

THE ESSENCE OF EXTRAORDINARY

Starting a “simple” (“organic/house”) church is *easy*. It’s much more challenging to establish one on the right foundation and grow it into the Christ-honoring, love-driven, life-transforming, multiplication-minded powerhouse that God intends. Those results require expert builders to work closely with the Holy Spirit over the long haul (1 Cor. 3:7-17). Lots of things can (and do) go wrong that leave a church fractured, render it irrelevant or dissolve it entirely after a short run. That’s one reason why so many instructions and corrections were included in the New Testament epistles. And why it’s important for us to think both biblically and practically as we plan, launch and develop our churches.

At least seven factors sharply influence the quality and long-term prospects of a simple church. They highlight the “essence” of what it takes to build something extraordinary from the ground, up: a spiritual temple in (and through) which God can be revealed (2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21-22).

1. **E**mbraced identity
2. **S**piritual formation
3. **S**hared responsibility
4. **E**ngagement guidelines
5. **N**on-negotiable D²NA
6. **C**ollaborative coaching
7. **E**lders (in training)

1. **Embraced Identity** – “*Jesus is in charge.*”

Early on, every group of Christians needs to answer questions like: “What are we? Why do we meet? How does God see us and what does he want us to be/do?” Some groups are slow to embrace their identity as a “real church”, preferring to think of themselves as a Bible study, a cell that meets as *part* of a church, a fellowship/prayer/discussion group, etc. But it’s important for a group, as soon as it legitimately *is* one, to acknowledge and embrace its identity as a real “church” because of the privileges and responsibilities which attend that role.

- a. A “church” = “Followers of Jesus who regularly meet *in his name.*”
- b. What it takes to “meet in Jesus’ name”:
 - Centering our attention on him as our Lord and honoring him as immediately *present* with us.
 - Striving to handle every situation and interaction as he himself would, as his representatives and ambassadors. This involves thoughtfully considering his interests, frequently consulting and “listening” for his guidance, actively seeking to discern his will and zealously working to advance his cause.

2. **Spiritual Formation** – “*Christlikeness is our goal.*”

One of God’s clearest objectives for all his adopted children is to transform them into the likeness of his perfect Son (Rom. 8:29; Gal. 4:19; Eph. 4:11-16). That fact has been revealed to us so we will cooperate with him by setting aside our lesser goals and focusing on *his* as committed disciples of Jesus (Lk. 9:23; Phil. 3:12-14; 1 Tim. 4:15-16). Therefore seeing to each person’s steady growth is a responsibility that belongs on every church’s short list of top priorities. It should include regularly highlighting and re-targeting Christlikeness (a.k.a. as godliness, holiness, maturity or sanctification) as God’s will, casting a vivid vision of what it “looks like”, urging people to persevere in their pursuit of it, providing instruction to establish them in the fundamentals of Christian beliefs and lifestyle, reminding them to conscientiously consider how they can “edify” each other (Rom. 14:19; Eph. 4:29; Heb. 10:24) and using our shared commitment to spiritual formation as a filter for deciding how best to use our times together.

3. **Shared Responsibility** – “*Participation is expected.*”

Believers in a simple church need to recognize that they, *together*, are a localized expression of Christ’s body, and that *all* of them are living members of it (Rom. 12:4-5). As such, *each* of them has an indispensable role to play in contributing to the body’s needs and carrying out its mission. Effective simple churches repeatedly stress these points:

- a. Every Christian brings God (the Holy Spirit) with him when he arrives at the meeting. So everyone needs to assume some responsibility, in Jesus’ name, for the content, flow, quality and outcomes of their time together.
- b. The Spirit of God expresses his love through those in whom he dwells by offering “spiritual gifts” to others who need them (1 Cor. 12:7).
- c. When the church/Body gathers, time usually needs to be set aside for everyone to disclose their needs and offer their gifts (1 Cor. 14:26), some of which they have prepared in advance. This practice of “open sharing” (or “Body Life”) gives the Spirit freedom to powerfully reveal Himself through many, so it works especially well as the centerpiece activity of a simple church.

4. **Engagement Guidelines** – “*Consideration is our code.*”

Paul repeatedly emphasized that love is to flavor all we say and do when we’re together in Jesus’ name. But some of our natural ways of relating to each other can be easily misunderstood or create difficulties and tensions (e.g. dominating, rambling, know-it-all-ism, inflexibility, sharp disagreements, superficiality, interrupting, side-

talking, sarcasm, etc.). It can therefore be very liberating to discuss and agree in advance on some practical guidelines (“rules of engagement”) to help us interact as a group in orderly, respectful and spiritually-beneficial ways. That’s why Paul sometimes sent specific, culturally-sensitive instructions to one church that he didn’t duplicate for them all. Certain violations of “etiquette” were more serious in some locales than others (like men having long hair or women in the assembly not covering their heads), and a “hot topic” in one church might be a non-issue in another (like having too many prophets wanting to speak at the same time). For our day, many useful guidelines can still be lifted from scripture, but we may also need to compose *new* ones for the protection and welfare of a particular group.

5. **Non-negotiable D²NA – “Four activities command our attention.”**

Once the newborn Church inhaled its first breath, the Holy Spirit started leading God’s people to immerse themselves in four activities that are timelessly useful for spiritual formation and impact. These elements of “DNA” are still the primary means God uses to vitally connect us with Himself, each other and the world around us. Churches are most healthy when everyone involved is devoted to maintaining a balanced diet of all four (the first two of which serve a single purpose).

Divine connection (loving God) via devoting ourselves to:

- (1) God’s word – Helping us grow an understanding, trusting, loving and obedient relationship with God.
- (2) Prayer/Praise – Helping us cultivate a personal, humble, constant, adoring and attentive interaction with God. (This also includes learning how to *listen* to him together.)

Nurturing relationships (loving other believers) – Developing lots of open, generous and mutually edifying connections with each other.

Apostolic mission (loving unbelievers) – Meaningfully connecting with the world around us and significantly impacting it with the love and truth of Christ.

6. **Collaborative Coaching – “Regular check-ups maintain our vitality.”**

Many groups allow one or more of the seven essentials to fade into the background because they favor the others. They then start to tilt out-of-balance and to lack some of the nutrients they need to stay vital. They may also remain ignorant of (or fail to incorporate) all that the Bible (and common sense) says about how to practice these priorities when they’re together. These common mis-steps point out the practical value of a skillful coach who can visit a church, observe how they interact and use their time, then offer some positive feedback to help them get back into balance, doing what works best.

7. **Elders (in Training) – “Godly leaders keep us on track.”**

As soon as it became feasible, the New Testament apostles (or their representatives) appointed men with high spiritual qualifications to be “elders” for the local churches of every city (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Tim. 3:1-11). The pastoral leadership provided by these men is just as critical in contemporary churches, so a process is needed to evaluate potential elders, to assist those not yet qualified so they can make the necessary advances, and to recognize those who are ready to serve. That process should include:

- a. Developing a descriptive list of elder responsibilities and qualifications, then prayerfully and candidly evaluating all “candidates” in light of that list.
- b. Involving those who aren’t yet qualified in a “program” of learning and training to help them become more so.
- c. Laying-on hands and publicly ordaining those who meet the qualifications and wish to serve a church (or network of churches) as elders.

SUMMARY – These seven elements can dramatically influence a church’s ability to start strong, connect deeply with God and each other, become life-changing, “impress” newcomers, stay balanced and on-track over time, multiply joyfully and reveal Jesus compellingly to outsiders. They outline a summary of recommended priorities that deserve to be seriously considered by those preparing to start, or are seeking to grow, a simple church (network).

HOW TO APPLY THE INFORMATION IN THIS PAPER –

1. Feel free to use or adapt it however you wish, but please credit “Simple-minded” if you share it with people who don’t yet know about this ministry. See my contact information under #4, below.
2. An interactive training has been developed to help your leadership team or church(es) practically incorporate each of the ESSENCE priorities into the life of any group. Teaching segments last from 30 minutes to three hours, depending on the topic. Short-term coaching and a full-day workshop are also available that cover all seven.
3. An **all-weekend** workshop is also available for 8-20 participants. It is designed to powerfully confront them with the supernatural difference they can make in each others’ lives when they are devoted to loving each other in Jesus’ name. This is a great way to launch a new church or take an already-existing group to a much deeper level.
4. Contact Bob Sears if you’d like to chat, correspond, schedule a phone consultation, etc. I would love to interact with you and support your efforts to advance God’s kingdom: www.simple-minded.net or phone (714) 612-0941.