

THE ESSENTIALS 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 has in mind. 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 ten factors sharply influence the quality and long-term prospects of a simple church. They highlight the “essentials” needed 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 agreements
5. **N**ourishing Bible study
6. **T**hanks- (and praise-) filled prayer
7. **I**ntimate fellowship
8. **A**ssertive evangelism
9. **L**ong-term coaching
10. **S**hepherding elders

1. **Embraced Identity** – “*Meeting as a church in Jesus’ name.*”

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 truly *present* with us.
 - Striving to handle every situation and interaction as he himself would, as his representatives and ambassadors. This involves carefully considering his interests, frequently consulting him and “listening” for his guidance, actively seeking to discern his will and zealously working to advance his cause.

2. **Spiritual Formation** – “*Striving to grow into Jesus’ likeness.*”

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** – “*Enrolling all to do their part.*”

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 – “Being sensitive to those who are different.”**

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.

Introduction to the next four “essentials” –

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 (Acts 2:42-47). These elements 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.

5. **Nourishing Bible study – “Staying immersed in the Word of God.”**

The first activity on that ancient list of things to do is still the most fundamental: *“They continually devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching”* (Acts 2:42). God still sanctifies his people by means of the truth revealed in his word (Jn. 17:17). So if we’re serious about all of us following and becoming more like Jesus, our church *must* do at least these two things:

- Concentrate a good portion of our times together on reading, discussing, understanding and applying the Scriptures.
- Help every willing person among us to cultivate a daily regimen of their own that includes reading God’s Book and discussing it with Him.

We must also be diligent to ensure that our Bible studies consistently go beyond “informational and interesting” to genuinely “nourishing and life-changing.” Among other things, that will probably require us to focus less on designated teachers/preachers in favor of interacting more with each other about what we’re reading and how we’re doing.

6. **Thanks- (and praise-) filled prayer – “Expressing ourselves in appreciative faith.”**

A second activity the Holy Spirit kept urging early Christians to practice when they gathered was praying together, often for extended periods of time (Acts 2:42; 4:24-31). No doubt this included times of waiting and quiet “listening” to hear what God might say to them, directly. But at its core, Biblical prayer has always been about unloading our hearts to God in expressions of confession, repentance and fervent requests for Him to accomplish what we can’t. Numerous examples and instructions in Scripture also urge us not to neglect offerings of gratitude and praise when we pray (see Col. 3:16; 4:2). These additions act as spiritual stimuli to keep us alert and God-centered, and He richly deserves them.

Churches can excel at some of these practices by leading people to sing meaningful hymns and spiritual songs. But they often detour around *other* important practices by being satisfied with one person offering a brief prayer or two on behalf of all the others present. This has turned praying *together* into more of a formality than a deeply engaging and empowering interaction with our God. Counteracting this trend will require us to set aside more time for people to voice their concerns, needs, requests, joys and fresh insights into God, followed by “seasons” of prayer which encourage everyone to contribute.

7. **Intimate fellowship – “Loving each other enough to be generous.”**

The NT Greek word for fellowship, “koinonia,” referred to sharing something in common. If you’ve ever ordered a single dessert that got passed around the table to people with poised forks, you know what it’s like to experience one kind of “fellowship.” The kind spoken of in the NT involves followers of Jesus sharing together their love for God and each other, which can be even *better* than dessert.

Intimate fellowship was what Jesus had in mind when He told His followers to love each other as He loved them (Jn. 13-15). It’s what Paul had in mind when he repeatedly reminded Christians to “build each other up” on every possible occasion (Rom. 14:19; 15:2; Eph. 4:29; 1 Cor. 14:26). Its characteristics are what we poetically extol in the “Love Chapter” (1 Cor. 13), and a colorful variety of ways to express it are detailed in every book of the NT. Apart from loving God, Himself, this is the single most important thing we can learn, and nothing would please Him more than seeing us excel at it (1 Th. 4:9-11).

But it doesn’t come easy, because there’s always at least one annoying person nearby that we can’t easily dodge, even (especially?!) in church. Sincerely loving them is plain unnatural. We must, therefore, conduct an ongoing, diligent search for more effective ways to get us outside of ourselves and into each other. Recognizing Christ’s love as God’s standard is a good place to start. Beyond that, we must apply ourselves to steadily progressing from “superficial and stingy” to “personal and sacrificial.”

5. **Assertive evangelism** – *“Going to others with God’s good news.”*

According to recent and reputable surveys, many more people in America are leaving churches than joining them, and the number of unbelievers becoming authentic Christ-followers has been reduced to a trickle. Why? It’s a complex problem, but try these two provocative explanations for starters:

- People aren’t interested in the kind of Christianity they see on display in most churches. It’s too-often characterized by a culture that comes across as odd, preachy, showy, authoritarian and intolerant, uninviting and too interested in money. The “simple church” model described on this website feels much more natural and inviting to many of these people.
- Most churches are frozen in an age-old misunderstanding about the fundamental nature of our mission. Their nearly-universal approach to evangelism and starting new churches is a mirror-opposite of the one modeled by Jesus and His apostles. This ill-advised approach can be summarized as “Come to us” instead of “Go to them.”

If these two diagnoses are accurate, solving them will lead churches to make some radical changes. Among them may be creating simpler churches

9. **Long-term Coaching** – *“Assessing our progress in light of God’s standards.”*

Most groups allow one or more of the ten ESSENTIALS to fade into the background while they favor the others. They then start to tilt out-of-balance and become deficient in some of the nutrients they need to stay vital. They may also be ignorant of, or fail to incorporate, what the Bible (and common sense) says about the smartest ways to practice these ESSENTIALS when they re together.

These common mis-steps point out the practical value of skillful, spiritually mature coaches who understand what a church should “look like” when it’s in top-notch condition. Perhaps on an annual basis they could visit a church, objectively observe how the people interact and use their time together, then offer some positive feedback to help them get into better balance. That practice appears to be precisely what the apostles offered the early Christian churches, both in person and in the many problem-solving portions of the NT. It’s needed today every bit as much.

10. **Shepherding elders** – *“Following the lead of mature men of God.”*

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 “guide” is needed to help us 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 ten 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 ESSENTIALS 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. Read more about the practical implications and how-to’s of the ten ESSENTIALS by ordering a copy of *Gold, Silver and Precious Stones* from the Resources page on the website.
4. 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.
5. Contact me 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.

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