

Our Vision for Simple Church

Obey My Commands

Jesus did not make a big thing of commands. He didn't leave us with the Ten Commandments of Christ, indeed most of his instructions are hidden in his sermons and parables and don't come across like commands. But there are two prominent exceptions.

"My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you." (John 15:12)

"Therefore 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 you." (Matt 28:19)

In view of these two great commands of Jesus, the motto of *Life For Liberia* is:

"Love one another; go and make disciples"

Blessed are those who hear my word and do it

Throughout history God has struggled to get His people to hear and obey His word, and it has been the constant cry of the prophets for the people to turn back to the ways of the Lord. Throughout Jesus' ministry we see Him trying to turn people's attention away from their religious traditions and make simple obedience to God their priority. We believe that God has called us to carry this appeal from the Holy Spirit to our friends in Liberia.

Our cry and our message to you is to measure everything you do by these two commands of Jesus, and let that be the test of its value: "Love one another; go and make disciples".

Unhelpful Traditions

Jesus said, "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!" (Mark 7:9). We are all guilty, in our efforts to establish churches, of the tendency to adopt traditions and copy practices that we see in other churches simply because "that is what churches do". Instead, we should be testing everything against the scriptures and in particular the commands to love one another and go and make disciples. We must not assume that what we or others have always done is what Jesus is calling us to do.

My yoke is easy

Jesus invites us to take His yoke upon us "For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30). But sadly, we tend to lay heavy yokes upon believers through our traditions. For the early church it was the heavy weight of the Jewish traditions that had to be thrown off:

"Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear?" (Acts 15:10)

But what about us? As leaders in the Body of Christ we will have to give an account to Jesus for the burdens we have laid upon the necks of our people whom Jesus has invited to share His yoke. Take a moment to reflect on all we ask people to do and be committed to in maintaining our church buildings and running our church programs. Would Jesus describe this as an easy yoke and a light burden? Can we justify the demands we place on church members by the fruit it is bearing in obedience to the commands to love one another and go and make disciples?

The Gospel of the Kingdom

Jesus and the apostles preached the Gospel of the Kingdom. We get a clear picture of this gospel from Paul's account of what Jesus told him to do:

"I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me." **Acts 26:18**

The Gospel of the Kingdom is what we are called to preach. It has several clear elements:

- **I am sending you to them** – We must go out and not expect people to come to us.
- **to open their eyes** – We try to open their eyes so that they can see for themselves the darkness they are living in. This is done through asking them about their lives, listening to them and helping them to evaluate the things they put their hope and trust in. We cannot open their eyes by simply telling them what they should believe.
- **turn them from darkness to light** – repentance is a complete change of direction touching every aspect of their lives. It is to welcome and walk in God's light, and no longer try to hide their behaviour in darkness.
- **from the power of Satan to God** – salvation is both turning from and deliverance from the works and ways and power of Satan. We must reject evil and African traditional spiritual practices. We need to be delivered from evil spirits and cut off every curse. We must stand firm in the confidence that as children of God, Satan has no power or hold over us.
- **receive forgiveness of sins** – Through our faith and trust in Jesus as the supreme King over all things in heaven and earth (Eph 1:20-23), and through Baptism in water and Baptism in the Holy Spirit (John 3:5) we are born-again and receive complete forgiveness of our sins. Forgiveness is given freely and completely in response to our faith in Jesus. Forgiveness is not, and never will be, given because of our efforts to live holy lives. See Hebrews 10:1-18.
- **a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me** – As disciples of Jesus we are welcomed by Jesus into His family, and He is not ashamed to call us His brothers and sisters. To be a disciple is to belong to Jesus' family and to give and receive love in that family. Because our hearts have been changed by Jesus, we will want to walk in the light and turn away from every kind of darkness. But however we may fail, we are secure in the love of God and in Jesus who stands as our righteousness before God.

This is the Gospel of the Kingdom which Jesus has commissioned us to preach. We are careful to maintain both the simplicity and the fullness of the Gospel. We do not complicate it with unnecessary explanations of theological truths, but neither do we reduce it to a simplistic appeal to come into the embrace of our loving heavenly Father. The only proper response to the Gospel is repentance, faith and baptism in water and the Holy Spirit. We cannot leave any one of these elements out.

Christ in us, the hope of Glory (Col 1:27)

The bible makes it very clear that righteousness is found in God alone. We try to be clear and consistent in teaching that our righteousness is based solely upon Christ. He alone is our righteousness. The accuser has been thrown out of God's presence and instead Jesus stands in our place; and He is the Radiance of God's own righteousness. The greatest hindrance to our own sanctification is self-condemnation and the condemnation of others (especially other

Christians). We agree with Paul, that the starting point for our growth in obedience is that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

In our teaching and discipling our starting point is always Christ our Righteousness and the unconditional love of God for us. We minister and pray with Paul...

... that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen (Eph 3:16-21)

But that is not all! In Christ, God dwells in us in His fullness (Eph

I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. (13) And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. (14) You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it (John 14:12-14)

Healing and Deliverance

Jesus made healing and deliverance central to His gospel message and told his disciples to do the same. In obedience to Jesus, we keep healing and deliverance at the centre of our proclamation and sharing of the gospel. No matter what the outcome, we keep proclaiming healing and expect God to act. We act in obedience to Jesus, not from fear of failure. But we don't stop with healing. The Gospel is about restoring our relationship with God, and that is always our focus and goal.

Baptism

In obedience to Jesus, we baptise new believers in water as soon as we can. We encourage this to be arranged and performed as it was in the New Testament – in a family setting (by the Growth Group), rather than as a church event. Baptism is how we share in Christ's death and resurrection. It should include deliverance from all past spiritual involvement, curses, magic or superstitious practices, African or ancestral rituals, belief and practices. This includes deliverance from harmful experiences of the past from parents and all other people.

Baptism in the Holy Spirit

Water baptism is followed by prayer to receive the powerful baptism in the Holy Spirit. We dare not depart from Jesus teaching that unless we are born of water and of the Spirit, we cannot be part of God's Kingdom (John 3:5).

Just as with healing and deliverance, we persist in praying for the transforming presence and power of the Holy Spirit for ourselves and for others, knowing that it is the Father's good pleasure to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask (Acts 1:8).

We encourage disciples to practice the spiritual gifts of tongues (as a God-given means of building up our inner spiritual life) and prophecy (as a God-given means of building up the church). These "gateway" gifts help us to walk more deeply with the Spirit and explore the whole range of Spiritual gifts.

Discipleship as Apprenticeship

One of the primary emphases of many churches is teaching. A great deal of time is spent both preparing and delivering teaching every week, and church members are urged to come and listen to all this teaching. We too are passionate about good teaching in the church, but we also believe that the emphasis on teaching in many churches is miss-placed. The problem is that most churches view understanding as discipleship, or they see teaching as the primary means of discipleship.

But Jesus did not say “teach them everything I have commanded you”; He said “teach them to *obey* everything I have commanded you”. Because of this we talk about discipleship as an apprenticeship. Discipleship is practicing doing what Jesus commanded us, and the only effective way to disciple another person is to demonstrate and practice obedience to Jesus.

For this reason we urge leaders to minimise the focus on teaching sessions in their churches and maximise their focus on demonstration. The teaching should be enough to provide understanding for the demonstration and no more. After putting the teaching into practice, the apprentices can be gathered for discussion and further teaching to support more fruitful obedience.

Teaching and preaching should be a response to the demands of apprenticeship and its value measured against its effectiveness in motivating obedience to the command to love one another and go and make disciples.

The Body of Christ

The Body of Christ is “joined and held together by every supporting ligament, growing and building itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Eph 4:16). This is the Holy Spirit’s description of church. It is not crippled and paralysed with non-functioning parts, the members are not in competition with one another, it is not held together by structures and programs and coercion but by *every supporting ligament* (the abilities that each one has). And it grows, not by leaders and teaching and programs, but by *each* part doing its work. And growth is not measured by bottoms-on-seats but by *love*.

The church, the Body of Christ, is the self-supporting family of disciples who love and care for one another and build one another up through all their varied gifts and abilities so that the Kingdom of God is made visible in their community. The Holy Spirit will guide the church in appointing leaders who will serve the church by keeping it focussed on the commands of Jesus to love one another and go and make disciples.

Walking in the Light

Being a Christian is not a show we put on, but the life we live. Jesus commands that we walk in truth and light before God and with one another. We reject pretence and rejoice that God is happy to have fellowship with us despite our failures. So we accept ourselves and one another as Jesus does. We accept Jesus’ teaching that there can be no true fellowship between us unless we are open and truthful with one another. We try to be open and truthful and encourage others to be open and truthful.

Shared Meals

Shared meals were at the heart of Jesus’ ministry and He told His disciples to continue sharing meals (at the Last Supper). Traditional churches have abandoned this command, but we seek to be obedient. Shared meals are at the heart of our fellowship and our outreach.

Shared meals lead into worship, prayer and ministry to one another. We invite others to join us where they can witness the love and fellowship between believers.

A Meeting Place

Churches have become associated with church buildings and this association has brought many problems. The message of evangelism has become "Go to church..." instead of bringing healing and deliverance into people's homes. Discipleship has become "Go to church" instead of listening to and obeying Jesus in our homes. Church-planting has become a matter of erecting buildings instead of planting groups of disciples. Church buildings are used to provide churches with a sense of identity and prestige – "No one will take your church seriously if you don't have your own building...".

Jesus said we should be a light set on a hill, not hidden away. When looking for a place to gather believers for worship, fellowship, shared meals and teaching, we look first for public buildings where believers are easily seen by the community and where non-members can easily come and see what is happening. The first choice would be a palaver hut or market area or some other open and public place. Perhaps a clinic or school may be usable, or a house with a large porch. If no such place is available we recommend approaching the community leaders and proposing that the community erect a suitable meeting place which the church can share.

A church based on Growth Groups can grow and multiply and church plant without ever having its own building. Buildings must be seen as a luxury for communities that can well afford them rather than as a necessity for mission.

Simple Church

Our appeal and our vision is that we examine everything we do and everything we teach in the light of Jesus' two great commands and return to the simplest expression of church that is effective in fulfilling those commands. Anything and everything we add to the simplest expression of church must be in obedience to the scriptures and justifiable in terms of its effectiveness and fruitfulness in love and discipleship.

Our vision includes regional and local leadership structures, eldership and apostleship, large and small church gatherings, church buildings, schools, theological training, helping the poor etc. etc., But our priority and starting point is discipleship through Growth Groups. We see these as the basic unit of church and the essential foundation for obedience to the commands to love one another and go and make disciples.

Our approach is to build church *from* obedient disciples, rather than to try and make obedient disciples through our church programs. Our focus is therefore primarily bottom-up rather than top-down. We do not believe you need a "church" to make disciples; rather you need disciples to make a church. We start with disciple-making through Growth Groups, and then see what the Holy Spirit is saying about gathering Growth Groups into larger church groups.

The issue of church buildings is also important in Simple Church. Please see "How Church Buildings Cripple the Gospel" on the website for a discussion of this subject.

A vision of the future

- Growth Groups as the foundation and basic unit of church and discipleship.
- Communities transformed through Growth Groups reaching out to their neighbours in love with the Gospel of the Kingdom, including healing and deliverance.
- Believers baptised in water and the Holy Spirit, walking in the light and secure in their righteousness in Christ.
- Discipleship primarily through active apprenticeship not listening to teaching.
- The unity of the Body of Christ expressed through the regular gathering of believers together for a shared meal and prayer in obedience to Jesus command at the last supper.
- Minimal burden on believers – the simplest possible expression of church.
- Minimal emphasis on church buildings – use of existing facilities wherever possible.
- Teaching sessions kept to the minimum and immediately put into practice through apprenticeship.
- Multiplying many small self-governing churches in relationship together.
- Leadership viewed as one of the many gifts given to serve the Body of Christ by keeping it focussed on loving one another and making disciples.
- Leadership setting an example in apprenticing others and walking in light and truth with one another.

We hope and pray that you are inspired by this biblical vision for discipleship and will want to join with us as we seek to walk with Jesus our brother, friend and King.

For more details about Growth Groups and many other aspects of discipleship, see our website: www.LifeForLiberia.org.uk