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## Book Review: Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples

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**Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making  
Disciples.**

**Reviewed by Bob Beaver**

*Geiger, Eric and Thom S. Rainer. Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2006. 257 pp. \$19.99.*

Thom Rainer has served as a church consultant for over 20 years. He has consulted with over five hundred churches, served as pastor in four churches, and served as interim pastor in seven churches. He has spoken in hundreds of venues and has published sixteen books and hundreds of articles, many of them pertaining to church growth and revitalization. Rainer was the founding dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism, and Church Growth at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. It is obvious from reading *Simple Church* that Rainer knows the local church. But more significantly, he loves the local church and desires for it to have maximum impact for Jesus Christ in the world.

Eric Geiger has done extensive research in the field of discipleship as it pertains to the local church. His research has been well-documented in the book *Simple Church*. His research for the book involved 405 churches, 208 that were vibrant/growing churches and 197 that were non-growing churches. The criteria for the vibrant churches was that they had to have grown in worship attendance a minimum of 5 percent a year for three consecutive years. From the collection of the vast amount of research performed for this project, Geiger made conclusions that resulted in the main thesis of the book.

The focus of *Simple Church* is to help Christian leaders "design a simple process of discipleship" in the local church (3). In Chapter 1, the authors portray the harried lifestyle of "Pastor

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Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Summer 2008

Rush" as he rushes his way through the complex local church ministry that has evolved over the years (4-7). As he rushes from one meeting to the next, he finds himself wishing that he could simplify his lifestyle in order to impact more people for Jesus Christ. That is the bottom line thesis of the book, simplifying the local church structure so that the church is more consistently seeing lives changed for the gospel. The authors appropriately challenge us with the following thought,

The significance is that, in general, simple churches are growing and vibrant. Churches with a simple process for reaching and maturing people are expanding the kingdom. Church leaders who have designed a simple biblical process to make disciples are effectively advancing the movement of the gospel. Simple churches are making a big impact (14).

In Chapter 2, the authors illustrate for us the difference between a complex church and a simple church. The complex church has a multiplicity of programs, vision statements, and ministries, but they do not necessarily move believers in a unified manner towards spiritual maturity. On the other hand, the simple church has everything in their ministry intentionally aligned to move believers towards spiritual maturity. In Chapter 3, the authors define the simple church as, "a congregation designed around a straight-forward and strategic process that moves people through the stages of spiritual growth" (60). They spend the rest of the chapter fleshing out the four key concepts that will help us simplify: Clarity, Movement, Alignment, and Focus. In Chapter 4, the authors tell the story of three different simple churches and how the four key concepts relate to their local ministry. In Chapter 5, the authors explain the significance of clarifying the process that a church will use to move people towards spiritual maturity. In Chapter 6, the authors describe how the local church can help ease congestion and provide forward movement for believers as they progress in their spiritual maturity. In Chapter 7, the authors discuss the significance of aligning all ministries around a simple process for maximum impact. In Chapter 8, the authors encourage simple church leaders to say "No!" to almost everything so the church can have a singular focus to its discipleship ministry. Finally, in Chapter 9, the authors tie the four key concepts together of clarity, movement, alignment, and focus so that Christian leaders can more easily move their churches towards simplicity.

The greatest strength of the book was the ease at which it was possible to evaluate one's church to discern whether it por-

trayed a simple or a complex discipleship ministry. The descriptions of these two models, particularly in Chapter 2 (29-56), were of such a high quality that I was quickly able to discern where we were at as a church model. Indeed, I found that we are the complex model and that we needed to greatly simplify for maximum impact for Jesus Christ. I found that we have an over-programmed, unfocused, and complex church structure. It was hard medicine to take, to be honest. But, I have found that in order for treatment to be effective, the patient has to first realize that he is sick. There are many things we are doing right, but simplicity is not one of them!

A second strength of the book was the manner in which it helped me think through the discipleship vision of our church's ministry. The authors use the example of Cross Church and state that the church's discipleship vision statement is all about "loving God, loving people, and serving the world" (37). All of their ministries revolved around these three purposes. Based upon the concepts shared about clarity, movement, alignment, and focus (227-241), I was able to come up with a simple statement of our church's discipleship process. It is, "Growing in Celebration (Worship), Growing Up (Discipleship), Growing Together (Community), and Growing Out (Evangelism)." For practitioners of local church ministry, this book was the proverbial "gold mine." But, there were very definite weaknesses of the book as well.

First, I was a little nonplussed to find out that all of the churches that were evaluated in phase one of the study, about 400 churches, were Southern Baptist Churches (246). Roughly 166 participated from the vibrant/growing strata and 153 from the comparison church strata (246). In phase two, they did include churches from other denominations as well as non-denominational churches, a total of about 100 churches. In this second phase, 44 churches participated from the vibrant/growing strata and 44 churches participated from the comparison church strata (246). Crunching the numbers, it means that roughly 78% of the churches were from a Southern Baptist Church denominational background. I would have liked to have seen the denominational backgrounds of the churches more evenly distributed than occurred with this study. While I have no personal bias against Southern Baptist Churches, it is possible that the results might have been a little different if there was a more fair distribution of denominational churches in the study.

Second, while I understand the point the authors were trying to make in using the simplicity of some American companies

in the corporate world (8-13), my scriptural understanding is that the church is not a corporate entity in the same sense. The church is a spiritual enterprise, but it should not be run like an American corporation. While the authors are not strictly advocating such a business-minded approach to the local church, the thoughts conveyed in such analogies could possibly communicate such a point. We must remember our Lord's admonition of the local church in Matthew 16:18, "*And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it.*" The church has power, position, and influence in direct proportion to how much we are drawing upon the eternal resources of our Lord, not upon our particular discipleship model of ministry.

Third, while the authors do make the case for the biblical basis for a simple discipleship ministry (16-20), I would have liked to see this biblical model expounded upon more consistently throughout the book. It perhaps would have been better to take an entire chapter to build a biblical basis for the simple discipleship model. I would think that drawing upon the simple discipleship model of our Lord with His disciples would have been quite sufficient for such purposes. While the book was excellent for the practitioner of local church ministry, the authors did not build a strong case for the biblical basis for their model. A theologian looking for something in the book to "hang his hat on" would have perhaps been frustrated with the book.

Even with the weaknesses given above, I would highly recommend this book to practitioners of local church ministry. It would be very valuable to seminary students who are looking forward to local church ministry. The word of patient caution given in the book is very appropriate for young pastors who may try to move a church into the simple church model too quickly. The authors state,

We are concerned some may move too quickly. We are concerned because we hear over and over again how frustrated church leaders are with the complexity that is leading to no life change. We pray leaders will follow the Spirit's leadership and implement change with wisdom and compassion (251-252).

It would also be highly valuable to new church planters and pastors attempting to revitalize their local churches. The practical aspect of the simple church model is something that all local church pastors need to be made aware of. And, the beautiful thing about this model is that the authors openly advocate adapting it for our own local church setting. There is not a "one

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size fits all" model presented in the book. A simple church in Hawaii may look quite different from a simple church in Florida. There is great flexibility presented throughout the book and that flexibility is greatly appreciated.

Reviewer

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