



There are many definitions for simple church, our preferred term for what is sometimes called house church. One of the best comes from the [Dawn North America](#) Web site (it is also found on the [House2House](#) Web site). Rather than reinvent the wheel, I list their definition below.

- By "simple church," we mean a way of doing and being church that is so simple that any believer would respond by saying, "I could do that!"
- By "simple church," we mean the kind of church that is described in the New Testament. Not constrained by structure but by the needs of the extended family ( *oikos*) and a desire to extend the kingdom of God.
  
- By "simple church," we mean a church that listens to God, follows His leading and obeys His commands.
- By "simple church," we mean spiritual parents raising spiritual sons and daughters to establish their own families ( *oikos*).

### Some Key Simple Church Characteristics:

There are lots of lists of simple church values, but the following seem to arise most often in the healthiest expressions of simple church. Healthy simple churches value ...

- Simplicity.

- Intimacy with God and one another. Intimacy with God is foundational for everything else!
- Community.
- Family. The church is family and healthy families are the church.
- 24/7 Christian walk. Most folks are in simple churches because of a sincere desire to be truly devoted followers of Jesus all the time, everywhere.
- Spontaneity.
- Supernatural lifestyle. We have found simple church folks to be remarkably 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).
- Listening to Jesus, doing what He says and encouraging others to do the same.
- Leadership by example, serving and spiritual authority and carried out in a leadership community.
- Discovery learning and modeling (as means of teaching/training).

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

In the New Testament there was only one church, so the questions "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 Rom. 16:16 and Col. 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-Gal. 6:10 and 1 Peter 4:17 (from the word *oikos*-household) and Eph. 3:15 (*patria*-family or lineage 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 Rom. 8:14-15 and Galatians 4:6 believers know God as their "Abba" (Aramaic for "papa" or "daddy"), and the most 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. The presence of the Holy Spirit was obvious in their lives.
- 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 immersed in water (baptized) as a means of identification with Jesus and His family.

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 Cor. 11:20-26).
  - The gathering could be as few as two or three (Matt. 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 Cor. 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 Cor. 5:4, 12:7-11, and Gal. 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 Cor. 12:7-11 and 14:24-26. Eph. 5:19-20 and Col. 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 it 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 New Testament 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 Cor. 4:14-17, 2 Cor. 4:5 (the word translated "servants" by some translations in this verse is actually "slaves") and 1 Thes. 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" that are too good not to include. Further defining characteristics:

1. The family forms around a person (or persons) of peace (Luke 10:5, Matt. 10:11). That is, mature people ( *presbuteros*) who function as spiritual moms and dads (*episkopos*-those who watch over). 1 Tim. 3:4-5.
2. Often works best when you begin small (as few as two: one household) and let Jesus add to the family. Matt. 18:20. Acts 2:47.
3. Not a meeting but a family who live life together (which includes meetings). Acts 2:44, 46. Heb. 3:13.
4. Most important fact? Jesus is present and active. It's His church and He is always at work to build it (not our job!) Matt. 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 Thes. 2:7, 11; 1 Cor. 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. Seventh, related to the above, Paul traveled alone only when forced to do so. Just as Jesus sent out his apostles in pairs, so Paul traveled in a leadership community. Again, Josh White adds a great thought here: "Based on our definition of 'church', 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 living out 'church' all the time. 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 Matt. 10:11-13. This person is defined very clearly by the culture of the day and by Jesus' instructions:

- First, they were 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 their 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 have 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 of Lystra (see Acts 14:6 ff. and compare Acts 16:1-2 and 2 Tim. 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 Judiasm 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 Rom. 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 Corinthians' transformation in 1 Cor. 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 their 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 Tim. 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 letter to the Thessalonians and 1 Tim. 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 Cor. 4:20, compare 1 Thes. 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, simple church planting should be done in a 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 will start by ensuring that your own family is a "household of peace." Then with much prayer, you will 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-that will open the doors for others who are potential "kingdom extenders" (it is God's prescribed means for "expelling" new laborers into the harvest). Then as you build relationship with the persons of peace you will be able to watch Jesus open their hearts to His love (supernatural power here will be the norm, one hopes!). The person of peace will then reach to their *oikos*, and the kingdom will expand along natural lines. What do you do next? I am fully confident that if you listen to Jesus (in the context of a loving community) and do what He says, you will discover the next steps as you take this amazing journey!

By Tom Wymore

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