

Simply Missional

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Dell Computers has shattered the warehouse myth. Most companies love big warehouses. They feel safe with lots of inventory on large shelves in massive warehouses, always ready for that next order. In their minds, the well-stocked warehouse confirms the belief they will always be able to meet customer demands and customer expectations.

Dell disagrees with the warehouse approach. In the technology business, the product literally rots in value on the shelves. Because Dell does not want their best resources on the shelves, they only keep two hours of inventory. Which means that if you order a PC on dell.com, the parts will not arrive to Dell until two hours before your PC is shipped to you.

Dell wants their resources out there, on the street. Not in the warehouse, where the resources merely gather dust and produce no impact. So Dell has designed a very strategic process to move their resources to the street.

Sadly many churches are betting their futures on the warehouse myth.

Most churches build big warehouses and shelve a bunch of Christians (those rows look suspiciously like shelves). They design attractive programs to “retain” people in the sacred warehouse, keep precise records of how much inventory (people) is on the shelves, and brag about their warehouses being constantly open. And warehouse managers love to show other warehouse managers their newest warehouses while dreaming together of bigger and better warehouses.

God is calling churches to shatter the warehouse myth, to change their warehouses into strategic distribution centers, where people are distributed as salt and light to the world—sending them out on mission. Some churches are strategically challenging their people to be out there, and these churches have a strategic and simple process that moves people from the warehouse to the street. These churches are simple and missional.

They are simply missional.

We are often asked if there is a relationship between our two books *Breaking the Missional Code* and *Simple Church*, co-authored with David Putman and Thom S. Rainer respectively. Is there a relationship between a church being missional and a church being simple?

If you have not read our two books, here is the elevator conversation: *Breaking the Missional Code* helps leaders effectively exegete their culture so they can live on mission as a Biblically faithful and strategically contextualized congregation, focused on living for God's kingdom. *Simple Church* challenges church leaders to design a simple discipleship process that places people in the best environments for spiritual transformation, and to remove the clutter and the busyness that competes with the essential.

So is there a relationship between a church being missional and a church being simple? We believe so. Churches that are living as missional communities in their culture are often quite simple. These churches do not rejoice in their complex systems or impressive buildings, but in the micro stories of their members' transformed lives. In the same way, churches that are designed around a simple process are embracing the call to be missionaries in their culture.

As best we see it, the relationship between being missional and being simple is apparent for at least six reasons...

1. Being missional and being simple requires strategic thinking.

While Jesus is the one who builds His church (Matthew 16:18), He has given us responsibility and authority in His mission of redeeming people to Himself. Expressing ownership in the movement of the Church, the apostle Paul says, "I laid a foundation as an expert builder" (I Corinthians 2:10).

An expert builder builds intentionally and strategically. He envisions the completed building, lays out a blueprint for the project, and aligns people and resources to the project. An expert builder would never approach a project haphazardly and without a clear plan.

In both of our books, we challenge leaders to be strategic thinkers. Thinking strategically is not isolated to one aspect of church leadership. Church leaders who think strategically about their community also think strategically about their church.

These leaders do not expect mission to just *happen*. They prayerfully seek for the best systems and structures that both facilitate and validate effective missional thrust into their communities. It is incumbent upon leaders to think outside the (warehouse) box.

2. Living a missional life is a part of a simple discipleship process.

Jesus' famous words, known as the Great Commission, are often quoted yet also misunderstood in many churches. "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded" (Matthew 28:19-20).

Many read, "teaching them everything" in Jesus' famous command. But Jesus challenges us to teach people to "obey everything." The end result of discipleship is obedience, not merely information. The test of our ability to disciple people is not how many times we gather people in the warehouse to download more information into their brains. The test of our ability to disciple is how we effectively move people to obey the command of being Christ's witnesses (Acts 1:8).

Many churches believe discipleship equates information. This faulty premise assumes that the only thing lacking is that church folk do not *know* enough. So when one of these churches seeks to ramp up their "discipleship," they typically look to add another type of curriculum or Bible study structure. Such churches produce a bunch of Bible Study junkies who sit in the warehouse with yet another workbook.

Electricians, mechanics, plumbers, scientists, lawyers, and doctors must *practice* their trade or profession. Would you want a heart surgeon who had just "studied" the heart to perform surgery on your child? Why do so many think that becoming a disciple can be learned through a workbook? Living the Christian life is not a workbook, it's a life lived.

Churches with a simple process seek to lead people to be doers of the word, not just hearers (James 1:22). Discipleship to these churches is not information, but transformation. And a true disciple is someone who seeks to transform the community around him. Such churches streamline their programming to create space in the lives of their people to live as a disciple/missionary in their community. Too many churches are filled with busy consumers rather than missional disciples.

Leaders of these *simply missional* churches understand that a broader vision for discipleship must be cast, a vision that results in obedience, not simply knowledge. By instilling in the hearts and minds of their members a paradigm whereby daily they look and listen for the activity of the Holy Spirit and the voice of God as they move through their day, these *ordinary* citizens are transformed into missionaries, sent from a Kingdom not of this world into a place that is dry and hungry for redemption on every level.

3. Simple churches offer less at the church building, thus creating opportunities for missional living.

The Scripture paints the picture that we are God's ambassadors in this culture (II Corinthians 5:20). Our citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20) and we belong to His kingdom, yet He has sent us into this world to represent Him. Because we belong to His kingdom, the apostle Peter describes us as aliens in this culture. "Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day He visits us" (I Peter 2:11-12).

The first part of Peter's challenge is critical: Live a holy and pure life. But the second part of Peter's challenge is equally important: Live a holy and pure life *among* those who do not know God.

Among. Not removed from. Not against. But among. Too many Christians have believed that lie that holiness is separation from sinners, instead of from sin.

Thus many churches remind us of the movie *The Village*. In the Village, a group of people is disgusted with the culture. Each of them has been dramatically hurt by the world, thus they decide to create their own village deep in the woods. They build their own homes, make their own clothes, raise their own food, and marry other villagers. They never leave the village. From recreation to education, the totality of their lives is self-contained within the village. To prevent their children from desiring to wander outside the village, the founding elders construct an elaborate story to keep their own from wandering off to "the towns."

Many Christians live in a secluded village. They seek jobs with other Christians, spend several nights a week at church, place their kids in Christian little leagues, and only "fellowship" with other believers. They enjoy Christian radio, purchase gifts at Christian bookstores, exercise at Christian fitness centers, sip coffee at Christian coffee houses, and watch videos on the Christian version of youtube.com (Godtube.com). They lay their heads on their pillows at night thanking God they lived another day unscathed by the world.

Village life is not the Christian life. While those who disengage from the world believe they are obeying God, they are living the antithesis of the gospel. While the warehouse feels safe, the warehouse is dangerous. The warehouse mentality pulls us off mission and gives us a myriad of excuses to disobey God.

We have heard the cries from pastors for years, "Our people just do not seem to know lost people."

Hmmmm.

Perhaps our church people do not know lost people because our churches have kept people in the warehouse, losing opportunities to deeply engage in relationships with lost people. Church leaders often “guilt” people into coming to the church, removing them from the world that Jesus came to save.

All too often we have discovered that church programming dominates the schedules of members to the point that there is just no time nor energy left in members lives to do the very thing they were created for—live as redemptive agents of the Kingdom of God. This results in both a de-energized body and a gathering of individuals who do not feel fulfilled in their own lives because they are not using their natural, God-given gifts to work in the fields in which the Lord has placed them.

Churches with minimal programming help their people live among the world as missionaries by not asking them to live *at* the church, but to live *as* the church.

Churches with minimal programming encourage their members to know their neighbors, coach their kids’ little league teams, attend the PTA meetings, and play in the city recreational leagues. And as Christ stepped into our culture, these church members are living incarnationally in the everyday environments life offers us. As Christ is Immanuel (God with us), these church members live *God with us* lives within the context of their communities.

4. Missional and Simple leaders know the culture.

Unlike many busy church leaders, the apostle Paul knew the culture and effectively engaged people with the gospel. His example in Athens (Acts 17) is a challenging reminder to enter the marketplace. Athens was filled with tons of little “g” gods spread throughout their culture. Every building was dedicated to a god and statues of gods filled the streets. The ancient satirist Petronius once joked that it was easier to find a god in Athens than a person. Athens was also the cultural center in the Greek world. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle all taught in Athens. They spoke in the same place that Paul would speak.

Paul stepped into the culture of Athens and reasoned with people in the synagogue and also the marketplace, *the agora*. He spent time in the church building (the synagogue), but he also went to the marketplace. His words created such a buzz that he was invited to the Areopagus so the people could hear more. The Areopagus was the epicenter of ideas and philosophy.

Paul stood in front of the crowd and said, "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you" (Acts 17:22-23). Paul essentially told the people, *the only statue you got right is the one to the unknown God because you are admitting you do not know Him. All the other gods/statues are false; so let me explain to you the one true God you have admitted you do not know.*

In his discourse to the people of Athens, Paul displayed his cultural knowledge in a missiologically discerning way. He walked around and noticed the statues in Athens, was disturbed by them, but still used them to build a bridge to start an evangelistic conversation. He also quoted a Stoic poet in his message because in the crowd were Stoic philosophers. Even his opening words to the crowd revealed his understanding of his context. He addressed the crowd with the words, "Men of Athens" because in the crowd were devotees of the great philosopher Plato. In Plato's famous writing about his mentor, entitled *Socrates' Apology*, Plato placed Socrates in the same position as Paul – in front of the men of Athens defending his teachings and beliefs. In Plato's writing, Socrates addressed the crowd, "Men of Athens." Now Paul, in the same position as Socrates, addresses the crowd in the same manner: "Men of Athens."

In other words, Paul did not wing it. Nor did he drive from his home to the warehouse and back to his home again. He understood his context, the culture surrounding him. And he placed himself and the timeless, flawless, and perfect message of Christ in the context of the culture.

Missional leaders fall deeply in love with the city or town in which God has placed them. They embrace and embed themselves in their community. Such leaders understand the vital key of incarnational ministry by living out the words of Jesus on a daily basis through a missional rhythm of *being* a blessing to the people (community) to which they are sent (Genesis 12:2).

When a church is marked by complexity, it is usually not filled with church leaders engaging their neighbors. They are too consumed managing the systems that keep the warehouse functioning. The warehouse has become the end instead of a means to effectively release and distribute people into the world.

5. Both Missional and Simple are people-focused, not program-focused.

When some Pharisees confronted Jesus for picking grain on the Sabbath, His response was, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark

2:27). In other words, the Sabbath was a tool given by God for man's benefit. Man was not created for the benefit of the Sabbath.

Perhaps some church leaders need to hear a new pithy: "The program was made for man, not man for the program."

The problem is that for far too many churches what were once tools have now become a detriment. When tools become rules, our focus shifts to what we do and not who we are. But, there is a better way: missional disciples not tied up by programs, but using programs for what they originally were intended—tools to help them live better, follow more fully, and serve more readily.

Instead of utilizing people and resources to keep church programs functioning, missional leaders view their programs and resources as tools for people to encounter the grace of God. The goal is people, not program. They view their resources as tools for people's lives to be transformed, and they train their members to think this way.

Such Christians are trained to view their wallets as their missional budget, so that as they move through their daily paces, they are openly and consciously looking to respond to needs and opportunities. Missional focus is not just about monetary resources and responses either. Kindness, mercy, gentleness, and joy are viewed as fruit to be shared daily as disciples move in and out of restaurants, offices, and stores.

Churches with a simple discipleship process view their programs the same way -- as tools. Their programs are slaves to the discipleship process God has given them. Their programs are offered as environments where God may bring about spiritual transformation. And because wise church leaders know that significant life change occurs when people engage in mission endeavors (personal or group), simple church leaders intentionally move people to mission environments. In fact, mission is a significant portion of the discipleship process in these churches.

6. Neither Missional or Simple is a church model.

While we are both grateful for the response to *Breaking the Missional Code* and *Simple Church*, we never intended either book to be perceived as a church model. Frankly, the proclivity of leaders to look for another church model is a sign of the church's shallowness, not its maturity.

There are so many unaddressed issues in our books (intentionally so) that prevent "missional" and "simple" from being comprehensive church models. We

did not advocate or discuss issues that are critical in a church model: music style, teaching style, dress, type of sermon, church architecture, or church organization. All types of churches should be simply missional. What we are advocating is for church leaders to distill their ideology of what church is to the irreducible minimum that defines a church as God's gathered people, sent to a particular community as His redemptive gift to that community.

We need all types of missional churches—big, small, traditional, contemporary, with country music (did we say that?), hip-hop, some with guitars, some with organs. We need churches in homes and churches in well-marked buildings.

The container is not the issue. The issue is not staying *contained*.

All types of churches should seek to release their people to be missionaries in the culture. And all types of churches need a discipleship process based on knowing *and* doing. We believe having a process for discipleship is essential in any effective church model and that process must contain an equal amount of lab work and classroom study. We believe any effective church model will challenge and cause their people to be missional.

As you read this, Dell's parts are being moved to the street. Out of the warehouse.

What about the people in your church? They are your greatest resource. Are they being distributed to the world around them? Do you have a simple process to move them to missional involvement?

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