

Church at Its Simplest

by Tom Wymore

What *is* Simple Church?

Simple Church is our preferred term for what is often called house church. One of the best “simple” definitions comes from the Dawn North America website (also the House2House website). I list their definition below (with a few changes).

- By “simple church,” we mean a way of doing and being church that is so simple that almost any believer will respond by saying, “I could do that!”
- By “simple church,” we mean the kind of church described in the New Testament. Structure is flexible and changes so that the church is constantly able to respond to the needs of the extended family and the call to extend the Kingdom of God.
- By “simple church,” we mean people who listen to God, follow His leading and obey Him.
- By “simple church,” we mean spiritual parents raising spiritual sons and daughters to establish their own families (*oikos*).

It's More Than A Change of Location!

Simple Church is more than a change of where people have church meetings. It is part of a response to God's call to re-examine everything about “church” in light of Scripture. So Simple Church is perhaps best described in terms of common core values. Healthy Simple Churches value...

- Simplicity. Formal programs give place to informal, spontaneous expressions of life and outreach.
- Intimacy with God and one another. Intimacy with God is foundational to everything else.
- Community. SC folks know that relationships are at the core of everything in the Christ life.
- Family. The church *is* family, healthy families *are* the church, and leaders are spiritual parents.
- 24/7 Christian walk. Folks in simple churches have a sincere desire to be devoted followers of Jesus all the time, everywhere; the level of personal accountability and involvement is very high.
- Spontaneity. Life and ministry together are characterized by the informal and spontaneous.
- Supernatural lifestyle. Simple church folks generally seem to be very open to the supernatural and keenly aware of the need to live naturally supernatural lives in today's broken world.
- Missional praying (e.g., praying the Luke 10:2b prayer for more workers for the Harvest).
- Participation (for everyone—everyone has something to contribute, not only when the church gathers but as the church ministers to its own community and beyond).
- Listening to Jesus. There is a huge emphasis upon hearing God and obeying what He says.
- Leadership by example, serving and spiritual authority, carried out in and by a leadership community. Leadership (and training) by example means that simple church leaders allot most of their time to intentional relationships in both formal and informal settings.
- Discovery learning and modeling is the primary means of teaching/training; this is a return to the Hebraic model used by Jesus and other NT leaders).

How is this different from more traditional forms of church?

Many of these values are shared by the traditional church models, so how is Simple Church different? Here's a few thoughts:

- In terms of meetings, the TC has to focus much of its energy and effort on the large gatherings, even in cell-celebration models. Healthy simple churches focus less on meetings in general, but when they do meet, the emphasis falls on the small group meeting (even with simple churches that have large group celebrations). SC gatherings also tend to be informal and spontaneous.
- Community is pursued deliberately in every way possible in a simple church. Effort is given almost exclusively to building relationships, rather than events, meetings, programs, etc.
- Leadership is a shared responsibility, and ministry itself, both in the gatherings and in the community is viewed as the responsibility and privilege of every member of the SC.
- Participation by each and every member is encouraged in all gatherings and all expressions of ministry (this even includes children!).
- Personal care for one another takes place through all the members of the group.

A Biblical Definition of Church—Is *that* a church?!

In the New Testament there was only one church, so the question “Is that a church?” would never have arisen. There was only *the church*: the “universal” Church, the church in a region/city, or the church that met in someone’s house (see Romans 16:3-5, 1 Corinthians 16:19 and Colossians 4:15). So a better question would be, “Is that a viable expression of the church?” What helps us recognize the Body of Christ regardless of how it is “clothed”? Consider the following.

- The church is the result of the extension of the Kingdom of God. The main theme of the New Testament is the Kingdom of God. Whenever the Kingdom of God invaded an area it created a community of Christ followers—a family—known as the church (*ekklesia*).
- Although there are many words and phrases used to describe the church in the New Testament, perhaps the simplest yet fullest description of the church is “God’s Family.”
 - The church is called “family” in only a few places—Galatians 6:10 and 1 Peter 4:17 (from the word *oikos*—household) and Ephesians 3:15 (*patria*—family descended from a father), but it’s clear that the early believers understood their relationship with God and one another in terms of family. In Romans 8:14-15 and Galatians 4:6 believers know God as their “Abba” (Aramaic for “papa” or “daddy”), and the most common term for the recipients of NT letters was “brothers,” with another common term being “beloved.”
 - So the church is family. I love my friend John White’s definition of the church: “A spiritual family called together by Jesus and functioning under His leadership.”
- What are the characteristics of the members of this family? All believers in the New Testament had entered the family by having experienced the following...
 - They had been unmistakably reborn from above (born again) through repentance and deep, absolute trust in Jesus.
 - They had confessed Jesus as *Lord*—as complete master of their lives (not merely “accepted Him as personal savior” as is common in our day.)
 - They had been baptized as a means of identification with Jesus and His family.
 - They had been inundated by God’s Spirit (baptized in the Spirit).
- Although we are not told a lot about the gatherings of the church, we do know the following:
 - They usually gathered around a meal, integrating at some point the celebration of the Lord’s Supper (see Acts 2:46; 1 Corinthians 11: 20-26).
 - The gathering could be as few as two or three (Matthew 18:20).
 - The following were characteristic of every gathering.
 - The *Presence* of God. The early believers expected the experienced presence of Jesus through the Holy Spirit to be with them each time they gathered (see Matthew 18:20 and 1 Corinthians 14:24-25).
 - The *Power* of God. The early believers expected the supernatural power of God to be expressed in their midst when they gathered (see, for example, 1 Corinthians 5:4, 12:7-11, and Galatians 3:5).
 - *Participation* by all. The early believers came to their gathering anticipating that each one would have something to contribute as the Holy Spirit led (See 1 Corinthians 12:7-11 and 14:24-26. Ephesians 5:19-20 and Colossians 3:16-17 also imply participation by a number of people in the gathering.). The value of participation was supported by their meeting in homes—a group is too large if its size makes its impossible for everyone to participate and houses help maintain the proper size. There are other, occasional larger gatherings described in the New Testament (for training?) but the regular family gatherings almost certainly remained small enough to allow for participation by all who wished to participate.
- Leadership in the NT church was servant-oriented and not hierarchical, and *leaders led by example* as much as by instruction and training. Paul’s life and letters are filled with evidence of this. Four very noteworthy passages regarding this are Acts 20:17-28 (Paul’s address to Ephesian elders), 1 Corinthians 4:14-17, 2 Corinthians 4:5 (the word translated “servants” by some translations in this verse is actually “slaves”) and 1 Thessalonians 2:6-12 (Paul likens himself to both mother and father).

- The purpose or mission of the church has many facets (see 1 Peter 1:9, for example), but it always flows from intimacy with Jesus (John 15:1-17) and derives its power and direction from relationship with Him individually and corporately.

Some more thoughts from John White on the Church as Family. (Too good not to include)

Further defining characteristics:

1. The family forms around a person (or persons) of peace (Luke 10:5, Mt. 10:11). That is, mature people (*presbuteros*) who function as spiritual moms and dads (*episkopos*—those who watch over). 1 Timothy 3:4-5.
2. Often works best when you begin small (as few as two: one household) and let Jesus add to the family. Matthew 18:20. Acts 2:47.
3. Not a meeting but a family who live life together (which includes meetings). Acts 2:44, 46. Hebrews 3:13
4. Most important fact? Jesus is present and active (prevenience). It's His church and He is always at work to build it (not our job!) Matthew 18:20; 16:18.
5. Most important skill? Learning to listen to Jesus and do what He says. Learning to see what He is doing. This must be modeled and facilitated by the spiritual grownups. John 5:19; 8:28-29; 12:49-50; 14:10-14; 16:13.
6. The leaders function as really healthy parents. 1 Thessalonians 2:7, 11; 1 Corinthians 4:15,16. (The health of every family reflects the health of the parents.) Their goal? Every member becomes mature (grown up) in Christ. How do they do this? Through wise parenting (often involves coaching/facilitating - asking and listening more than telling and directing). Every Christian home is growing towards becoming a church (or is an embryonic church?)
7. A family eats together (the Lord's Supper). Acts 2:42,46. 1 Corinthians 11:33.
8. Every family member contributed to making the family strong (the "one anothers" – teaching, prophesying, serving, singing, etc.). Maximum size? When not every member can contribute what they have brought when the family gathers. 1 Corinthians 14:26 (key word in the passage is "everyone").
9. The family becomes the base of operations for the Kingdom of God in that neighborhood. Luke 10:9.
10. New churches are birthed when new "people of peace" are identified. Luke 10:5, Mt.10:11.

Summary: Is it a viable expression of the church? Yes, if you see the following:

- People being transformed by the power of God, relating to God and one another as family, who are in various ways transforming the world around them.
- Leadership that leads by loving example and serving as well as by instruction/training.
- Gatherings that are filled with God's presence and power and in which everyone participates.

How to Plant a Simple Church Network, New Testament Style:

A moment's reflection will cause us to realize that *all* the churches planted during New Testament times were *networks of house churches*, so it seems wise to look to the New Testament for help. Paul left more house church networks behind than anyone, so how did he do it? Not like we would expect!

Strategy (I encourage the reader to do her/his own research on this in Acts!)

Paul's strategy was based upon what Jesus had taught His disciples and consisted of simply following the Holy Spirit's leading. This is most obvious in his second journey (see Acts 16), but it was clearly his "strategy" throughout. This does not mean that there are no patterns in what Paul did, however.

1. First, prayer clearly fueled and directed Paul's ministry. This is clearest in his letters to the house church networks he founded, but prayer is also a major theme in Acts. All that Paul did was birthed out of prayer. His first journey was launched during a "prayer meeting" (Acts 13:1ff.), and Paul's life breathes an atmosphere of constant prayer.
2. Second, as Roland Allen points out in *Missionary Methods, St. Paul's or Ours?*, Paul was led consistently to major Roman cities that were trade centers for their regions. Paul expected the explosive power of the Gospel to result in its being spread throughout a region from a central hub.
3. Third, Paul clearly modeled his approach after Jesus' instructions to his disciples in Luke 10 to find a person of peace (see below for a discussion on the person of peace). He always began his presentation of the Good News, if possible, in a synagogue or at least a place of prayer because he was looking for a person of peace—see Acts 13:2, 14; 14:1; 16:13-14; 17:1-2, 10; 18:4; 19:8.
4. Fourth, signs and wonders played an essential part of the proclamation of the Good News. The message of the Kingdom of God was consistently validated by supernatural power. This is also consistent with Jesus' commission to the seventy-two in Luke 10 and to the twelve in Luke 9 and its parallel passages. The presentation of the Good News apart from supernatural confirmation would have been unthinkable for early Christians!
5. Fifth, training for new believers was by means of example and modeling which backed up the interactive style of teaching common in Paul's day. Paul preference was apparently to stay in a place long enough to be a model himself. When that wasn't possible, he left someone behind, if possible, to model as well as teach (Luke was left in Philippi, Silas and Timothy in Berea, etc.).
6. Sixth, Paul established and developed leaders by two means. He trained leaders "on site" when possible (training especially the "persons of peace" who probably became leaders/elders in the local house church networks), and he also trained "apostolic" leaders as they traveled with him (Paul always tried to have a number of disciples with him as he traveled. These people became those whom he could either leave behind in a city or send out to strengthen or troubleshoot situations).
7. Seventh, related to the above, Paul traveled alone only he had to. Just as Jesus sent out his apostles in pairs, so Paul traveled in a leadership community. Again, John White adds a great thought here: "I think it's fair to say that these groups of two or more should be thought of as mobile churches. Jesus was sending out churches to plant churches. The church didn't start when they showed up at the home of a person of peace. They already were the church. They were always living out 'church.' It's almost as if 'church' is a benevolent virus with which they had been 'infected' and they naturally 'infected' others along the way."

The Person of Peace Principle

What is a "person of peace"? The "person of peace" is mentioned in Jesus' instructions to the 72 as He sends them out before He visits the villages to whom He sends them (Luke 10:6). The "person of peace" also shows up as a "worthy person" in Matthew 10:11-13. This person is defined very clearly by the culture of the day and by Jesus' instructions:

- First, s/he was the person whose house was most clearly recognized in the area as a house of peace/wholeness. Marvin Wilson explains in wonderful detail the goal of every Jewish home to become a *shalom bayit*, a peaceful home (see *Our Father Abraham*, pp. 217-219). Thus the person of peace would be recognized by the wholeness (health) of his/her life and family and would become a primary foundation for the establishing of God's kingdom in the region (wholeness begets wholeness!).

- Second, the person of peace was someone whose heart had been prepared by God to receive the message of the Kingdom of God. This person's house then became the "base of operations" for ministry in the region and their sphere of influence would afford natural, relational pathways for the Kingdom to flow through.

The application of this principle after Pentecost is clearly evident in the book of Acts. Philip is led to the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26-40), Peter is led to Cornelius (Acts 10), and Paul's people of peace include Timothy's mother, Eunice in Lystra (see Acts 14:6 ff. and compare Acts 16:1-2 and 2 Timothy 1:5), Lydia (Acts 16:14-15), Jason (Acts 17:5-9) and many others.

What if a "person of peace" isn't available because of the brokenness of the culture? This clearly was an issue at some point for Paul and the other apostles. What did they do?

- First, note that it wasn't as much of an issue then as it might be now. The Roman Empire had been thoroughly permeated by Judaism through the Diaspora, and Paul seems to have been typically led to cities where there was a synagogue. Also, there were some healthy people of peace in the Gentile world—some philosophies of life promoted values that were ethically and relationally healthy to some extent (the Stoics come to mind). Paul makes note of this in Romans 2:14-15 where he speaks of Gentiles who have the law of God "written on their hearts."
- Second, the Gospel in New Testament times powerfully transformed lives—people were remarkably healed, delivered and deeply changed by the supernatural power of God. We see this in Paul's description of the Corinthians' transformation in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and in many other places. The sheer power of the Gospel to change lives coupled with a much stronger emphasis on obedience to God's word helped to create people who became "persons of peace" in a relatively short period of time. Even in our day, most of us have known people whose hearts were set on obedience and transformation from the beginning of their journey with God—perhaps we were looking at a person of peace in the making!
- Third, it appears that when there was no identifiable person of peace in a region Paul would either stay in that area long enough to model health and wholeness (as in Corinth and Ephesus) or leave a person of peace behind as he did in leaving Luke in Philippi and Silas and Timothy in Berea, etc. This strategy would also be backed up by letters and visits as needed.

Why this principle is so important.

- First, this principle is how we make disciples according to the "absolute dependence principle" in John 15:4-5. Since it's true that we can do nothing apart from Jesus—just as He did nothing apart from His Father (John 5:19 and 30)—then failure to look for the person of peace God has prepared is an invitation to failure. On the other hand, as we trust in and discover God's prevenience in preparing this person, we will find immediate receptivity *and* lasting fruit (John 15:8,16).
- Second, the process for making disciples requires us to start with reasonably healthy people whenever possible. Because wholeness (health) begets wholeness (health) and because modeling is the primary (but not only) means for training followers of Jesus, starting with someone whose life already has some wholeness ensures a good foundation for what follows. It appears that the person of peace typically became the leader of the church that was started in his/her home after being discipled for a season. Paul probably appointed elders from among such leaders (see Acts 14:21-23 and the qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3:1-7—a good description of a person of peace!). Obviously, God's word and His Spirit can be trusted to bring transformation when no healthy model is available, but we need to make this the extreme exception if we are to make disciples the way that Jesus and the early apostles made disciples.

Application to us? How shall we go about planting a Simple Church network?

1. First, since health begets health, and since only a person of peace can recognize a person of peace, the first qualification for extending God's kingdom as an apostolic church planter is for you to be a person of peace! For Paul it would have been inconceivable to have an emotionally and spiritually immature person start SC networks. Jesus and Paul knew that a healthy foundation was not optional for seeing a region transformed. This is underscored by Paul's emphasis upon modeling and his frequent concern that believers model transformation to their pre-Christian neighbors (see Paul's letters to the Thessalonians and 1 Timothy and Titus for much treasure on both these points).
2. Second, with the call to extend God's kingdom comes the need for an increasingly intimate relationship with God. As we have already stated, intimacy is at the heart of everything. Intimacy enables us to discern God's leading, intimacy gives birth to the healthy expression of supernatural power, and intimacy is "the place" from which effective prayer flows.
3. Third, prayer—not as the western church typically defines it but as the Bible defines it—must be made the foundation of everything. A good place to start might be to ask for God's help in putting into practice Luke 10:2b, Jesus' teaching on prayer and the principles in Paul's prayers in his letters.
4. Fourth, since "the Kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power" (1 Corinthians 4:20, compare 1 Thessalonians 1:5, et al.), you should be prepared to do whatever it takes to see God's supernatural power released as you present the message of the Kingdom.
5. Fifth, since the church is essentially family and community, simple church planting should be done in community. This community starts with your own family, but it should go beyond there. In today's highly connected society everyone can follow Jesus as part of a band of brothers/sisters! This community aspect cannot be neglected, because the healthy family and leadership community model the intimate relationships that result from the Gospel of the Kingdom.
6. Sixth, you must intentionally practice of the "person of peace" principle from the beginning. Through prayer and interaction with your community you will discover persons of peace and build from there.

So in planting a network of simple churches you start by ensuring that your own family is a "household of peace." Then with much prayer, you seek to hear and discover God's direction so that you can find the next "person of peace." You will also be praying Luke 10:2b, which will open doors to others who are potential "Kingdom extenders" (God's prescribed means for "expelling" new laborers into the Harvest). Then as you build relationships with the persons of peace you will watch Jesus open their hearts to His love (supernatural power will be the norm, one hopes!). The person of peaces will then reach to their *oikos*, and the Kingdom will expand along natural lines. What do you do next? I am confident that as you listen to Jesus (as part of a loving community) and do what He says, you will discover those next steps!

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