

“The Church’s Full Life” Article for the Chalcedon Website

Ronald Kirk
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Behold, how good and how pleasant *it is* for brethren to dwell together in unity!—Psalm 133:1

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.—Acts 2:42

Organic Life

However, indispensable the formal, local church is, its job is to *support* the *Organic Life* of the body of Christ. A significant difference exists between the formal and informal local church, similar to the difference between the legal aspects of marriage and the ordinary activities of married life. While the institutional church is indeed fundamental and integral, the community life of the church is the essential church and it includes every member.

What do I mean by Organic Life? An organ is a collection of individual components which work together to fulfill some collective purpose. Thus, organic church life consists in a collection of people living in harmony with one another to fulfill God’s individual and collective purposes for them. Note that in an organ the component elements must maintain their individual wholeness. Without their constituent qualities intact, they not only lose their constituted life, they lose their ability to contribute to the larger entity. If you kill the cells which make up the liver, the liver dies. If the liver dies, the whole body dies.

The concept of organism is as fundamental a truth in creation as one can find. I have long known it as godly *individuality*. There is no individuality or separateness of existence except in relationship to others. There is also no relationship without distinct constituting individuals. The whole must not compromise the individual; the individual must cooperate with others to maintain the greater whole, and fulfill its corporate purpose. Another term we might use for organic life is *community life*.

Applied to the local church, this means: 1) The constituted community must produce its ministry to the individual; and 2) The individual must contribute his individual gifts to promote the purpose of the community. To accomplish the church’s reciprocal duty, however tightly bound the individual is to the whole community and vice-versa, the individual and the community must yet maintain the sanctity of their respective spheres. In other words, the individual may not selfishly abuse the community which will tend toward the compromise of its holy trust. Likewise, the community may not interfere with the individual’s private affairs, as long as these affairs do not include obviously manifest, gross sin (e.g. 1 Corinthians 5). For every individual, there is a private life and a corporate life. The two lives are separate, yet in union. This reciprocal liberty and union is the essence of the Biblical Federal Principle. Both the individual and the community are essential to God’s design for man, and lie in the very nature of our redemption. God saves the individual toward a particular purpose (Ephesians 2:10), even as He builds the whole church of such lively stones for His glory (1 Peter 2:5).

For Christians, building consists in the process of positive godly change—sanctification. More than so many particular accomplishments, God’s architecture rather builds upon ongoing growth in character, wisdom and skill development, that is, in education. I have again long observed that God seems to care more about our response to a situation than any particular measure of success in an endeavor. What we learn by grace in wisdom and character stays with us apparently for eternity.

God’s Providence in the One and the Many

Of course, God Himself is central to the principle of Organic Life. We necessarily begin with the Trinitarian nature of our God, for everything in creation and God’s design for the church rest in whom and what God is. God is, according to Scripture and the confession of the historical church, at once One God and Three Persons. In the Three in One, God exists in perfectly self-contained being and fellowship. He is the One and the Many in perfect reconciliation. The individual Persons of the Godhead impose no compromise upon the unity of God. There is no inequality between the Three Persons. Neither is there a compromise of the individual Persons to form the one God. God’s creation reflects in turn this perfect balance between the individual and community. There is with God’s creation neither fragmentation—meaningless pieces—nor is there a mashing of the parts together to forge some monolithic whole. There are no “masses” of the people, as in the communist sense. There is no ultimate chaos or anarchy. God governs all. In covenant community, we properly express unity in diversity, liberty with union, individual life with corporate life, with a violation of neither.

Not only is God the origin of individuality and community, He is our sole ability and ultimate purpose to live rightly.

Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner *stone*; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.—Ephesians 2:19-22

Historically, we have not seen men getting along in such perfect harmony. The simple reason is sin. Even in the church, men tend either toward broken relationships or toward slavish conformance under a strong authority. Relational brokenness occurs because of sinful selfishness, striving to get one’s own way and using conflict to get it. Authoritarianism results from an ambitious person using willing stooges, who out of laziness allow someone to take care of them at the expense of their individuality and liberty. Slavishness aptly terms these sinful human qualities.

Today, the Holy Spirit given to us makes us able to live with each other in love, the way God lives and intends for us. Here then is an important aspect of the art of life. Not only must Christians live a holy individual life, but a holy corporate one. Glorifying God, it is our responsibility to learn to live as individuals in corporate community. Our Lord manifests perfect love in the Godhead. He extends that love toward His creation. He is our example and our power to love. Therefore, we count upon Jesus’ promise that, “Where two or more are gathered in my name, there am I in your midst.” Christians appropriate God’s effective enabling by faithful effort.

The Church’s Purpose

What is the organic church community supposed to accomplish? Recalling the reciprocal relationship between the individual and the community, we note that the church’s corporate job is exactly the job assigned to man in general. They cannot properly be separated. Men ought to glorify God through growth, in education to become what God intends: productive, moral beings, in perfect relationship to God and to each other.

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Thus, we continue in “the apostles’ doctrine.” The Biblical educational tripod includes: Instruction, Discipline, and Example. Discipline for adults is mostly self-discipline. However, we may help each other to do right through gentle admonition and example. Thus, in addition to hearing sound pastoral teaching, we may instruct or counsel one another—when asked or when love demands intervention. Notwithstanding, the organic community of the church primarily help each other to grow educationally through the ordinary influence of life’s example. “Iron sharpens iron.” We serve each other, to encourage servanthood (Mark 10:42-45). We encourage each other to higher character and accomplishment by our practice of faith and self-restraint toward one another. We encourage each other to study and growth through personal scholarship. We discourage sin through exemplifying righteous living. We help each other to grow through regular gathering together to study the Bible and rejoice in worship. We encourage each other to live well through sharing our cultural expressions. For example, we invite each other to our homes where our personal efforts at the art of living encourage one another. The people knew they were Jesus’ disciples because they had been *with Him*. Much of Jesus’ discipleship occurred through the mere influence which fellowship provided.

Moreover, inasmuch as the Holy Trinity is our example, perfect *fellowship* is a part of the church’s organic life, like the influence from immersion into family life. Thus, we continue steadfastly in “fellowship.”

Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, *art* in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me—John 17:20-23

The church ought to demonstrate the wisdom of God in redeeming us, by being able to get along with each other without slavish conformity, in joy and peace, voluntarily, in liberty and in love. Love God; love your neighbor. We cannot love each other if we do not spend time with each other. Therefore, we gather regularly for worship and study. We gather purely for each other’s good company. Simply living together fulfills much of the calling of the church. Dr. Rushdoony stressed ordinary living, upon a strategic vision for dominion and growth of the Kingdom.¹ The effects of extraordinary and powerful individual events can dampen and dissipate, but nothing can stop the inexorable power of the many living for God by the power of the Holy Spirit, glorifying Him in so many ordinary ways. Christianity’s historic middle class perhaps best illustrates this idea. It is God’s peculiar gift to glorify Himself so fully in a content, peaceful, hardworking, loving and free middle class. This is early America’s heritage. Complacency will kill middle class society because such a condition is *not* natural.

We neglect the importance of pure fellowship to our own hurt. We become so involved in a zealous church mission, we may deny ourselves the pleasure of living with one another in Christian charity. We forget that such community glorifies God to the world. My family knows the value of this kind of extended Christian family in the church, where we are each other’s best friends. We work together, forming perhaps the strongest bonds. Then we enjoy each other’s company. We love to be together and often are, usually in peoples’ homes, celebrating birthdays or holidays. We often take outings together.

These kinds of church relationships have formed our closest associations, our dearest friendships, though perhaps we are now far apart. Here is an attainable pattern for godly, neighborly love.

Finally, we are to be productive for Him, expanding our influence through our economic and moral activities in the church and into the community beyond our church circle. We have a kingdom duty before God. “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.” Ephesians 4:16 speaks to the body fitly formed and strengthened through the supply of the joints—the relationships—between the members, every one effectively contributing to the building of the body in love. When the body of Christ functions as it ought, every joint supplying its part to the whole, we work together. Paul told Timothy to equip the saints for the work of the ministry. Thus, we voluntarily work together, doing the work of the church. Interestingly, I have long noticed that I form the quickest and closest relationships when working arm in arm together for a godly cause. Marriages are like that. Friendships likewise.

Some more ambitious ministries of the church community may include schools, private social welfare associations as the Puritan forefathers practiced, barn building, health insurance, and economic ties such as banks and Christian business associations. Hospitals were once largely the domain of associated Christians. Christians may perform community services now accomplished largely by unbelievers, such as sports and recreation for young people, or Christian coffee houses. The 18th century in England marked a great cultural maturity upon its earlier theological earnest. There private social clubs played a major part in England’s cultural growth. Such associations may assume the form of literary societies or political watchdog groups.

The Life of the Church

And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.—Acts 2:46-47

We have only touched upon the particulars of church life. The main point here is to emphasize the necessity of an organic church life beyond the confines of the formal church’s activities. Essentially, the organic life of the church consists in living—living with one another as an extended family. This is not to demean or usurp the institutional church. Regular assembly under the auspices of the formal church is fundamental and necessary to provide discipline, structure and government. But the Lord requires more. If we can learn to live well, our conduct will distinguish us for influence in the community, so that we will find favor, and the church will grow. If not already thus accomplished, a fulfilled church life will require discipline until the practice of it becomes second nature, fulfilled by the Holy Spirit.

¹ For example, see the “Doctrine of the Church” in R.J. Rushdoony’s *Systematic Theology Volume II* (Vallecito, Ross House Books: 1994).