

Simple Church “Thumbnail” Bible College

...as uncomplicated, relational, and passionate as Paul’s example

Teacher: God’s Spirit Textbook: Bible

- Any Christfollower can grasp these 6 elemental truths about the nature of a simple church rather quickly,
- then spend the rest of their lives sharpening and living-out what they’ve learned
- among many groups of overlooked friends.

Simple Example: Most evangelists believe a person can grasp at least a basic understanding of what John 3:16 means, accept Christ, and be eternally changed in one conversation. Though thousands of books have been written about “evangelism,” the livable truth of it is refreshingly simple. We know that God’s Spirit is the real force at work in a person’s heart and mind anyway.

Grasping the basics of “how-to-be-a-church” together is also just as uncomplicated. If you are a Christfollower you don’t have to go to Bible College, be ordained, read a thick book, go through ten steps, be certified, or get the state’s permission to become the Body of Christ, the Church, in your circle of relationships. Though more thousands of books have been written about “church,” the uncomplicated, refreshing, life-changing, livable truth about it is also profoundly simple. Doable. God’s Spirit, again, is the real guide and power at work in making it “church.” All you need is His Spirit, a “Paul” to mentor you, and a grasp of the basics.

An “Aha” Moment: As a child I was extremely hesitant about getting in water over my head. Though I went to pools and lakes with family, I limited my participation to the shallows always. I couldn’t swim and thought it was just too risky to learn...wouldn’t even try.

Then a lifeguard told me he could teach me to swim in two minutes! Though I only half believed him, that caught my interest. He assured me he’d taught scores of kids to swim and all it took was two minutes.

Okay...I gave him a chance. Sure enough, he helped me to see and do the basics...kicking, paddling, breathing correctly...and within moments I was swimming! It wasn’t as difficult, drawn-out, or threatening as I had imagined...pretty simple actually.

Was I a good swimmer? No, I was just a novice, but I was swimming...out of the shallow water, diving, dunking, and having a great splash with my friends. Over the years I’ve gotten more skilled, but overcoming my own mental block was the biggest hurdle.

Why did I think it was so difficult, so impossible for me? (The parallels for Christfollowers who can’t “swim” ...gather and lead a simple church...are too obvious.)

Yes, you can grasp the basics quickly. Will you be great at it? Probably not. But the Spirit doesn’t need, or want, your greatness anyway. HE is the real power and guide.

Becoming A Simple Church

...six elemental truths to grasp, live-out, and sharpen for the rest of your life

Note: In each of the six “basics” spend some quiet minutes soaking up each truth. Read the scripture, and then let the scripture “read you.” Listen to God’s Voice as He gives you insight about: a Christfollower friend to partner with, your community, your circle of relationships, an overlooked group to love, His guidance and power, other verses He brings to mind. Be still and silent before the Lord...what does His Spirit nudge in your heart?

I. **Any Christfollower can** initiate the birth of a church.

Read: I Peter 2:9, Ephesians 4:1, 11-12, 15-16

To what kind of persons were these verses written? What does it say to you about all Christfollowers? What does it say about you and your own qualifications and opportunities? What kind of spiritual gifts do you have? What spiritual gifts do you need in another Christfollower to compliment you in leading a church? Who may have led the church in Lydia’s home after Paul birthed it and left? (Acts 16:15) Who led in the jailer’s home? (Acts 16:33, 40)

Living Example:

A young couple in the Austin area, he a musician, she a homemaker, both Christfollowers, began meeting with a few friends and some not-yet-Christians in their home on Monday evenings. They ate, prayed, laughed, and shared life. A Bible verse discussion time was where they found truth for living. Someone always had a worship CD or experience and another had a kid’s Bible game. The homeless needed food...single mothers needed beds for their kids...missionaries needed Bibles...there was always some way they found to give a hand-up. Unbelievers who came saw the gospel as well as heard it. This group became HIS Hands, Heart, Voice, and Compassion in their slice of the world. They had no church name, no permission but God’s, and no church planter training. But they were His church transforming lives there.

II. **Begin as an embryo.**

Read: Matthew 18:20, Colossians 4:15

Jesus made it crystal clear...HE values even 2 or 3 who have gathered in His Name. Not only is HE present with them, HE makes HIS power available to them.

There probably weren’t too many more than that gathered at the church in Nympha’s home. How big could her 1st century home have been...perhaps the size of one room in many houses today? A healthy group would have been 8 to 12...small by how we “picture” church. But this was the kind of church that spread across the Roman Empire like a fresh wind for 300 years. Just “Nympha” churches everywhere!

Living Example:

The “green” church meets in a suburban middle class city park parking lot of the Dallas

metro area. For over a decade they have come, rain or shine, dressed warm or cool like they would for a football game. Many bring chairs or sit on a vehicle, or maybe a curb. Grandparents, young adults, kids and babies all show up to be Christ's Body together...usually 10 to 15, sometimes 20 or more, but they started with four.

Yes, they do worship and share the ups and downs of life. Yes, they dialogue about a Bible passage together and share what it means to them. They bring food, or clothes, or cash to give away every week. Someone often shares about their own journey to finding Christ, and they go to a pool to baptize. The church is in their "gathered hearts"...when they leave the parking lot the church goes with them into their homes, jobs, and neighborhoods.

Yes, it is embryonic, powerful, and transforming...it is touching lives that have not been on any Christian leader's radar, ever.

- III. Let **God's Spirit** be your strategy coordinator. Let Him stop, start, redirect, and guide you.
Read: Acts 6:15

Notice how Paul let the Spirit STOP him from two different directions he wanted to pursue. But he was strong enough to not rush ahead with his own great ideas and just pray and wait on the Spirit to guide him. Soon enough God's Spirit led him to a seller of purple on a riverbank who was already hungering for spiritual truth. (God could see her while Paul was looking toward other cities with his limited human perception of the right direction to go.) Before Acts 16 is finished God has used Paul to saturate two unlikely groups with both Christ and embryonic churches. Paul would not likely have picked Lydia and her household, nor a jailer and his household. But the Holy Spirit was the "strategy planner," not Paul.

How does the Spirit speak to you? When do you take time to listen? Are you sensitive enough to His leading that you stop what you have in mind and let him redirect you? Are you willing to wait, to go to persons that you would not likely have picked, or to trust that HE is working in some hearts that you can't see, making them hungry for Himself? Let it be HIS vision, timing, and strategy, not yours.

Living Example:

"Around eighteen months ago, the Lord showed us prophetically that we were to start a church in one of the low-income housing projects, Springfield, about 20 minutes from our home. So we gathered together a team to pray for the area, and for several months, it was a prayer project. From time to time we would actually go and walk the area claiming it for the Kingdom, but most of our praying was done on an individual basis.

One day, Tony and I happened to be driving by, and on impulse decided to stop and prayer walk again. Tony was specifically asking the Lord that we would meet our 'person of peace.' A torrential downpour surprised us and we ran to take shelter under a balcony with two Hispanic ladies who turned out to be sisters. Conversations started, and they inquired what we were doing there. (We obviously did not fit the local profile.) We explained to them that we were praying for their neighborhood, and as the conversation went one, asked if

we could come by occasionally to pray about the needs in their family. They immediately agreed, and so for the next few weeks, once or twice a week we would drop in and pray for them, staying just fifteen minutes or so. It was not long before we were seeing very specific answers to prayer.

One of the sisters, "Rosa," turned out to be our person of peace. (She has a heart as big as Texas – everyone is welcomed and loved by her.) Our next step was to ask if we could bring some of her friends and family members together, and so a weekly meeting time was set up at her home. She very quickly became a Christian and this led to many of her family members doing the same. We have touched several other homes in the complex, too. Now a year later, the apartment is crowded out every week with 30 to 40 people jammed in, sitting on stairs, on the floor, kids everywhere. Neighbors are telling us that the project has begun to change; there is less violence and some of the drug dealers are moving out." *(Excerpt from Getting Started, by Felicity Dale, House 2 House Ministries, page 100 and 102. Used by permission)*

IV. Gather overlooked friends as a simple church in an **everyday environment**, wherever they are living life.

Read: Romans 16:3-5A

- A. It must have been "rudimentary" compared to the steeple-type standards of today...this little church in the 1st century. But it was where they lived. It was what they had. It worked for them. Probably they had worship, but no fancy instruments. Surely they disciplined, but most of the Bible wasn't written yet. They shared food, friendship, and faith with fellow strugglers in life, but it had to happen right where they were living life – that was their only option. And yet, God blessed it, used it, and we are still reading about it!
- B. If you weren't going to use any money for facilities, salaries, childcare, utilities, maintenance, custodial care, or insurance (so you could give all church offerings away), where could your group gather as a church?

If you use no sign, no advertising, and don't have a name, then in the public eye you are just a group of friends gathering, and you don't need permission to hang-out with friends anywhere. Where might your group most naturally gather? What does the Spirit bring to mind? Listen to Him.

Living Example:

It's okay to be the church, and gather as a church, wherever you are. Just ask Christfollowers in the "underground" churches meeting in secrecy in many countries. Or, talk with José gathering his church around a picnic table in a mobile home park. Maybe the university students gathering in a dorm lobby on Sunday morning have a good idea (dorms are "deadly" quiet on Sunday mornings.) There's no time to describe the car mechanic leading his church in a burger shop at lunch hour, or the day-laborers singing, praying, and soaking up scripture together around a truck tailgate, or young urbans around a fire pit, or mountain bikers being the Body of Christ near their favorite trailhead, or the group in the garage church, or under the bridge, or in

a sound studio, or the student union building...well, you get the idea.

V. **Be Christ's Body.** Alive! Not just some well-meaning, well-oiled organization.

Read: Acts 2:42-47

Man, these Acts 2 Christfollowers weren't just "going to church," they'd found a new way to live! The Bible describes them with "life" terms like: sense of awe, sharing with all, one mind, and sincerity of heart. There was no organizational chart, growth goal, or catchy marketing. They were Christ's Hands, His Heart, His Voice, His Compassion in their circles of influence. That's contagious!

Living Example:

A Facebook post had the best "living" definition of what a church should be: "Loving God, Loving People, Making Disciples."

I nurture the church I shepherd toward living-out 5 healthy rhythms of churchlife together. Here are my suggestions. (How does God's Spirit impress you to reshape these for your group?)

1. **Be really good friends.**

Each week encourage the group to tell (1) what God is doing in their lives, or (2) what the world is dumping on them each week. Guide them in praying for each other. Be an example of meeting with 1 or 2 during the week for mutual encouragement.

2. **Worship God** in some sincere way.

Find natural ways for them to experience and talk about God's greatness, power, or love every time you gather. Could they look at a picture of a mountain, or the ocean and see the hand of God there? Is there a Bible verse about God that would remind them of His great love for their lives? Does someone have a worship song/video they want to show on their laptop?

3. **Learn & Grow in living** the truths Jesus taught.

Pick a Bible verse (or verses) each week, about Jesus, that you want to discuss as a group. Ask, "What does this say to you about **life, God, others, or self**...and how do you intend to live this week because of what this verse says?" You guide the discussion to keep it on track but let each person answer and talk openly.

4. **Help others.**

How could the group regularly help struggling people in some way? Do a project for kids, sick, or hurting persons. Volunteer together at a "Helping Event or Ministry Site" in the area? Help them see how they can be a Good Samaritan to someone?

5. **Share Christ's Love & Good News** with others.

Ask a participant ahead of time to share their own journey-to-Christ. At every gathering ask God to continue arranging encounters between current participants, and others

in whom He has created a heart hunger for the person of Christ. **Always be authentic, never false**, in caring for another person. Be sensitive to their needs. Never manipulate. Include and value each one.

Focus on Christ-centered relationships

Always challenge participants to be passionate servants of Christ rather than turning to events and attractions to keep them interested. They will follow Him!

These 5 rhythms recur over and over in the life of the New Testament Christfollowers, and they can be meaningfully expressed by any micro-culture or group in a community.

VI. **Pass it forward.**

Read: 2 Timothy 2:2

- A. Churches are all about transforming relationships. No course, speaker, book, or concert can even come close to a 2 Timothy 2:2 on-going relationship in building servant leaders.
- B. Think of 2 or 3 Christfollowers who “invested” in you through the years. They probably don’t realize how much they impacted your life. Your personal touch in someone else’s life will probably be more influential than any degree, trophy, or title they ever receive. So, begin praying for an intern that you can equip to lead the church. God might send someone to your before the church starts who is spiritually faithful and who just needs you to stay behind the scenes and mentor them for a few months. Or, the intern might come later and become your co-laborer, or start a new church with another group. Spend extra time with your intern. Pray for and encourage him. Let God begin to shape and use them...it’s good to invest yourself in persons who birth more churches.
- C. Don’t even begin until God guides you to a mature pastor who will be your prayer-supporter, and give you wise counsel. Look to him as your “Paul” and keep your own spiritual life and growth in his watchcare.

Living Example:

I only knew him for 9 months before he moved away. He was the single-most influential person in my spiritual development. I was already a sincere Christfollower at the time, but flighty, immature, and pretty undependable in my responsibilities. I was only 18, but he began to practice 2 Timothy 2:2 in my life without me even knowing the concept. His “discipling” in my life was not sequential, or linear, but it was intentional on his part.

Most importantly, he genuinely befriended me. I wasn’t just a “project” for him. He took time out of his 70-hour work week to talk with me alone. He gave me opportunities to serve Christ that stretched me a bit. And, he was always patient and forgiving when I didn’t follow through completely. He didn’t hesitate to speak the truth in love when I needed to hear it. He saw my potential for servant leadership long before I began living up to his confidence in the “Christ-in-

me.”

He didn't give me a book; he gave me himself. His influence on my 40 years of ministry has been profound. Many times I've thanked God for bringing my life into relationship with his.

Graduation

Okay, that is a “thumbnail” sketch of simple church.

- Any Christfollower can.
- Begin as an embryo.
- Let God's Spirit guide.
- Use everyday environments.
- Be Christ's Body. Alive.
- Pass it forward.

It's enough understanding for any Christfollower to birth a church. You almost certainly know more details than Aquila and Priscilla did when they started their homechurch.

Congratulations! May His Spirit guide and grow you into many years of leading others to be Christ's Body, the church, being His Hands, His Heart, his Voice, and His Compassions among overlooked groups of friends.

P.S. You probably have lots of questions about baptism, deacons, elders, offerings, and a dozen other issues. Remember Christ is the Head (the one in charge), and the Church is His Body, not an organization. Ephesians 4:1-17

So, whatever you have questions about:

1. Mentally, for a moment, just set aside customary practices and the current popular trends in how things are done in churches.
2. Ask his Spirit to teach and guide you about the issue in question. John 14:26, 16:13
3. Then read for yourself what the scripture says. I don't like to use man's terms to describe scripture, but prefer to use scripture itself.

Then wait until HE clarifies the issue for you,
and go with HIS guidance.

This will last

(If you use or publish *The Simple Church "Thumbnail" Bible College*, you probably need to call it an "Institute" to comply with legalities in using the term "college.")