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RETURNING TO GOD'S PROCESS FOR MAKING DISCIPLES

SIMPLE CHURCH

THOM S. RAINER
& ERIC GEIGER



NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

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*From Thom:
To Nellie Jo
My love
My life
My heroine*

*From Eric:
Kaye, I dedicate this book to you.
Your relationship with God inspires me.
Your support and encouragement motivate me.
And your love brings me joy.*

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Acknowledgments

I have been a student of the American church for over twenty years. Though I realize I have only begun to understand this God-given institution, in some ways it seems as if I have studied it from every possible angle. Still I knew something was missing.

A couple of years ago, a young man with lots of energy came into my office to show me some research he had done. He couldn't sit still. Such is his nature, but even more so on this occasion. He was tremendously excited about the fruit of his research to this point.

Simply stated, he found that the healthiest churches in America tended to have a simple process for making disciples. They had clarity about the process. They moved Christians intentionally through the process. They were focused on the elements of the process. And they aligned their entire congregation to this process.

The simple church was discovered.

Eric Geiger was that young man, then a twenty-something but now an aging old man of thirty. His research was sound. His discoveries were on target.

We did further research, and the results were confirmed with even greater certainty.

I am grateful to Eric for his intellect, his enthusiasm, his persistence, and his humility as the “old man” (me!) offered guidance and a few suggestions for improvements.

Eric and I wrote this book in the first-person plural for easy flow. But we also note when we are speaking specifically about either one of us.

My gratitude also extends to my family at LifeWay Christian Resources, where I serve as president. The men and women who are part of this family are some of the greatest and smartest Christians I know.

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How can I say thank you to my great family? In every book I write, you see me talk about my sons: Sam, Art, and Jess. One person recently asked me if these young men could possibly be as great as I describe. The fact of the matter is that I cannot overstate how wonderful they are. Every person who knows them agrees with me.

Of course, the object of deepest love among all of us in the Rainer family is Nellie Jo. Wife and mother *summa cum laude*. Isn’t life great, Doll? Isn’t LifeWay a great place? Isn’t Nashville a great place to live? I love you so very much, and I love traveling on this journey called life with you. The best is yet to come.

—Thom Rainer

It has been said that it takes a community to raise a child. Well, it also takes one to write a book. I am eternally grateful to God for the community of people He has placed in my life.

I thank Thom for taking me on this journey. There is a lot of talk about investing in the next generation of leaders. Some would say at age thirty, I am a part of that next generation. Thom has lived that sermon. Thank you, Dr. Rainer, for believing in me and partnering with me on this project.

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I thank Broadman & Holman for all the energy and time they poured into this project. When I first met Ken Stephens, the president, he said, "Welcome to our family." I felt like I was in a scene from *The Godfather*. I almost tried to kiss his ring. Almost. It was a great moment, and I hope there will be many more.

I thank the following leaders with whom I have had the honor to serve or study under: Jerry Key, Dr. Michael Hawley, Ben Wasson, Chuck Allen, Dr. Terry Fields, Dr. Dino Senesi,

and Dr. Brad Waggoner. I am blessed because of your investment in me. I hope you see some fruit from your labor.

I thank my parents and brother. In the midst of enormous change, you have been constant. Even when I was far from God, you loved me. Your continual encouragement has supported me for years.

I thank my wife, Kaye. I am so thankful for you. I love you and I like you. You are the most tangible expression of God's grace in my life. Difficult days are much more bearable with you. Great days are much more exciting with you.

Most of all, I thank Jesus. I present this work to You as an offering to be used for Your glory.

—Eric Geiger

PART 1

Simple Revolution

ONE

The Simple Revolution Has Begun

Out of complexity, find simplicity.

~ ALBERT EINSTEIN

Relax. This book is not about another church model. If you are a church leader, you have been exposed to plenty of models. Most of them are on your shelf. Or worse, you have blended a bunch of models into one schizophrenic plan. If that is the case, neither you nor the people in your church are really sure what your church is all about. We see it all the time.

Go ahead, let down your guard. No new program is going to be pushed. There will be nothing new to add to your calendar. If anything, you will be encouraged to eliminate some things, to streamline. This book will help you design a simple process of discipleship in your church. It will help you implement the model you have chosen. It will help you simplify.

Keep your eyes on the words at the beginning of each chapter. Four simple words. Clarity. Movement. Alignment. Focus. Those four words will speak volumes before we conclude the book.

After hundreds of consultations with local churches and a significant research project, we have concluded that church leaders need to simplify. They are constantly asking, “How can we make all this work? How can we put all the pieces together?” Many of the church leaders we talk to are seeking an escape from the not-so-simple life.

The Not So Simple Life

Pastor Rush is on his way home from a conference on church ministry. He loved the time away, the challenging messages, and the extended times of prayer and worship. But he hates how he feels right now. The conference notebook sits on his lap filled with all that he learned and all that he wants to do. He wants to open it, but he can't. He wants to think about the future, but his mind is filled with the details surrounding the rest of this week.

As the plane takes off, he only feels the weight of the responsibilities that await him. Somewhere between ten thousand and thirty thousand feet, he puts the notebook (and his dreams) in his bag.

It is Wednesday afternoon. He feels a little guilty not being at the weekly visitation program last night. He feels more guilty for enjoying the night off. The Tuesday night visitation program was his baby, his paramount program, when he came to the church several years ago. It soon became the passion of many people in the church. He is grateful those people caught his passion and feels like a traitor for resenting the additional night away from home.

Tonight, he has to (wishes he wanted to) lead the prayer meeting at church. He tells himself he will share something God taught him in a personal devotion. By doing so he will have time to return some phone calls before the prayer meeting.

Experience tells him the messages on his desk and the e-mails on his computer will be many. He knows they are already there.

The financial team is meeting after the prayer meeting, so he will not be home until after 9:00. He does not lead the meeting, but he needs to be there. Hopefully his kids will still be awake when he gets home.

Tomorrow morning he is having breakfast with one of the men on the church board. He does not know what it is about, but he thinks it will only add more to his mounting list of responsibilities.

Then there is a staff meeting and maybe some hospital visits. Tomorrow night he and his wife are in a small group. He has recently encouraged everyone in the church to be in a small group, and he wants to lead by example. He genuinely loves the group when he gets there, and he wishes it did not feel burdensome. He asked each staff person to be in a small group and prays they don't feel the same way he does right now.

He has little work done on his message for the upcoming Sunday morning worship services. He is in the middle of a series on relationships. He taught on relating to your spouse last week, and he longs to live out some of the practical principles he shared: date nights, picnics, and so forth.

He wants to make that happen in some way this week. Friday night could work. He commits to pass on the invitation to attend one of the local high school sporting events. He knows that will disappoint one of the board members who has encouraged him to be more visible in the community.

Saturday afternoon, after his son's ball game, he will spend much of the day on his message. It looks like another "Saturday night special" is in store for the Sunday morning crowd.

This weekend he is going to speak on relating to lost neighbors. He wishes he had some personal stories to share, but life

has just been so busy lately. He thinks of all the times he has pulled into the garage after late nights at church or church-related activities. He hasn't met the new couple two doors down. He tells himself they just moved in a few weeks ago but then remembers it was six months ago, at least.

He knows that if he is not relating to his neighbors and inviting them to Christ and to church, he cannot ask his congregation to do so. He wrestles with changing his message, but he has already announced what he is going to preach. He shakes his head and slumps a little lower in the seat.

He is tempted to witness to the person sitting next to him on the plane just to get a personal story for his message—nothing like a good airplane story to get a crowd going. He rebukes himself for the improper motivation. The passenger is asleep anyway. Must be nice.

Pastor Rush reaches back into his bag. He pushes the conference notebook aside and grabs a legal pad.

He has the weekly staff meeting after his breakfast appointment. This will be the only time he has to prepare for it. He decides to keep it brief, jotting down only a few items to discuss. He knows there are some staff issues that need to be dealt with, but he does not have the time or emotional energy to raise them.

He begins to think about his message for Sunday night (which is different from Sunday morning). He has taken some criticism lately for the quality of his Sunday night messages. He understands why. They have been underdeveloped. He is trying to work on them earlier in the week, taking some of the time away from the Sunday morning message preparation.

This Sunday night there is a neighborhood block party. His wife will go while he is at church. He thinks, *At least one of us*

knows our neighbors. Of course, people will wonder why she was not at church. The tension is mounting. He slumps deeper into the seat.

He knows there has to be a better way. He knows it and continually admits it to himself and the Lord. But there is no time to discover *it* (whatever *it* may be), much less time to put *it* into action.

Like other conferences, Pastor Rush was impressed but is coming home almost depressed.

During these times, Pastor Rush has disciplined himself to remember his calling into ministry. When he was in his early twenties, he committed his life to vocational ministry. He mentally goes back to those days when he wrestled with his career path.

God had given him an unquenchable passion for the church, for the Word, and for people. He knew God had set him apart to serve the church. He still does. He still has a deep burden. The nagging in his heart to make disciples through the ministry of the local church is still there. That conviction has not wavered, only grown. But he knows so many things have been placed beside it, even on top of it.

Yet, he is in this for people.

At thirty thousand feet Pastor Rush is thinking of people in his church. He is praying and thinking. Some tough questions are emerging. Are the people in his church being transformed? Is his church making real disciples, the kind of disciples Jesus made? Or is everyone just busy?

He glances over at the sleeping passenger next to him. On his lap is the airline's magazine, and it is opened to a full-page advertisement for a popular media device. The top of the advertisement says *Simple*. Out of curiosity Pastor Rush pulls

the same magazine out of the seat pocket in front of him. He finds the page to further examine the advertisement. It is interesting. He snickers.

Simple sure sounds good.

The Revolution

Simple is in.

Complexity is out. Out of style at least.

Ironically people are hungry for simple because the world has become much more complex. The amount of information accessible to us is continually increasing. The ability to interact with the entire world is now possible. Technology is consistently advancing at a rapid pace.

The result is a complicated world with complex and busy lives. And, in the midst of complexity, people want to find simplicity. They long for it, seek it, pay for it, even dream of it. Simple is in. Simple works. People respond to simple.

The simple revolution has begun.

Apple knows this.

They are pioneers of simple. They are a part of the revolution against complexity, pushing it forward on the technological front. Pick up an iPod and find one big button. Connect it to your Apple desktop, and music automatically downloads. Plug your printer cable into the USB port, and you are ready to go. "Plug and play," the mantra of a computer generation hungry for simple.

Even Apple's graphic design is simple. Look at the logo. An apple with one color has replaced the former multicolored apple. Their artwork on their products and in their stores is subtle. Their cultlike followers are vocal missionaries to the