

A photograph of two young boys in a forest. They are wearing straw hats and plaid shirts. One boy is holding a large, rolled-up map. They are looking at a wooden signpost with multiple arrows pointing in different directions. The background is a blurred green forest.

Simply
Follow
Jesus
Simply

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A Road Map to
Making More and Healthier Disciples
Literally Everywhere

By
Chris Suitt



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Simply Follow Jesus Simply: A Roadmap to Making More and Healthier Disciples Literally Everywhere

By Chris Suitt

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Introduction

Making More and Healthier Disciples

The gospel message is quite simple; and yet, we can make living and sharing it quite complex. This can be seen in two contrasting pieces of art, one in a museum and another on the side of a *mountain*.

In the museum, I saw a video shown on three glass panels of three still life flower pots reflecting on a mirror. These pots were repeatedly shattered into thousands of pieces and then put back together again in a kaleidoscope effect. Was the artist talking about redemption? I'm not sure. Whatever the artist's message was, it got lost in its complex delivery.

Contrast this with another artist, Leonard Knight, whose philosophy of life was, "Love Jesus and keep it simple." He was a folk artist who wanted to spread the message of Jesus' love and each person's need to have a relationship with Him. He then proceeded to take discarded and recycled materials, endless amounts of adobe clay, gallons upon gallons of donated latex paint, and thousands of hay bales to create *Salvation Mountain*.

What you see as you drive up, besides cars from almost every US state and people speaking various languages, is a huge "mountain" rising out of nowhere. This mountain had the words, "God is Love," in big red and pink letters on the very top, and a heart shape just below it containing the words, "ACTS 2:38 SAY JESUS I'M A SINNER PLEASE COME UPON MY BODY AND INTO MY HEART." A simple message delivered simply.

Why have Jesus believers taken a simple message and made it complex, especially as a war rages on for people's souls?

In Matthew 9:36-38 it is written, "*When Jesus saw the crowds, He had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.'*"

People are hurting, being harassed and many are feeling helpless.

They are being held captive by their “drugs of choice” or sinful choices - finding only temporary fulfillment outside of Jesus (Heb. 11:25). Some of these drugs are listed in Galatians 5:19-21 and Romans 1:28-32. As you review these passages, you’ll discover that Paul is not only talking about chemical or liquid drugs. He also includes thoughts, attitudes, words, actions and various life-styles. It’s safe to say that everyone on this planet is broken while looking for joy, peace and love – even believers in Jesus. The question is, “Where are they going to find it?”

Jesus is the only source of lasting hope, abundant life, real peace, unending joy and fulfilling love today, tomorrow and into eternity. As we filter everyday life through Jesus and His Word and then put those discovered truths into practice empowered by the Spirit, we’ll find our needs met and our faith healthier. Our lives can then become the simple message that others need to hear.

With that in mind, the following chapters contain stories that illustrate scriptural principles that show all disciples can make more and healthier disciples, all disciples can start churches, and every location is a potential church meeting place for a church if *we simply follow Jesus simply*.

Church Comes to You!

I met Brandon when he was in our youth group. After graduation from high school, I didn't see him but every six months to a year. When his life hit the skids, which it always did, I'd see him peek into the door of my office. He'd sit and we'd talk. He would always leave uplifted and with a challenge. "Hey, Brandon, let's start meeting on a weekly basis in a *Bible Impact Group*. Let's see God break this cycle."

"Okay, Pastor Chris, let's do it." Only I'd never see or hear from him again for another six months to a year. It was like clockwork and went on for years. Then one day it happened. He was killed in a construction accident. I was blown away at the news. What made it even worse was that I was to be out of town on the day of his funeral! I was bummed.

When I got back to town, I went to the party house where I knew most of his friends would hang out. To say they were surprised to see me would be a slight understatement. What came next blew their minds!

As they were drinking and we were talking about God, Jesus (separated in some of their minds) and life, I offered to start having these "conversations" with them each week. What I am about to say were their words, not mine.

"You would come do church with us here, even while we're drinking?" I said, "Naw, church can't be done in this ungodly place. You have to put down the beers and weed, dress up and come on Sunday *morning*." Gotcha! No, what I did say was, "You bet I'll do church in this house with you all!" You should have seen the looks on their faces when I made that statement. What an awesome site to behold it was. Some of those kids were believers who had given up on *church* and some were as raw and rude as could be. Yet, they kept coming to ask their questions and discuss life's issues while listening to what Jesus, the Word of God, had to say about them.

People have come and gone, and so has the weed and alcohol, while the location has changed multiple times. Yet, there is still a group of believers moving toward Jesus together from that party house today all because *church* came to them.

Simple Church

We need to stop going to church and start being the church everywhere we go. “How is this possible? I don’t have time to go to church all the time!” Well, if we’re thinking about a service on Sunday morning in a building on First and Main Street as being the church, then yes, it would be impossible for us to *go to church* every day.

It would be possible, though, *to be the church* everywhere we go if we understood the scriptural meaning of the word “church.” Our English bibles use the word “church” that comes from the combination of two Greek words *ek* and *kaleo* to make *ekklesia*. *Ek* means to move away from a position at point A to another location at point B. *Kaleo* means to call out very loudly. An *ekklesia* is a group of people being called by someone to move away from one location to another.

A football stadium filled with people can be a church with that definition, right? Yes, as this is how the word was used in Acts 19:32. So what’s the difference between the football stadium and the church? Jesus. He’s the one doing the calling, not the stadium owners (Matt. 16:18; Rom. 16:16; 2 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:22; 1 Tim. 3:15). In all its simplicity, an *ekklesia* or church is a group of people being called out by Jesus to move away from themselves and the world (1 John 2:15-17) to be closer to and more like Him.

Therefore, church has nothing to do with a building or a service at one location and everything to do with a group of people listening to and following Jesus together every day, not just on Sunday (Jn. 10:27). Jesus is the key. What’s interesting is that all the metaphors used for church have one thing in common: They need something else to be vital. Houses need foundations. A body needs a head. Branches need a vine. A temple needs indwelling, etc. In other words, they need Jesus to be fulfilled or completed. When you take Jesus out of the church, you don’t have a church, you have a stadium or building filled with people.

Jesus is not only crucial to being the church, but He's also the only One who can build it as well (Matt. 16:18). And He'll do this building through His saints whom He told to make disciples everywhere they went (Matt. 28:18-20). Herein lies another word that is in need of a simple scriptural definition—discipleship.

Simple Discipleship

The biblical term for “disciple,” *mathetes*, isn’t about any particular disciplines or the filling of one’s head with certain doctrines/beliefs. The idea of being a disciple is that a person would incorporate the beliefs of the one to whom they’re listening into their daily lives, which leads to a changed life and heart. *Hence, a disciple has not been discipled until what has been put into their head comes out in their life.*¹ Quite simply, a disciple is not a disciple until their life has been changed.

A Jesus disciple, then, is a person who listens to and follows Jesus in their thoughts, words and decisions/actions throughout their day no matter where they are. As their lives are changed, others will see and can hear Jesus in them, the very beginning of the discipleship process, “As you go make disciples.” Then when someone comes to faith, they have been given authority from Jesus (Matt. 28:18-20; Eph. 2:6) to continue the discipleship process by baptizing that person and teaching “them to obey everything I have commanded you.” This started with the Eleven, who obeyed this command and passed it onto those they met, who obeyed and passed it onto the next generation, right down to today. Each disciple then can pass on what Jesus has already taught them; and thus, all disciples can make disciples!

Biblical church is simply a group of disciples who actively walk through life together to become more like and move towards Jesus. With that in mind, you can stop going to church and start being the church everywhere you go. And, not only can all disciples make disciples, but all disciples can also start churches as churches and disciples are about a person, the seed, Jesus.

Who, then, is Jesus to you? Can He, the Word of God, use anyone to make disciples and start churches?



Church at the Racetrack

Michael was asked while putting on his riding gear, “Is that your church?” Under a canopy at a local motocross track, he’d just finished a gathering of the church where the riders were heading off to prepare for their individual races. He smiled and said, “Yes.”

Church at a motocross track? Yes, but it took Michael a while to get it.

I met Michael ten years ago in an airport as we boarded a plane to Israel. He and his wife, Donna, joined a group that I was co-leading to experience Israel first hand. A little while later, he was asked by my co-leader, who was heading home to Israel to stay, if he would lead the Jewish ministry at their church in Hermosa Beach, CA. He’d had no training up to this point, other than gathering with a small group of believers each week to become more like Jesus, which this body called *MiniChurch*.

When asked whether he should do it, his pastor gave him the best advice I’d ever heard. “Just go do it. Listen to and follow Jesus. He’ll show you what to do.” Michael followed that advice, which led to one of our many conversations.

One weekend, he invited me to share with his group about the Seven Jewish Feasts of Leviticus 23 in both their historical and prophetic contexts. I crammed it all into two meetings. After each meeting he, Donna and I would go to lunch and talk. It was at one of those lunches that he talked about the need for more training. I invited them both to go through our *Discipleship Training Center*, which would be like nothing he had probably ever experienced before.

I told him that I would not teach him *what* to think, but *how* to think biblically and then let the Spirit help him arrive at his own convictions from life change now (*More Than a Sunday Faith*) to life later (*Eschatology*). I told him he would leave each week with a headache as he would be forced to think in a biblical, not West-

ern way. The classes would be taught in a Hebrew manner and would take them three years of coming my way for four weeks every quarter to complete.

They took me up on the offer. As they were making steady progress (Donna would bring the best cookies!) another offer came. Michael was asked if he would take over a ministry called *MotoMinistries*. He was challenged to provide chapel services at events hosted by a certain motocross club. He'd never done it before and had never been trained to do it either. Yet, his pastor's advice came back to mind, "Just go do it. Listen and follow Jesus. He'll show you what to do."

He did and has been doing this ministry for years. After finishing the classes, we'd continue to meet and talk. In one of them, Michael said, "I'm really feeling called to be a pastor. What do I do?"

I said, "What do you mean? You are a pastor." With a quizzical look on his face, I made a number of statements about what pastors do and asked him if he was doing them. With each statement, he answered in the affirmative. Then I said, "If it walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, flies like a duck and swims like a duck, what is it?"

He still had that quizzical look on his face, when he said, "But, I don't have a band, a pulpit, a building, a budget..." I replied, "Where do you find any of that in Scripture?" He was defining pastor by his old paradigm, not a scriptural one. As he continued to filter this old paradigm through Jesus, the Word of God, the lights started shining. He was beginning to grasp what Jesus said, "My sheep hear My voice, I know them, and they follow Me."

Jesus is the Chief Shepherd. Our job is to simply listen and follow Him. When this finally sank in, Michael realized he already was a pastor...at the racetrack.

Jesus, the Word of God

In Mark 4, Jesus tells a very important story. It's about only two things – seed and soil. In His explanation of this parable, Jesus says something very important to His disciples. "Don't you un-

derstand this parable? How then will understand *any* parable?" Jesus was saying that if they didn't get His point here, they probably wouldn't get anything else He taught either. Which was? Everything is about Him!

The soil is people's lives and the seed is Jesus, who **is** the *logos theos* or the Word of God (Lk. 8:11, Jn. 1:1; Rev. 19:13). Stop and think about that for a moment. Jesus alone is being planted! It's interesting to note that there are three words used for the Word of God in the Bible - spoken/*rhemta*, Scripture/*graphe* and Jesus Himself/*logos*. The written Word of God, Scripture, is absolutely essential to know how to listen to and follow Jesus, the Word of God, every day everywhere we go as His church and disciples. We learn who Jesus is, what He thinks and how to listen to Him through Scripture.

Yet, Jesus told another story in Mark 4 about the seed. He said the seed could do the job of growing and bearing fruit without human effort (4:26-29)! We must never forget that Jesus Himself *is* the Word of God. He, not any curriculum, program or human leader, is the seed that causes fruit in a person's life. He said that He would build His church.

Therefore, are we creating a layer between the soil and the seed, the person and Jesus? Are we putting people into direct contact with Jesus, the Word of God, or simply giving them scriptural facts to fill their heads through various teachings and classes? The goal should be to give His disciples the ability to hear from Jesus directly rather than being dependent upon a certain teacher or pastor. Let's put the soil and seed together without a middle person!

The Spirit of God

Scripture also teaches that it's the Spirit's job to lead people toward Jesus both at salvation and in sanctification/becoming more like Jesus (Jn. 3:5-8; 1 Pet. 1:2) Are we using methodologies that replace His work in Jesus' disciples and church; or, are we giving the Spirit room to do the job that only He can do?

The question now becomes, "Will we trust the Word of God, both Jesus and Scripture, and the Spirit of God to do their job in

making more and healthier disciples?" It's all about planting Jesus into good soil and letting the Spirit bring about the fruit - as they determine, not us. Church and discipleship are all about the Word of God and Spirit of God, not a particular method. Churches can do a lot of programming without Jesus or the Spirit ever being allowed in their ministry. Remember, Jesus was on the outside of the church at Laodicea (Rev. 3:14-22).

Will we allow the Spirit of God to help each disciple and gathering of believers *to be in the Word of God and walk with the Word of God* (Jn. 5:39-40) each day by listening to Jesus, the seed, who brings fruit when planted in good soil?

Church in a Cigar Shop

“Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.” Exodus 40:34

The following is a story from a good friend and co-laborer of mine, Ed Waken.

“God often shows up in powerful ways in the midst of clouds! I smoked my first cigar and created my first cloud on Anini Beach, Kauai. We had four generations of family together on vacation when my son invited me to enjoy a cigar with him on the deck overlooking the Pacific Ocean. As we smoked our cigars, he told me about a cigar bar where he had been hanging out in our city. I heard stories about some of the men who frequented there and my heart was captured. My son invited me to join him at this cigar lounge to pray for these men and see what God might stir up. God does move in the midst of clouds!

“We have been hanging out at this cigar lounge together and found many other believers who were already hanging out there. Could God be up to something in all of this smoke? We began a few *Life Transformation Groups* [Ed. Note: groups of 2-3 men/women who hold each other accountable to scriptural life change principles also called *Bible Impact Groups*]. We meet throughout the week and have hosted some breakfasts and chili parties for the guys during sporting events. Spiritual conversations are regular and church gatherings break out.

“Being light where this much darkness is adventurous and faith building. Connecting with men in manly environments is a powerful experience. When men know you are the real deal and will be their friend and love them no matter what, strong bridges are built and the light of Christ shines bright. As relationships are built, you hear their stories and obvious points of prayer emerge. Telling them a few days later that you are praying for their situation is something many of these guys have never experienced. You can see their breath being taken away through their eyes.

“If you are inclined, find a cigar lounge to create a cloud and begin conversing with new friends about the things of life and God and see where God takes it. You might find a “glory cloud” descending upon you for a holy experience!”

Go Where People Already Hang Out

Jesus said He would build His church—make more disciples (Matthew 16:18) and make it healthy (Eph. 5:25-27). Furthermore, He said He would use His disciples in the process of planting Jesus seeds (Mark 4:1-20), and then reaping or making more disciples everywhere they went (Matt. 28:19).

We see a good example of this in Acts 13-14. Paul and Barnabas went to the following cities: Cyprus, Paphos, Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. What happened? Disciples were made and churches begun. They went to the locations where they knew people would naturally gather. They planted seeds through preaching the gospel/sharing their Jesus stories. In some cities, no one came to faith. In others, many disciples were made. Before heading home, the team returned to the cities where disciples were made to strengthen them and appointed elders in each church.

They planted Jesus seeds by going to where people hung out, and then disciples were made and churches started. What we see in Paul’s ministry can be duplicated today in every city of the world by anyone who is committed to making more and healthier disciples wherever they are. The following has been modified from *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens*.²

It starts with the **practice of prayer**. Jesus said the harvest is ready and believers should pray for Him to send workers into that harvest to harvest (Matt. 9:38; Lk. 10:2). Seeing more disciples made starts, continues and ends with prayer. Jesus told us to ask the Lord of the harvest to send “workers into His harvest fields.” Notice it says, “His fields.” We are to ask Him where He wants us to go. You live in a home and a city, and are gifted with abilities/interests that you’ve been given for a reason. There are disciples to be made from a harvest just waiting for someone to enter it!

As we pray, we're looking for **pockets of people** (Lk. 10:3) or where pre-believers already hang out. As a Jewish rabbi, Paul started with synagogues because he knew people would already gather there. He also knew he would get an opportunity to speak.

Believers should do the same—go where people already gather. One simple way to do this is to **repurpose a present activity**. (Lk. 10:1). Take something you're already doing — hiking, reading books, skating, cooking, playing music, kids sports activities, etc. — and now do it with those don't know Jesus in your area. Except this time, go with a different purpose—to make more and healthier disciples.

After discovering where people naturally gather and getting Jesus' permission to go, then **participate with your BIG partner** in this activity (Matt. 10:5-8; Lk. 10:1). Whether or not your BIG actually does this activity with you, they will be going with you into the battle. They will be holding you accountable to becoming more like Jesus, and praying for you to share Jesus with those at this activity. This provides a great foundation for the next step.

As you go into His fields to plant seeds, you're now bringing the **power of His presence** to these *pockets of people* (Lk. 10:4-5). Keep in mind that a single candle has its greatest effect in a dark room, not a lit one. As you allow the power of God to continue to change your life, the light within you will shine ever brighter as you share your Jesus stories with those you hang out with (Acts 1:8 - be a witness).

You're not just going to hang out in these *pockets of people*, but you're asking the Lord to lead you to the **person of peace** (Lk. 10:5-7). This is the person who will be interested in the gospel, is connected to and is well known by many in that pocket. What's interesting is that this person may be on the fringes of the group. Jesus healed a demon possessed man no one wanted to be around, but his Jesus story made a huge difference to all who knew him (Mk. 5:18-20). It was the same with the Samaritan woman (Jn. 4) and the Philippian Jailer (Acts 16). Be asking Jesus to show you this person(s) and then start and keep building on this relationship.

Once there, stay focused on being a **person of purpose** who is

there to plant seeds (Mk. 4:30-32), not just participating in the activity. There can be no fruit without seeds. There can't be more disciples without planting Jesus. Ask yourself, "Am I here to skate, to cook, to play music or here to plant seeds? Stay focused on your purpose for being there so you'll be ready to share Jesus as the Spirit opens the doors.

As you keep planting Jesus seeds, some will put their trust in what Jesus did for them by dying on the cross and rising from the grave (1 Cor. 15:1-5). What do you do when that person of peace comes to faith?

Read on!

The stories in the following three chapters have been changed to protect the identity of our persecuted brothers and sisters in the Middle East. It was here a brother said, “Two or three was considered a crowd and bigger crowds were considered a threat to authorities, but we still meet.”

They understand what we in the West take for granted: we need other believers to move toward Jesus! They know they need Jesus’ presence (Matthew 18:20) to survive in a world where they can be severely persecuted, either through threats, imprisonment, beatings or any combination of the three. Some will not meet at all out of fear of persecution.

Yet for some, despite the threats, they will gather together in the most unlikely places out of the need to *be church* so they can become more like Jesus and hold up under such conditions.

Church in a Car

My wife and I had recently come home from a trip to the Middle East. While there, we met a couple who regularly put their faith into action to the point of being persecuted for making more and healthier disciples.

One day we received an email about their need for a new car. Their old one broke down after 300,000+ miles in less than a few years. I couldn’t believe a car could get that many miles on it so fast, until I read what they were doing with that car. *They were holding church services in it!*

Seriously, a brother would somehow get permission to leave or sneak out of his living area to take a drive with the husband. The husband and the brother would then do/be church while driving. They would never stop. The husband wanted to protect the brother from being spotted by the authorities, who could be watching, with a known believer in Jesus and who also came from “enemy” territory.

This location for church enabled the brother to make more and healthier disciples when he returned home. It encouraged him to grow stronger and take bolder steps in sharing his faith within his known *pockets of people* in order to make more and healthier disciples himself. This boldness landed him numerous times in jail, with its ensuing “interrogations.”

Yet, as often as he could get away, this gentleman and the husband would put more and more miles on that car to do/be church. Needless to say, my wife and I listened to and followed Jesus in giving to this effort.

I was even able to experience this church for myself. On another trip to this region of the world, I was given the privilege of attending this church gathering. As I sat in the back seat and took in the glory of God in our midst, my brothers did church. What an awesome sight that was. Church in a car, who would have ever thought, right?

DNA of Discipleship

Peter preached the good news for the first time where there was definitely a natural pocket of people...in Jerusalem where Jews gathered from all around the world for Pentecost (Acts 2:8-11). The Spirit used Peter to plant Jesus seeds where “about three thousand” disciples were harvested/made on one day!

How did the Holy Spirit disciple these new believers? Acts 2:42-47 tells us in what has been termed the **DNA** of a healthy/mature believer: **D**ivine Truth, **N**ourishing Relationships and **A**ccomplish Jesus’ Mission. These new believers “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching” (vs. 42-43). The apostles taught what Jesus taught them directly, what the Spirit brought back to their minds (John 16:12-14), and what Jesus showed them in their study of Scripture (Acts 6:4) or **D**ivine *truth*. These new believers were being taught how to listen to Jesus for themselves (Jn. 10:27; Eph. 4:11-16) in order to express their love to Him through following/obeying Him (John 14:23). Healthy believers, then, keep **Loving Jesus**.

This love grew in the context of a community. These disciples

then “devoted themselves to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayers” (vs. 42, 44-46). It was a specific group of people, the church, who were involved in and praying for each other to become more like Jesus (*Nourishing relationships* - James 5:16-20). This transformation fulfills Jesus’ command to “as you go make disciples” (see p. 5). **Becoming Like Jesus**, therefore, is another sign of a healthy or mature faith.

As believers become more like Jesus, they have something to share with those around them about what Jesus has done in and for them (vs. 47). Thus, they are now doing what Jesus asked of His disciples - to be His witnesses (*Accomplish Jesus’ mission* - Acts 1:8), which is another sign of a healthy faith - **Sharing Jesus**.

How did the disciples do this together or be church? And could it be done in such a way that any and every disciple could do it? The answer is a resounding yes!

Bible Impact Groups - the Importance of Two or Three

Let’s remember the simplicity of the biblical definitions of church and discipleship: Disciples give each other biblical tools to listen to and follow Jesus in their everyday decisions to become more like Jesus. The church is a group of disciples moving away from themselves and the world to become more like Jesus together in those decisions.

Jesus said, “Where two or three come together in My name, there am I with them.” (Matt. 18:20) It’s interesting that one of the five words used for a gathering or meeting of the church/disciples is found in this verse. Jesus is present when two or three disciples gather together. Therefore, the Word of God and the Spirit of God can do their job of making more and healthier disciples in a meeting with as few as two or three disciples. Why? Jesus is present! Think about it, two or three disciples can meet anywhere at any time (driving around town in a car) to encourage and stimulate each other to love, become more like, and share Jesus. It can’t get much simpler than that, can it?

May I suggest *Bible Impact Groups* (BIGs) for this gathering of two or three? BIGs apply the DNA of healthy believers as found in Acts 2:42-47. BIGs are not an accountability group to stop a certain sinful behavior. BIG partners hold each other accountable to

the biblical life change process or discipleship. Jesus didn't come to add Himself or new behaviors to us. He came to replace us with Him. Therefore, we become what we focus on and what we focus on only gets bigger. We should be focusing on and thus becoming more like Jesus.

BIGs do this through a gathering of 2-3 men or 2-3 women who ask four simple questions each time they meet (James 5:16). This process gives each disciple the biblical tools they need to become more like Jesus, hear His voice, and then follow Him (Jn. 10:27) while being used of the Spirit to make more disciples as they go about their everyday lives (Matthew 28:18-20).

BIGs allow the Spirit to bring to light the area(s) He wants to change in a person's life as they learn how to use the Word of God in their daily decisions (2 Cor. 10:5, Jn. 16:13). BIGs have no curriculum other than scripture. Each disciple is challenged to read through the Bible in a year while asking Jesus to speak to them while reading. BIGs have no leader or teacher; therefore, all believers, even brand new ones, can be used by the Spirit to make more and healthier disciples.

As one author put it, "If we can't multiply a group of two or three, then we should forget about multiplying a group of fifteen to twenty. By focusing on the simple, we actually can see dramatic results in the complex." Start small and see what the Word of God and Spirit of God will do.

When that person of peace comes to faith, it's time to form a BIG. (You can find BIG cards with the questions at morethanadayfaith.com.) All disciples can make disciples, even the newest and youngest ones.

What happens when these BIGs reproduce into more BIGs? Read on!

Church in an Olive Grove

On another trip to the Middle East, I attended a church service in quite a different location - an olive grove. It was quite normal for people in this region to gather in olive groves to relax while drinking coffee. In the middle of row after row of olive laden trees, this coffee break was not your normal coffee house affair. They would get a red hot coal fire going, place either a flat or round metal tin over the top and make some great eats and thick-as-mud coffee.

As the church gathered and the smell of fresh coffee filled the air, the church service began, even though it had already begun the moment first people arrived. They were hugging, sharing Jesus stories and scripture, encouraging each other and praying for one another.

Again, as I didn't speak the language, with a mug of Turkish coffee in hand, I was brought into the presence of Jesus through the presence of Jesus in these brothers and sisters and the simplicity of following Jesus simply. Church doesn't have to be complicated. Jesus and a few believers meeting together anywhere can definitely make more and healthier disciples.

Scriptural Principles from Early Church Meetings

Scripture uses five different words to describe the disciples when they met together. Simply stated, *church* meetings were a gathering of believers, who allowed the Spirit to empower and enable each disciple to make more and healthier Jesus disciples wherever they went.

- They met indoors and/or outdoors, in both public and private locations, at least weekly, but most likely daily, in Jesus' name;
- They did life together as seen in the words used to describe the believers—brother/sister, family and saints; and to describe the church—body, bride, and household;

- They praised, prayed to and heard from Jesus directly and through His people;
- They let the Spirit guide the meeting to edify, encourage and strengthen each person's faith, where everything was done in an orderly manner;
- *Every person participated* using their Spirit given and guided gifts;
- They met for additional training as necessary;
- They eventually had a spiritual covering through a citywide group of elders for the entire church of that town;
- They took communion, baptized and took up a collection;
- The fruit of more and healthier disciples was expected and considered normal; and,
- Loving encouragement/correction was provided as necessary to keep people moving toward Jesus.

Other than the above, Scripture is silent on how the disciples made more and healthier disciples as a group/church. Who led the meetings isn't mentioned. And neither is a set format, time, frequency or where meetings were held. What is mentioned is that everyone participated in ways that helped each disciple, empowered by the Spirit, listen to and follow Jesus. Thus, a general principle can be for groups to tap out at 12-15 people. Group involvement tends to go down as the numbers go up. The key, though, is this, keep listening to and following Jesus. What does He want done?

The meeting of the church is more about who it is done for, Jesus, and who empowers it, the Spirit, than some methodology on how it's done.

With that in mind, all disciples can make disciples. All disciples can start churches. Every location where the Spirit provides is a potential meeting place for the church to make more and healthier disciples.

Church in a Place of Business

Through a friend of mine, I learned of an urgent need for a meeting place for the church to gather. In this particular region, meeting in homes had become a challenge. Regular meetings were attracting attention, especially from nosy neighbors who might leak information to the authorities.

Even though it was just a few people meeting in this home, the wife of the believing husband started to get a little uncomfortable about having “these people” in her house. She put up with her husband’s wishes for a while, but no longer. She was tired of taking the risk of losing her home to the authorities and her husband to jail.

So the believers came up with an idea. Why not start a business where people would be expected to gather? This way, small groups of believers could come and go at various times and not draw suspicion, which at the same time would take pressure off the wife.

What the business was doesn’t matter. It was the fact that money was raised to purchase a building for a particular business where church gatherings could take place, right under the nose of the authorities! Multiple church gatherings are still taking place at this location today.

Church is not about a building; and yet, buildings can be used for the church to meet no matter where and what those buildings may look like. Simple church can take place anywhere at any time.

It’s a Jesus Gathering!

What happens when these healthy disciples reproduce more healthy disciples? Keep forming new BIGs and keep starting new gatherings of these combined BIGs. This doesn’t have to be in a building, but it can be. They can even happen at the very location where you found your person of peace.

Let's remind ourselves of what *ekklesia* is and is not about. An *ekklesia* is a community of disciples becoming more like and moving towards Jesus together. It's not about a service where the few minister to the many in a church building. The *ekklesia* can call itself whatever it wants - home fellowships, house churches, simple/organic churches, etc. The word *gathering* is used here to simply get away from the word "church" because of the baggage or misunderstandings involved with that English word. Where and how the gathering operates should be dictated by Scripture, not culture - Christian or otherwise.

Keep in mind that a gathering is not about a method, but about making more and healthier Jesus disciples using the principles in Chapter 5. So pick a location where the gathered can talk confidentially with minimal distractions. If there is a person with the gift of hospitality, let them host the group. If more have this gift, rotate locations. Keep things simple so anyone can facilitate the group, which leads to making more gatherings of healthier disciples!

Think through five basic elements whatever method is used: 1) connection with each other or community, 2) praise, 3) time in and with the Word, 4) praying for each other, and 5) purpose. These gathering elements reflect the DNA of healthy disciples found in Acts 2:42. Each gathering should strive to balance these elements. The proposed format is never meant to be a rigid schedule, but a guideline of what is possible. As you learn to listen to the Spirit, you might come up with a different format or get a sense of when a certain gathering will be heavier on community, praise, teaching, prayer or purpose.

If, however, one area of the five elements is continually ignored, the gathering will get out of balance and will not end up making healthy disciples. As the facilitators develop a deeper walk with Jesus, they will know whether it's God or people controlling the group. Either way, it's a training ground to grow closer to Jesus together.

The gathering should be a place where people can be "real" on their walks/journey. We stumble and fail forward just like everyone else. We have challenges that need answers. We also, however, find victory as we submit to Jesus (1 Cor. 10:13). When this

happens, others will see it and gain hope for their own lives, marriages, families, careers, etc. The gatherings should be a place to be known and to know others who can support and pray for each disciple to have a healthier faith. The gathering should be a safe place to ask and research answers together to life's questions in the Word of God.

A Simple Gathering Format:

Connection Time

Give the group time to connect either before the meeting or during their initial time together. It's simply a time to get the group interacting with one another, being the church. Some gatherings eat together (snacks, potluck) to help this connection happen.

Praise Time

Transition to praise/thanks by helping the group focus on Jesus by giving Him permission to accomplish His agenda for the gathering. This can be done with or without music/instruments.

That week's facilitator can ask any of the following or something like them. How'd your week go? What are you thankful for? Where did you see answered prayer? How'd it go with what we prayed for you all week? How did you see Jesus this week? What did He tell you? Anything you learned about Jesus you want to share or give Him praise for? These questions can be asked in a number of ways, but the group is now focusing on who Jesus is and what He has done for them.

If there is a musically gifted person in the group, they could lead the group with live or taped music, or go *acapella* using songbooks. Individual members could also bring a song to be sung or for the group to listen to via taped music/smart phone. The key is to keep it simple so others can do it and all can participate.

Word Time

The norm should be to go through a book of the Bible, chapter by chapter. As the Spirit leads, a video or tape series could be used; but, staying in scripture is best. The goal would be for each

person to read the section before the gathering and be ready to discuss it when they come.

Here are five *suggested* questions that can be easily answered of each passage that will bring out the truth Jesus wants each person to hear. These are suggestions, so don't go through them as if you're checking off a list. If you do, the gathering will quickly become mundane and human led. It's okay to make variations on the questions. The point is to get the gathering into, thinking about and listening to Jesus in His Word.

Silence is okay. Give them time to think about the Word and then respond. They are learning how to hear Jesus. And please, resist the urge to give the answer! It's amazing how the Spirit gives different insights to each person, which make an entire picture. If the passage that is being covered is long, it can be broken up and the first two questions can be asked of each section.

The first question is, "What does this passage tell us about God or Jesus? Who is He and what can He do?" The reason for "God" is that when you're in the Tanakh/Old Testament, they will not find the actual word *Jesus*. Jesus is God, but for some, especially new believers, the connection may be hard to make at the start.

The second question is, "What does this passage tell us about people and/or us? How or what do people think, need, want, feel or act?"

The third question is, "What are you going to do this week to live what we talked about tonight? How does this apply to you?" The group could brainstorm ways to apply the truths they've heard or leave it up to each individual to say how Jesus wants them to apply it.

Questions two and three are some of the reasons that both BIGs and gatherings are needed to make more and healthier disciples. BIGs are made up of only one gender, allowing certain life areas to be discussed and worked through in and with the Word of God that wouldn't be discussed in a mixed group. BIGs also don't need any specific spiritual gift to produce Christlike character. The gathering, though, is the place for people to practice using their spiritual gifts. It also allows men and women, who are

unique in the way God created them, to bring out different insights from Scripture, which the Spirit can use to make more and healthier disciples of them both.

Prayer Time

The fourth question is, “Who will pray for you this week to live out what you heard?” The key here is praying for each other to live out what God is asking each of you to do. This becomes the basis for praying for each other throughout the week. Texting works great, as the person can quickly get the gathering praying for them if they start struggling to live it out.

You can pray as a group or break up into smaller groups. As the Spirit leads, the entire group can even spend time praying for one person. The point is that you’re applying James 5:16, where praying for each other brings about life change. The more specific the confession, the more specific the prayer can be.

Here’s something to think about when it comes to prayer. Unless what is being prayed for affects the person sharing the request, be careful not to let the gathering get bogged down in taking requests for others not part of the gathering—unless it’s for the salvation of specific people. This doesn’t mean you don’t pray for those not in the gathering. It’s simply that you don’t take these requests during the gathering. Emails and texting can be used to share these types of requests.

Purpose Time

The fifth question is, “Who needs to hear what I heard tonight?” This goes to the heart of the truth that every person struggles with the same challenges (1 Cor. 10:13). As the gathering works through that issue and sees victory, others need to hear their Jesus story of how He changed or helped them.

The Spirit brought the people He wanted together into the gathering and placed it in the location He wanted it to be in order for those around it to find Jesus. Gatherings are a family of believers being used by the Spirit to plant seeds and harvest in Jesus’ fields. Therefore, to what *pockets of people* does God want this gathering to make His presence known? Start a *practice of prayer* for this

pocket and then make a plan to bring Jesus' presence to them!

More Thoughts on Gatherings

The gathering time can be used for planning fun activities to further build the community and ways the group can continue to make a presence in the *pockets of people* they know. Let those in the gathering use their gifts to plan these activities.

The gathering should strive to be a place that is welcoming, accepting of differences (and there will be) and not rushed. The goal is to hear what Jesus has to say through His revealed Word, as individuals and as a gathering.

Let the Spirit put your gathering together. He can work in each believer's life through people of all ages and backgrounds, even though the Spirit may put together gatherings of men, women or youth.

Transparency is crucial. The believer in Jesus can not grow without being honest with other believers (James 5:16). Honest sharing will not occur without struggle, being uncomfortable and/or pain. This is why we are commanded to be devoted to each other (Rom. 12:10) and to work through these struggles together, which allows us all to have a healthier faith.

Will some leave? Yes. Will more come? Yes. Is it about numbers? No! Remember, Jesus said He would build His church. We are to focus on making more and healthier disciples. Let Jesus and the Spirit do their job!

Furthermore, the Spirit gives every believer a gift He wants them to use; so, each disciple should participate in the gathering somehow, not just a few. With that in mind, the following is simply something to think through. There may be a person with the gift of teaching, but be careful to not let only one person do all the "teaching" in the gathering. A biblical gathering involves everyone. So let the Spirit use the entire gathering to minister to each other, even if one person gives a teaching from Scripture.

Keep in mind that the ability for everyone to be involved starts to decrease at about 12 people. This is why it's a good idea to let everyone have a turn at facilitating the gathering. You don't need

the gift of teaching to have a gathering. Anyone can facilitate the above format, so let others practice facilitating the group. This allows them to use their gifts while preparing for the time when the Spirit wants to start another gathering. Remember the Word of God and the Spirit of God produce the fruit God desires.

How long should each gathering go? As a general rule, the gathering should take about an hour and a half, but can last longer as the gathering itself hears from the Lord. Some gatherings have been known to go all day! The gathering should be sensitive, however, if those with crazy work schedules or with young children attend. Thus, beginning and ending at an agreed on time is important. If you consistently go over that time, some people will stop coming.

Some gatherings want to meet more than once a week and others want to meet all day. That's okay! It's also okay to take time off. Some gatherings meet for three weeks and then do something fun together. Allow the gathering to listen to Jesus as to how He wants the gathering to handle their time. Remember, even Jesus got away for rest!

Because God wants to use the church to make more and healthier disciples, who can make more and healthier disciples (see **Simple Discipleship** on p.5), two things can happen when its gatherings reproduce into more gatherings. One, simply keep starting more gatherings independent of each other. Or two, combine all the gatherings once a week/month/quarter in a larger space or a rented facility to celebrate what Jesus is doing in His Church.

One gathering leader put it this way, “It simply feels good to be part of a larger group - to see how God is working in other people’s lives and/or gatherings, especially when it seems like He is not working in yours. It brings encouragement.”

This larger gathering can be a time of praise and praying, a time of sharing Jesus stories of what He’s doing or a fellowship time to know that each gathering is part of a larger body. There could even be a teaching, especially if all the groups seem to be having similar challenges. Again, it’s all about Jesus. He’ll show you what He wants done.

Will those making more and healthier disciples have questions that puzzle them, need further biblical tools, and/or be asked questions they don’t know the answers to? Certainly. Will questions come up that no one in the gathering can answer? Yes. Will challenges arise at the gathering that create tension? Again, the answer is yes. There are a few remedies for these situations. One, start a *Discipleship Training Center* that all disciples, even gathering leaders, can attend to increase their number of biblical tools that will enable them to be better listeners and followers of Jesus for themselves in community.

Paul did this in Acts 19 when he took the disciples and held “discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus” for two years. This led to an entire region hearing the good news of Jesus! I’ve got simple and reproducible materials to make this happen. Or, you’re welcome to participate in the *Discipleship Training Center* I facilitate in-person or via Skype/ooVoo. Contact me through

www.morethanasundayfaith.com.

A second option is to find someone outside the gathering to disciple someone inside the gathering or be a biblical resource for individual disciples. Paul wrote letters and sent leaders to help out local gatherings (Timothy to Ephesus and Titus to Crete). In fact, 1 Corinthians was written in response to questions believers at Corinth had!

Another solution, when multiple gatherings occur, is to start thinking about 1 Timothy 5 and Titus 1, which talk about elders or spiritual leadership who oversaw all gatherings under Jesus' leadership. These leaders then can care and train the facilitators of each gathering.

Again, love Jesus and keep it simple. He will show and the Spirit will empower you what to do.

Conclusion

The purpose of this booklet was to help every believer understand that all disciples can make disciples, all disciples can start churches, every location is a potential church meeting place, and all church owned/rented facilities can be used to gather *pockets of people* and to train disciples. This can happen because the Word of God and the Spirit of God uses that one Jesus disciple to start it all, if being the church and a disciple are kept as simple as scripture says they are. It's time to simply listen to and follow Jesus, The Shepherd.



Endnotes

1. *Discipleship: Copies of the Original*, morethanasundayfaith.com/resources.
2. *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens*, Neil Cole, Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2005.

