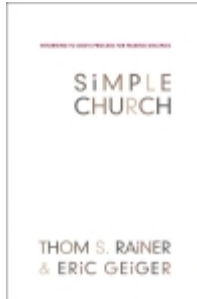




'Tis a Gift to be Simple: A Review of "Simple Church" – October 07



I bought my wife a block of wood for Christmas. Really. It was from one of those knick-knacky country shops. It's about an inch and a half by five inches and painted a light green. Across the front is painted one word in clean black letters, 'simplify.'

My wife and I have an ongoing discussion about how complex our life is. Our 'simplify' block sits on the window over our kitchen sink to remind us of those conversations, and of what we really value. Sometimes, less really is more.

If you live by that maxim *Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples* will resonate with you. For those of us in ministry, our church lives are too much like our personal lives; almost unmanageable. We have found ourselves balancing a large number of roles, budgets, relationships and responsibilities that keep us and our ministries from thriving.

Enter the 'Simple Revolution.' In studying over 400 churches, Thom Rainer (President and CEO of Lifeway Resources) and Eric Geiger (Executive Pastor of Christ Fellowship in Miami) found that thriving churches have a simple process for integrating visitors and moving people toward growth in Christ. *Simple Church* is directed mainly to those in church leadership. It is not another ministry model but more of a strategy to implement any model already being used. In *Simple Church* Rainer and Geiger propose an alternative to complexity: Simplicity. And according to their research, that means four things; clarity, movement, alignment and focus. Here's their argument.

Clarity – Clarity is the ability of the process to be communicated and understood by the people. (p. 111).

On the road to simplicity, a church leadership team needs to begin with one question, 'what kind of disciple do you want to make?' The team needs to come to a consensus on what the markers for success will be. How will they define faithful Christian living? Are people expected to serve, participate in short term missions, use their spiritual gifts? However this question is answered becomes the goal of your programming and ministries.

The second step is to describe that goal or purpose as a process. All of the Christian life is a process, and any purpose statement should reflect that. The leadership team needs to think through how each weekly program will contribute to that process. Remember that for most people our programming is our church. It will communicate our purpose more than anything we say. What is said and done must communicate the goal in a way that everyone, church-wide can get it.

Movement – Movement is the sequential steps in the process that causes people to move to greater areas of commitment. (p. 139)

If spiritual growth is a process, a church's programming should naturally move people toward the next step. The programs need to be placed in a sequential order (one for each step of the process), further facilitating the natural movement from one level of commitment to the next.

Programs are not activities unto themselves. They provide an atmosphere for God to work. Strategic programming places people on the pathway of God's work. It also provides intentionality to the process. There is a spoken *and* real expectation that people will not 'stay in one place' spiritually. At each phase of involvement in our churches the next phase is already on the horizon, and people know it.

But the most important element in helping people move from one step to the next is relationships. People will move because someone brings them along.

Alignment – Alignment is the arrangement of all ministries and staff around the same simple process (p. 168).

Alignment is getting all programs and staff working in the same direction. *Without alignment, complexity is assured.* (p. 169). If various staff and departments have a different focus, the church is bound to have competition, confusion, and reduced effectiveness. Alignment gets all the horses pulling in the same direction. The process must also be simple and clear enough to work at all levels of ministry, uniting children, youth and adults.

For example, some people give their time and energy to teaching ministries and some give themselves to serving. One group can easily become frustrated because their studies are poorly attended, and others because few help in serving. Alignment can help these two important aspects of church life complement each other, rather than compete against each other.

Focus – Focus is the commitment to abandon everything that falls outside the simple ministry process (p. 203).

Now get ruthless. Eliminate things that duplicate, or compete against the main process. This is good stewardship of time and resources. It helps the church truly *invest* resources rather than just *spend* them.

Less is more. Extreme caution should be used in adding additional programs. And if special events are undertaken, the leadership needs to ask how can it funnel back into the process? Generally though, special events will compete against the process, and should be avoided if possible.

Focus can be the painful part. It might mean saying 'no' to a great many good things, in favor of the better things. Some might be put out because their favorite ministry has been changed or canceled. It may mean ending long-standing traditions. It might mean change.

Simple or Simplistic?

Our programming communicates our values, usually more than we intend. I have found in my ministry that one of two messages might be heard. One is that busyness is valued over substance. (Some people come to everything!) The other message is the exact opposite. As we present option A, B, or C for growing spiritually, the message heard is that growing spiritually is optional. (Some people don't come to anything.) The way we structure our ministries and programs themselves has meaning. Our programming needs to say what we mean, and it needs to move people in the desired direction.

Simple Church has lot of profound truth, but it left me with a few questions. Is the simple approach advocated here overly simplistic? If a church puts all their eggs in an ABF, or small-group basket, won't there be some that feel left out? What about men's/ women's ministries? They meet some needs that can't be met in mixed company. And since many churches will shy from women teaching mixed audiences, removing a women's program would remove a chance to exercise those gifts. It would also be interesting to know if any 'complex' churches are thriving. Simplicity can't be the only ingredient to making a ministry go.

A Gift Indeed

Simple Church has some great insights for those leading in churches. Rainer and Geiger's writing style moves their points along quickly, and clearly. It would be a helpful discussion starter for almost any ministry staff, or elder board.¹ As I read, their research put words to some of the things that I had been feeling for some time. It is not the answer to unlock every ministry challenge. But it did give me a good beginning point to reflect on my own ministry, and how to structure our church more effectively. And their simple approach actually fits perfectly with the ABF philosophy.²

¹ Lifeway even has some short tips on leading a leadership retreat at http://www.lifeway.com/lwc/article_main_page/0%2C1703%2CA%25253D166103%252526M%25253D200828%2C00.html?

² Eric Geiger has a great article on Sunday School and their simple approach at <http://www.webtoastmedia.com/admin/geiger/uploads/SS%20in%20SC.pdf>

As the old song teaches, simplicity is a gift. And in the complex world that our congregations live in, it is a gift that many are aching for.

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