

NINE

*Becoming Simple*

*Just Do It.*

~ Nike

**Clarity → Movement → Alignment → Focus**

*There is a scene in *Super-Size Me* that is disturbing. We are not talking about the one where Morgan Spurlock, the producer, vomits on the ground. OK, that is disturbing as well. But we are referring to a different scene.*

*In this scene Morgan Spurlock is seeking to prove how effectively McDonalds impacts upcoming generations. So he meets with schoolchildren and shows them pictures of famous people. Most of the children recognize a depiction of George Washington. All recognize a depiction of Ronald McDonald. None of them recognize a common depiction of Jesus Christ.*

*None. Not one.*

*Yes, we know the depiction is probably inaccurate, but you get the point. Most children in America are growing up without any knowledge of Jesus. We are living in a post-Christian culture. For upcoming generations Christ is no longer the starting point. Children and teenagers no longer rebel against the standard. Today there is no standard.*

*Nearly ten years ago Thom predicted this would be the case. In his book *The Bridger Generation*, he presented research that indicated only 4 percent of upcoming generations would become Christians. Sadly we are living in the reality of that prediction.<sup>1</sup>*

*McDonalds is influencing future generations. Churches are not.*

*While the impact of McDonalds is spreading, the impact of the church is shrinking. In fact, most churches are spiritually stagnant and declining numerically. And this decline is in the midst of an increasing population.*

*The church, as a whole, is doing more and more. And the church, as a whole, is making less and less of a difference.*

*Church complexity is costly. The cost is beyond time and money. The kingdom is not expanding. Lives are not being changed. Transformation is not happening. Churches are not growing.*

*Moving to simple needs to happen. For the sake of the kingdom, the church, and the people you serve, it is time for action. In many churches, there has been too much talk. New statements mask the same behavior and the same paradigms. New strategies cover up the complexity. In most churches, nothing really changes.*

*The kingdom is not about chatter. It is about action. Nike has some great theology. It is time to just do it. It is time to refuse to be a programmer. It is time to design and implement a simple process that moves people toward spiritual transformation.*

*It is time for change. The alternative is to continue leading dying churches filled with spiritually anemic people.*

*Change or die. Those are the choices.*

### *Change or Die*

*A recent medical study reveals just how difficult change is for people. Roughly 600,000 people have heart bypasses a year in America. These people are told after their bypasses that they must change their lifestyle. The heart bypass is a temporary fix. They must change their diet. They must quit smoking and drinking. They must exercise and reduce stress.*

*In essence, the doctors say, "Change or die."*

*You would think that a near-death experience would forever grab the attention of the patients. You would think they would vote for change. You would think the argument for change is so compelling that the patients would make the appropriate lifestyle alterations. Sadly that is not the case.*

*Ninety percent of the heart patients do not change. They remain the same, living the status quo. Study after study indicates that two years after heart surgery, the patients have not altered their behavior. Instead of making changes for life, they choose death.<sup>2</sup>*

*Change is that difficult. The majority of heart patients choose not to change. They act as if they would rather die. In the same way the majority of churches choose not to change. They would rather die. Tragically, in most churches, the pain of change is greater than the pain of ineffectiveness.*

*While moving to a simple church approach needs to happen, the transition will not be easy. It is change. Becoming a simple church is difficult. In fact, the longer your church has been complex, the more difficult the transition will be.*

*Attention church planters: this information is good news for you. While you have little money, own no land or buildings, you are able to design from scratch.*

*Cluttered church leaders do not have that luxury. Ceasing to be a pack rat will be extremely challenging. Moving out the clutter will be more painful than a garage sale. Leadership expert Tom Peters once commented, "It is easier to kill an organization than it is to change it."<sup>3</sup>*

*Please do not take the easy route. Do not kill your church. You have seen that happen. It is horrible. Do not treat moving toward simple as a corporate restructuring or downsizing initiative. The church is the body of believers, filled with real people.*

*There is a tension here, isn't there?*

*On one hand, you must move to simple as fast as you can. So much depends on it. The longer you are complex, the longer your focus is divided. If you remain complex, your process for transformation remains unclear. The longer you are complex, the longer your church is congested. People remain unchanged. And this bothers you. It should.*

*On the other hand, you must move to simple slowly. You have the heart of a shepherd, and you care for the people in your church. Becoming simple will be painful for some people. They cannot imagine losing some of the traditions and programs.*

*So this tension exists. You desire to see changes happen now for the sake of the kingdom and the unchanged people in your community. Yet you desire to bring the people you already have along with you. How is this tension resolved?*

*Change theorists argue over this tension. Some advocate that change should happen all at once. Quickly. These people insist that it is less painful to cut off your arm with one fell swoop as opposed to one section at a time. They advise to tie all changes to an overarching vision and go for it. They believe that big sweeping changes produce results quickly, which ultimately validates the change.*

*Other change theorists shake their heads in disagreement to this advice. They believe change should be incremental, slow, and methodical. These people insist the goal of change is not destruction but transformation. They believe that by implementing change slowly, people are given an opportunity to adapt and grow. They propose that incremental change is wise because each change builds a culture where more change can occur.*

*Which group is right? Both approaches to change have succeeded. Both approaches to change have failed. You must live with this tension. Now/later. Fast/slow. Sweeping/incremental change.*

*Good news. You have the Holy Spirit. Pray for discernment. Allow God to give you wisdom and grant you favor. Get on God's timetable. Move to simple as God leads. Use wisdom and compassion in becoming a simple church.*

*Here is the bottom line: Get there as fast as you can but not faster.*

*Back to Pastor Rush*

*It has been three months since Pastor Rush had the sacred and scary moment in his office. The moment was bittersweet. It was sweet because he sensed a new direction. It was bitter because he knew change would be imminent.*

*It was the moment where he stared at a plethora of church models on his shelf and realized everything was mixed together like a spiritual bowl of leftover casserole. He realized, in the midst of the busyness,*

*that his church did not have a clear how. At the church Pastor Rush serves, there is not a process in place to move people to spiritual maturity.*

*His moment was soon interrupted. Phone calls and preparation pulled him away. But the unrest has continued. Over the last few months, Pastor Rush has seriously evaluated his church for the first time in years. He has walked around. He has looked. He has asked questions.*

*As Pastor Rush walked around, he realized things were done poorly. While activity abounds, excellence is missing. There is so much happening, so much to manage, so many programs to produce. Attention, energy, resources, and people are divided.*

*Complexity is often synonymous with mediocrity.*

*In his personal devotions Pastor Rush has been reading through the latter half of the Old Testament. It has been years since he has read and studied the Minor Prophets, the little books before the New Testament begins. God used the first chapter in the book of Malachi to confirm that change is not an option. Pastor Rush has been wrestling with Malachi 1. Each time he reads it, he sees himself and other people in his church. His heart is filled with conviction.*

#### *Malachi 1*

*In Malachi 1, God confronts the leaders, the priests. The priests were offering leftover sacrifices to God. No one really likes leftovers. Neither does God.*

*"A son honors his father, and a servant his master. But if I am a father, where is My honor? And if I am a master, where is your fear of Me? says the LORD of Hosts to you priests, who despise My name."*

*Yet you ask: "How have we despised Your name?"*

*"By presenting defiled food on My altar."*

*You ask: "How have we defiled You?"*

*When you say: "The LORD's table is contemptible."*

*"When you present a blind animal for sacrifice, is it not wrong? And when you present a lame or sick [animal], is it not wrong? Bring it to your governor! Would he be pleased with you or show you favor?" asks the LORD of Hosts. "And now ask for God's favor. Will He be gracious to us? Since this has come from your hands, will He show any of you favor?" asks the LORD of Hosts. "I wish one of you would shut the temple doors, so you would no longer kindle a useless fire on My altar! I am not pleased with you," says the LORD of Hosts, "and I will accept no offering from your hands.*

*"For My name will be great among the nations, from the rising of the sun to its setting. Incense and pure offerings will be presented in My name in every place because My name will be great among the nations," says the LORD of Hosts.*

*But you are profaning it when you say: "The Lord's table is defiled, and its product, its food, is contemptible." You also say: "Look, what a nuisance!" "And you scorn it," says the LORD of Hosts. "You bring stolen, lame, or sick animals. You bring this as an offering! Am I to accept that from your hands?" asks the LORD.*

*"The deceiver is cursed who has an acceptable male in his flock and makes a vow but sacrifices a defective animal to the Lord. For I am a great King," says the LORD of Hosts, "and My name will be feared among the nations." (Mal. 1:6–14)*

*The priests had specific instructions for what type of sacrifices they were to offer to God. According to Leviticus 22, they were to bring only pure and unblemished animals to sacrifice. They were to bring God the best.*

*Yet the priests were responding to God, their Master and Father, by offering the worst animals. This is an unacceptable offering to God. He reminds them who He is. Seven times in the passage, God refers to Himself as the LORD of Hosts, the Lord Almighty. He deserves, desires, and demands the best.*

*These people forgot that. They actually had the audacity to offer to God blind and diseased animals. God tells the priests to try offering those kinds of sacrifices to the governor.*

*God even tells the priests to shut down the temple, to shut the doors to cancel services, to just stop everything. God has never been impressed with halfhearted worship. The mediocrity is sickening to God.*

*He tells the priests that He will accept no offering from their hands. In essence God says, "If I cannot have the best of you, the best from you, then please do not bring anything to me." According to God's system, something is not better than nothing.*

*The people in Malachi stayed busy. They continued to go through the motions of serving God. They kept having church week after week with no intensity or intentionality. They were checking off their to-do list.*

*Remember, these were the priests. The priests did not call the people to a higher standard. In their minds everything was fine as long as sacrifices were offered. As long as they fulfilled the *what*, everything was OK.*

*God was concerned about the *how*. It mattered to God deeply *how* sacrifices were offered to Him. It mattered to God deeply *how* the priests served Him. These priests created a culture of mediocrity. And this profaned the name of God.*

*Mediocrity bothers God because it violates His nature and behavior. God is an excellent God. His character is flawless. Excellence flows from the nature of who God is. Everything God has ever done has been excellent. Creation, the sunset, the ocean, and His resurrection point to His excellent nature.*

*The leaders offered an inappropriate response to God. Instead of reflecting His attribute of excellence to the world, they modeled mediocrity. God was frustrated with the leaders because they set the pace and the tone. The people took their cues from them. If the priests offered second best to God, the people would as well.*

*Multiple issues have converged at once in Pastor Rush's mind. People are not being transformed in his church because there is not a simple process. Everything is too complex, too cluttered. And this clutter fosters mediocrity. It is impossible to offer excellence when focus is so divided. Seemingly people continue to go through the motions while no one is ever changed.*

*Most importantly, Pastor Rush feels that God is not pleased. He and his staff are running mediocre programs instead of making disciples. Pastor Rush has decided that change must happen. Or he will die, internally. The pain of mediocrity and ineffectiveness has become too great.*

*As the leader, he knows the change needs to begin with him.*

*Perhaps you are where Pastor Rush is. You do not want to spend the rest of your life leading mediocre programs. You do not want to go through the motions of ministry without a clear process for transformation. Perhaps the clutter and the complexity are unbearable. Your calling from God remains unchanged. It keeps you going, but you know there is a better way to do ministry.*

*You are not alone.*

*Hundreds of church leaders have shared with us the same frustration. That is the reason for this book. We pray it has given you a framework for a simple ministry process.*

*We conclude with four steps to becoming a simple church. These steps summarize much of the book and frame the transition for you.*

*For some these steps will take several months. For others these steps will take several years. Remember, the longer your church has been complex, the harder the transition will be.*

### *Step 1: Design a Simple Process (Clarity)*

*You must first design a simple ministry process for your church—on paper. This design is not about changing any programs or structures. Not yet. During this step, you are simply exploring what a process for discipleship would look like at your church. The process must first be in your head and heart before it becomes a reality.*

*Use this step to create an environment receptive to change. Let people know that a process is not in place, that disciples are not intentionally made. Share that presently discipleship, if it happens, just kind of happens by accident. The conversation may be uncomfortable if you have been a leader there for a long time, but you must create some dissatisfaction if people are going to be open to change.*

*Do not make the mistake of beginning with your existing programs. Begin with a blank sheet of paper. Do not try to squeeze the process into your programs. Allow the simple process that God gives you to be your starting point.*

*Invest a significant amount of time in the Scriptures and in prayer. Read about discipleship. Allow God to breathe into you *what* a disciple at your church should look like. Involve others in the discussion. Meet with spiritually mature staff and key leaders and have open discussions about what kind of disciples God is calling you to make.*

Once you have had these times with God and others, narrow your definition of discipleship down to a few key points. After you have invested the appropriate amount of time, you should be able to fill in the blanks to the following statement. Disciples at our church are: \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_.

You may have fewer blanks, or you may have more. However, less is best. The more blanks you have, the longer your process will be.

At this point there is no reason to get nervous. You have not implemented any changes. You still have not cut any programs or events. You are simply discussing *what* discipleship looks like.

Now it is time to discuss *how* it happens.

After you have chosen a few key aspects of discipleship, place them in sequential order. Discuss with others *how* people progress through the aspects of discipleship you have listed. Talk about *how* spiritual transformation takes place. Share *how* spiritual growth has happened in your life and the lives of others you know. The process must be personal.

Place your aspects of discipleship in order based on differing levels of commitment. Remember, the process must be clearly defined. There must be a starting point and a next step. The first step in the process should be the first level of commitment.

Describe your definition of discipleship in process terms. At this point you should be able to fill in the blanks to the following statement: People become mature disciples at our church by

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

The number of terms and the terms themselves in this set of blanks should be the same as the previous set. Now they are in sequential order.

Spend time discussing and preaching your process. The clearer this process for spiritual transformation is to people in your church, the easier the next transition steps will be.

### **Step 2: Place Your Key Programs Along the Process (Movement)**

After you have designed a process on paper, it is time to implement it. It is one thing to have a simple process written down, it is entirely another thing to place the programs along the process. This point is where the transition gets more difficult. In fact, each upcoming step will be more challenging.

Choose one churchwide program for each phase of your simple process. The purpose of the program should coincide with that particular part of the process. You may have some programs left over, meaning they do not fit into your process. At this point the complexity becomes obvious. Do not feel that you have

*to eliminate those programs right away. Take your time and move through the transition as God leads. Elimination is part of the last step.*

*At this point you still have not gotten rid of anything. However, you may have to change the focus of some of your programs. You will want to be sure each program in your process is designed to meet that specific aspect of discipleship effectively. Here is where the resistance to change happens. When you tweak a program, you are tweaking tradition.*

*The first program is the entry point into your process. The following programs should require greater levels of commitment. Remember, you want to progress people to greater levels of spiritual vitality. You want to be able to move people through the simple process.*

*After you have finished this step, you should be able to fill in the following blanks.*

\_\_\_\_\_ (program) \_\_\_\_\_ (program)

\_\_\_\_\_ (program) \_\_\_\_\_ (program)

### *Step 3: Unite All Ministries Around the Process (Alignment)*

*After you have followed steps 1 and 2, you will have a simple process with programs strategically placed. Now you must align each ministry around the same process. If each age-specific ministry uses the same words to describe the process, the people in the church will grasp it much faster.*

*The more you involve other leaders in the design of the simple process, the easier it will be to unite them around it. If they are in the discussions, you are simply challenging everyone to put into practice what is agreed upon.*

*When new leaders are hired or recruited, be sure they believe wholeheartedly in your simple process. As new ministries begin, ensure they understand how they fit into the overall picture.*

### *Step 4: Begin to Eliminate Things Outside the Process (Focus)*

*OK, this is where the change is REALLY felt. Please notice, that here is the only time in the entire book we used all caps to emphasize a point.*

*Most people will be grateful that a process for discipleship is developed in your church. Most people will appreciate that the programs are purposeful, that they are a part of a bigger picture. And most people will enjoy the unity of all ministries moving in the same direction. Things in your church will be clearer and more focused. Remember that people do appreciate simplicity.*

*However, some people will struggle with abandoning other programs to focus solely on the ministry process God has given your church. Some of the programs will have deep traditions and rich history. You must use wisdom in step 4.*



*If you consistently discuss the simple process and the programs used to move people through the process, some people will begin to wonder how additional programs fit. You will even begin to have people ask you that question. It is an awkward moment, but a great opportunity for discussion.*

*In time it is important that you eliminate programs and events that do not fit. They are a distraction from the process, and they prohibit your church from enjoying all the benefits of a simple church.*

*To be a simple church, you must implement a process that is clear and moves people. You must insist that all ministries align to the process, and you must refuse to allow it to become cluttered. You must stay focused.*

*While becoming simple will be difficult, it is also worth it. The gates of hell will be pushed back, dented, and damaged. The upcoming generations will be exposed to the gospel and goodness of our God. And the people in your church will be placed in the pathway of God's transforming power.*

*Simple. It is so compelling.*

*The simple church revolution has begun.*

*Are you in?*

#### **GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- 1. What is the relationship between complexity and mediocrity?*
- 2. How complex are we?*
- 3. How receptive to change are our leaders?*
- 4. How receptive to change is our entire church?*
- 5. How long do you think each transition step would take at our church?<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church* (Nashville: B&H, 2011).