inclination to engage in a process of segregating the true followers from the shoddy ones. But Calvin clearly states, “...we are not bidden to distinguish between reprobate and elect – that is for God alone, not for us, to do”. Calvin derives this understanding not as an entirely new conjecture, but rather, articulates it afresh from Augustine’s ecclesiology. The marks of the true church in accordance with the Reformers, which are the word of God purely proclaimed and the

sacraments administered in accordance with Christ's institution, do not render a visible church true; they only serve to affirm that the true church is somehow invisibly found within that visible church. That which is hidden can be found only within the revealed congregation of believers, albeit in impure and imperfect form.

One does not need to be Reformed in position or to entirely embrace Calvin's doctrine of election to agree with his distinction of the visible and the invisible church. One also need not undertake the self-appointed task of pinpointing in an effort to demonstrate just how legitimate Calvin's delineation is in the felt experience of the Christian community. A mere unwavering determination to embrace the Kingdomic vision of the gospel story and to act upon it would already, over time, bring one to observe and experience the tension of the two entirely different "kingdoms" within this entity we call the "church of Jesus Christ", or so it seems.

What we cannot deny is that the two seem to truly be entirely different kingdoms with diverging interests and preoccupations. Whilst a minute fragment of the faith community may be attempting to embrace the values of the Kingdom in all its senselessness, much of churchlife consists of a mechanical dispensation of the religious life either at the convenience or the compulsion of its adherents. And these two dimensions often seem to exist in conflict with each other. One would not be going too far to attribute Calvin's visible and invisible church, the lower and the higher dimensions of the church, to these two components comprising that which we call "the church". The language I shall choose to employ to fit the contemporary context of the church is the "institutional church" (representing the lower dimension or the visible church) and the "organic missional church" (representing the higher dimension or the invisible church).

Whilst it is almost impossible to devise apt definitions for the two dimensions of the church (if one even cared to attempt to do so), the divergent concerns of the institutional church and the organic missional church are starkly apparent. The organic missional church focuses on values of the Kingdom as its supreme guiding force, whereas the institutional church manipulates the gravity of these values to accommodate its interests and sustain the viability of its structures and organisational mechanisms. In the latter, the church's commitment to Kingdom concerns is limited and determined by the resources it can and is willing to commit to the realisation of those concerns. The organic missional church focuses on the cost of following the way of Christ, whilst the institutional church focuses on amassing resources to sustain the costs of preserving structures. The cost of discipleship in the organic church is not immediately visible or measurable except that one is conscious that it involves everything within one's jurisdiction for disposal; the cost of discipleship in the institutional church is almost immediately measurable.

In the institutional church, salvation often seems quantifiable. But this is not so in the organic missional church. For this reason, the institutional church sees people as "members", whereas the organic missional church sees people for precisely what they are – people. The institutional church occupies a "sacred space" constructed of bricks and mortar. But the organic missional church sees the entire world as a sacred field in which God is at work. At the same time, paradoxically, one finds the organic missional people to emerge from *within* the institutional church confined by bricks and mortar. The institutional church functions in accordance with policies, procedures and processes. The organic church hardly "functions", for it just *is*. The preoccupation of the latter is with the dignity and worth of the human person and of creation. The former is inclined to subject people to the structural oppression of the letter of the law, often at the expense of their dignity and personhood; they are often reduced into numerical entities. The latter often bends those very policies and procedures instated by the institutional church just for the sake of people's wellbeing.

This is not to say that the people who choose to remain within the confines of the institutional church are insincere about their choice to embrace the faith. The fact is, to live a life venturing in the waves of insecurity and uncertainty is not something desirable or conceivable for everyone – and this is precisely that which is required to find a life within the organic missional church. As fear and intimidation overwhelms, one may find the organic missional life unnecessary in the light of a neater alternative being made available in the institutional church context. This neater

alternative allows for one to “follow Christ” devoid of the risks and the costs the faith entails. This applies even for ministers of the church – serving the institutional church comes with titles, stability of income, reputation, and authority accorded by the powers that be. Serving the organic missional church leaves one unrecognised, ignored, and perhaps most fearfully, *unnecessary*.

In missiological circles, it is commonly assumed that parachurch organisations and mission agencies are visible representations of the organic missional church. However, in accordance with the above descriptions, it must be clarified that these organisations are *not* the visible representation of the organic church, for they too are inclined to being thoroughly institutional and self-absorbed in nature. They too seek their own self-sustenance and are often preoccupied with issues of self-preservation, these inclinations exhibiting themselves through a fixation on policies, procedures and processes. Hence, it must be clarified that parachurch organisations and mission agencies are not necessarily a part of the organic missional church. For the most part, they represent yet another facet of the institutional church and are often subject to the same inclination to exhibit structural evils that compromise Kingdomic values. Hence, what has come to be known as “modalities” and “sodalities” in missiological language are not to be taken as synonymous with our terms employed in this ecclesiological construction. This is not to say that the parachurch organisations and mission agencies have no part in God’s scheme of things, for to advance this assertion would be equivalent to claiming that the institutional church has no part in God’s purpose.

This segment of the essay has deliberately refrained from proposing a nuanced definition for the institutional and the organic missional churches. I have instead sought to draw broad descriptions of the two dimensions of the church insofar as it would suffice for our purpose of moving on with the discussion. It can be said that the institutional church represents the organised dimension of religion, and is not simply about denominations. Any assembly of people which seeks to perpetuate its assembly through structures and constitutions represents the institutional church. Any community of people which seeks to embrace and express its commitment to the Kingdomic vision beyond (and sometimes in conflict with) these institutional structures is an organic missional community.

## **II. The Dynamics of the Two “Kingdoms”**

If the primary concerns of the institutional church are not truly Kingdomic in nature, why would God allow for its seemingly necessary existence? God preserves the existence of the institutional church for the sake of the organic missional church. The two dimensions of the church exist in a symbiotic relationship with each other. The institution is like the cup which gives form to water (i.e., the organic missional church). Although it is the organic missional community that animates the true Body of Christ, it is the institutional church that gives this Body its visibility and form. The institutional church proclaims the word of God and administers the sacraments as God’s means of grace, whilst the organic missional church is preoccupied with being the visible animation of the word and the living incarnation of the sacraments in the world. The institutional church dispenses God’s grace within the confines of buildings, but the organic church is God’s incarnation of grace in the space of creation. The institutional church represents symbolically *to* the world what the organic missional church is *in* the world. Whilst the institutional church is fixated upon its internal dealings and keeping the “house” in order, the organic missional church is the church in the world.

This is not to say that the organic missional church exists for the sake of the world. Traditional ecclesiology emphatically affirms that the world exists for the purpose of the church. In fact, God created the world that the church may be formed from within it. In the history of the church, God has gathered people unto himself and called them his “church”; how this is so remains a mystery, just as calling, election, and salvation are eternal mysteries which can be understood only as intellectual human conjectures. But in the same way, one can infer that the institutional church exists for the purpose of the organic church, for it is within the institutional church that Christians have historically come to capture a higher vision of the Kingdom and formed organic missional communities within the church institution. God seems to have formed the institutional church that

the organic missional church may be formed from within it. From within the institutional church, people have captured the higher vision of the Kingdom. Hence, could it be that the institutional church is God's ordained means of forming and growing the organic missional church? Could the institutional church be God's established incubatory for the organic missional church? Of course, one may ask then if the people from the institutional church are "saved" – answers to questions like this are the divine prerogative of God and one must never assume a position to affirm or reject the status of institutional Christians within the scheme of the Kingdom.

The organic missional Christian must remain fiercely committed to the institutional church but not to its priorities. In his sovereignty, God has instituted both the organic missional church and the institutional church such that the former arises from within the latter. Whilst the institutional church often seems to be working against – or at best, constituting a hindrance to – the cause of the Kingdom, it is from within this realm that organic missional Christians emerge. Undoubtedly, when such Christians emerge, they become a "thorn in the flesh", a source of disturbance, for the church institution. Their abiding presence remains as a stark reminder to the institutional church that there is a higher way of life, a higher calling to discipleship, even if many from the institutional church choose to ignore their presence. There is an apostolic role associated with the organic missional church in that it is there within the institutional church to impose a cleansing effect upon the institution, thereby drawing the larger Body closer to the vision of the Kingdom. For whilst there are those within the organic missional church who have willingly laid themselves down for the purpose of the Kingdom, there are others within the institutional church who need enforcements of Kingdomic challenge in order that they may not slip into positions of spiritual complacency.

Besides that, the institutional church is also charged with the task of guarding the orthodoxy of the organic missional church's theology. When the organic missional Christians attempt to dispense all together with the institution instead of living within the existing tension, their ecclesiology must be held suspect. For in all history, it was the institutional church that has been the articulator of theology in its orthodoxy. From the time of the early church, the various ecumenical councils that met to resolve issues of doctrinal conflict represented the institutional Body of the Lord. This crucial role in guarding the theological orthodoxy of the church must not be viewed with disdain, for it is beyond the scope of the organic missional church. The task of the organic missional church is to fulfil these articulations of theology in praxis, and to provide challenge for the further crystallisation of these theologies. It must be obvious by now that even if the institutional church and the organic missional church cannot relationally co-exist in harmony, they must co-exist harmoniously in terms of their functional ontology. For one to exist in ignorance of the other is to render a significant fracture in the economy of the Kingdom.

The institutional church exists because human assemblies require structures within themselves in order to function. However, establishing structures in such a manner poses the grave possibility of compromising the often unshaped and unformed Kingdomic life found within the Christian story. And yet, the church – being the assembly of saints, *human* saints – cannot possibly exist without such structures, simply by virtue of its members being human. But from within these assemblies, there can emerge clusters of saints who are less concerned about structural issues and remain more fixated on the issues of the Kingdom. And their concerns cannot bear fruit if the institutional church does not persist in the working out of its temporal concerns. As it were, the institutional church needs to establish and preserve order so that the organic missional church can create chaos within the said order. The concerns of the latter give meaning to the former, whilst the concern of the former set the stage for the outworking of the latter. The existence of both is necessary.

### **III. The Unity of the Church**

In relation to this dynamics also is the pertinent issue of unity in the church. It must be noted that the issue of unity is not to be construed as the division between the institutional church and the organic missional church, but rather, unity among various institutional churches. The organic missional church is not divided; it does not have to be. The unity of the church is a major concern of the institutional church, not the organic missional church. This is because the fractured fellowship of the Body arose from the institutional history, and it is for the institutional leaders to negotiate a restoration of institutional unity. As far as the organic missional church is concerned, there never was a fracture in the unity of the church – it exists in harmony with the various components and streams of the Great Christian Tradition, for it looks beyond itself.

This is so because the theological concerns of the organic missional church are rather different from those of the institution. If theology in the institutional church impacts the constitution of the organisation, theology in the organic missional church animates its behaviour patterns and lifestyle. Hence, the organic missional church is most concerned for unity not so much in the traditions and expressions of institutional churchlife, but rather, in Kingdomic values. It does not establish institutional boundaries and is not interested in organisational reputation or credit. It finds a deep and authentic sense of oneness with all who embrace the call to walk towards the Kingdom. Its disputes are not so much centred on, say, the speaking of other tongues or the acceptable forms of corporate worship as they are about practically caring for the needs of the poor, the hungry and the marginalised. In other words, it is the organic missional church which possesses the capacity to exercise charitable theological positions. It is the institutional church that is disunited, for there, we find elements of control, power, and authority to be pertinent issues. For the organic missional church, these are irrelevant, for authentic Kingdom living is to be found in the laying down of one's life and all that one holds dear for the cause of the Kingdom.

When Jesus prayed "that they may be one", he was referring to his Body in the true sense of the word. He was referring to the organic missional people whose concerns pertain to that which he had spoken of more than seventy times in the Gospels – the Kingdom of God. It probably does not bother God that the institutional church exists in a fragmented state, for this is a partial given in institutional life wherein control and power constitute consequential issues.

At this point of time in history, the search for unity within the church is an active search undertaken by the institutional church. As far as the organic missional church is concerned, there is no fracture. Instead, there is a sense of charitable unity among all who capture the heart of the gospel story and who desire to learn what it means to lay down their lives to follow Jesus.

### **IV. The Praxis of Organic Missional Life** **a. For the Ministerial Vocation**

A minister of the gospel who desires to truly embrace the vision of the Kingdom and to embody it without compromise will inevitably find himself at odds with the institutional church. His predicament arises from the reality that he is actually gainfully employed by the institutional church, this being a vocation which entails the rendering of his authority, recognition, titles, and status within the organisational hierarchies. To continually stand at odds with the institutional church for the sake of the Kingdom is also to put all these privileges at stake. And yet, he struggles with the reality that his deepest motivations are inclined to those of the Kingdom, which is the primary and ultimate purpose of the organic missional church. In situations like this, the minister finds himself having to choose. And choose he has to. The calling of Christ to follow him is not something that entails the possibility of compromise, for we either accord everything or nothing to him.

Then there is another dimension of the minister's affiliation with the faith community which compounds the complications he faces – despite his unyielding commitment to the organic missional life of the church, this ecclesiology does not permit him to dismiss the institution and to work apart from it. It is the institutional church as the visible assembly of believers that affirms his vocation in the ministry, and he is obligated to uphold this appointed vocation always in the best interest of the church's wellbeing. However, this "wellbeing" is to be defined in accordance with

Kingdomic values, and not institutional values. When called for, the minister is obligated to ignore the gravity of his position and his security and to act in accordance with the Kingdom, for it is in acting in accordance with the Kingdom that he functions for the wellbeing of the institutional church (which admittedly, would construe otherwise). He must be willing to lose it all; yes, everything.

The minister is to be the sacramental presence of Christ unto his people. He is called to be the real model of Kingdom life for all people, within and without the institutional church. He must never compromise this role even if it is upheld at the expense of his standing with the institution. He must find a place of peace within him to exist in this state of tension between serving the organic missional purpose of the Kingdom and surviving the temporal demands of the institutional church. He must always seek to be a visible embodiment of the Kingdomic life rather than merely to *do* the “work of the Kingdom”. And even at times when the institutional church seems to have compromised his wellbeing, he must love the church unceasingly and fervently seek to offer himself to the Body in accordance with the vision of the Kingdom.

#### **b. For the Christian Believer**

Despite the incapacity of the institutional church to align its priorities in accordance with the Kingdomic vision, no follower of Christ is excused from a fierce and unyielding commitment to the church institution. Despite the failure of the institutional church and its inconsistency with the Kingdomic vision, the faith of a Christian believer who seeks to exist apart from the institution must be seriously questioned. This understanding is found in the argument that the institutional church consists of people gathered by God from the world. And it is very likely true that the organic missional Christian is gathered by God from the institutional church. Whilst the individual’s deepest motivations may strongly and strangely differ from that of the institutional church, the fierce commitment to the institution guards his motivations and keeps them aligned to a cause beyond his self-interest.

Many individual Christians who have stood at odds with the institutional church have resorted to finding alternative paths among parachurch ministries and mission agencies. Such an alternative is not legitimate, for one needs to understand that these organisations themselves too are often self-motivated and constitute the institutional church in no less measure than the local assembly. Further to that, it does not do service to the cause of the Kingdom when many such parachurch institutions seek to perpetuate their existence by seeking resources in various forms from disgruntled Christian individuals. Many of them do not even deem it necessary that the parachurch institution walk in partnership with local churches; they often solicit help from individual Christians without the express blessing of local faith communities. This is extremely telling of a weak ecclesiology on the part of such parachurch agencies, and it betrays the very institutional deficiency they often attribute to the local church institutions. This is of course not to say that parachurch agencies are redundant. The issue in question is whether parachurch agencies are the natural solution to the institutional crisis of the church – a firm ecclesiological approach refutes this possibility. The discerning believer is called into the local assembly, the institutional church, and to live out the higher way of the organic missional life. This means that he finds himself consistently stuck in the tension between institutional demands and Kingdomic commands. To seek creative solutions in the form of attachments to parachurch agencies at the expense of the local church institution is ecclesologically defiant. In this light, parachurch ministries too need to examine their own ecclesiological motivations and positions.