

## ESSENTIAL CHURCH, PART 1: PARING DOWN

Mark 4:26-29, Hebrews 12:1-2 (NASB)

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We would all love to be right in the middle of the blessing of God: people coming to Christ, disciples becoming strong, the launch of exciting ministries, spiritual gifts popping out like flowers, the ballooning of resources from the hand of God, and a dramatic outbreak of vibrant spiritual life in Christ. But what does it really take to arrive at that place? If it were easy, we would all do it.

The founder of The Christian and Missionary Alliance, Dr. Albert Simpson, discovered that for him to get to that place of blessing the Lord had to take him through a radical experience of paring down. Before the launch of the Alliance Simpson had been the pastor of a good denominational church in Louisville, Kentucky. While there he discovered a special burden for the lost and a remarkable gift of preaching. He began seeking the Lord for an opportunity to use these gifts. The Lord brought him the choice opportunity to take a church in New York City where the streets were teeming with immigrants.

He told the church leadership there that if he were to come, he would be on mission to reach these many thousands for Christ. The leaders of this well-to-do congregation readily agreed. Who could argue with evangelism? But then he arrived and it started happening. Simpson began preaching Christ on the crowded streets of New York and hundreds came to Christ in a short period of time. He started bringing them to worship at the church and was eager to have them become part of the life of the body of Christ there.

But the new believers smelled funny, dressed funny, talked funny, and were poor. The members of this particular church were elite members of society and struggled with the inclusion of the converts. Eventually Simpson put it to a vote of the Board: Can these new converts be admitted as members of the church? I do not know how that discussion proceeded, but in the end the answer was no. The Board felt that the immigrants simply did not fit in their church.

But Simpson was a man on a mission. In a moment of decision he resigned his esteemed, well-paid pulpit to do evangelism on the streets of New York. He began by conducting a big promotional meeting to urge his vision on others who had already seen God do great things through his new work. He invited them to meet him on November 23, 1881, to plan future ministry together. Seven people showed up. Did he then spit and moan about what was wrong with the other Christians? The Alliance history, *All for Jesus*, records Simpson's recollection of the event: "...The small group then knelt in prayer to thank God that [we] were poor, few, and weak. 'We threw ourselves upon the might of the Holy Ghost,'" (Camp Hill: Christian Publications, 1986, p. 52). In two years there were hundreds of people involved in that work, and soon after that there were thousands. Today there are millions worldwide.

## THE SOURCE OF GROWTH

How does dynamic growth, both spiritual and numerical, come about? What does God expect of us? What are the things only he can do? Christ spoke directly to this issue in Mark 4:26-29: "**And He**

**was saying, 'The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows-- how, he himself does not know. The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come''**

(Mark 4:26-29). A farmer has a lot of work to do and needs great wisdom if he will see successful crops. But after all his work is done, there is not a single thing he can do to actually make his plants grow. He goes to bed and the God who made the plants makes them grow.

What is your ecclesiology? Is Christ making his church grow in this way or do you have the sneaking suspicion that you and I are actually doing it? If Christ is the sole source of growth for his church then the church has a built-in tendency to grow. But what can you and I do about a perceived lack of growth in our own church? The plant store shelves are jammed with products with tantalizing names like Magic Grow, Weed-B-Gone, and Happy Plant. Do we go to the church growth store and buy some Magic Church Grow because it is our belief that growth will come if we do a lot more stuff?

I commend to you, based on the truth that God alone can cause his church to grow, that we accept the model of our forefather in the faith, Dr. A. B. Simpson. We must accept, as he did, the painful process of paring down on a personal level. Essential churches—churches which are overwhelmingly focused on Christ—are built by essential Christians who have that focus in their personal lives. Plants will not grow in rocky soil, hard soil, or soil with thorns and weeds. If we do not permit God to dig out the rocks, pull the weeds, and break up our hard soil how will we ever know if we are ready to throw ourselves on the might of the Holy Spirit—to trust him only for the growth of his church?

## HOW TO BE ESSENTIAL CHRISTIANS

The Lord used the writer of the Book of Hebrews to give us some crucial advice about how to be essential Christians. The first two verses of the twelfth chapter contain seven key things we must do. They read: **"Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God"** (Hebrews 12:1-2).

The first thing we learn is that essential Christians remember the models of faith the Lord has given us: **"Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us..."** The previous chapter of Hebrews is chock full of remarkable stories of people who pared away every false trust in human strength and wisdom and threw themselves on the mercies of God. Some are stories of miracles and remarkable providences. Many others are the stories of the people of God refusing to give up their faith even though they saw no observable fulfillment of the promises of God during this life. People who not only were not granted earthly blessings but received terrible persecution for their faith, some to the point of martyrdom. Essential Christians learn how to be part of God's work of building his kingdom by faith. Let the examples of faithful people in the Bible challenge you about what this really means.

The second thing is that essential Christians **"lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which**

**so easily entangles us..."** Can you imagine being a pioneer settler in the early days of our country and having the challenge of using hand and horse power to remove enough trees and rocks from your land so that you could plant a crop and eventually eat? This is precisely what the Lord challenges us to do in our personal lives. The vibrant life dynamic comes after the work of clearing the impediments away. And notice that there are two categories of things which are in the way of our becoming essential Christians. There are encumbrances, weights, and hindrances which are merely obstructions. They could be perfectly good things, even great blessings, which nevertheless have the effect of getting in the way of our growth in the Lord. Then there are the sins which poison our souls. No plant can grow very well if it is constantly being poisoned in some way. The same is true for our inner persons. And neither one of these are automatically obvious. We must go to God constantly in prayer and ask: "Lord, is something I am doing in the way of what you want to do in my life?"

There is a temptation to analyze the story of A. B. Simpson and conclude that the main hindrance to his ministry on the streets of New York was his established church. I will agree that his church revealed by their decisions that they were not very committed to being on mission with Christ. And yet the biggest encumbrances were the personal ones. At some point Simpson realized that nothing could stop him from following the Lord's will into evangelistic ministry—as long as he was willing to give up his staff, his building, his large salary, his prominent pulpit, and all the other resources of his local church. His fond hope at that point was that he had enough contacts in the city who would join him to start a well-formed work right away. And then the Lord brought him seven people and no real money with which to start. He really didn't have anything left—except the Holy Spirit of God. Do you and I think that this is enough? We may never find out until we pare down.

The third thing essential Christians do is **"run with endurance the race that is set before us..."** The idea that we are, as believers, part of a long endurance race has a critical shaping effect on our thoughts and attitudes. What should we do differently knowing that we must run all the way to a distant finish? We should get spiritually fit, refuse unnecessary weights, and toughen our minds.

Once when I was running I found a nice old guitar amplifier on the side of the road on mile four of a five mile run. I was torn about leaving it because I knew someone else would pick it up. But it was fairly heavy because of some large transformers inside. So, not wanting to stop running, I turned around, scooped it up, and tried to finish the last mile while holding the amp in my arms. Wow, did that become stupid in just a few strides! I tried holding it on my front and on each side. Gradually I ran slower and slower until I was forced to walk the last quarter mile. Needless to say, I did not actually finish the run. How often do we make unspiritual decisions because we have not prepared our minds to run all the way to the finish line in Christ? What are you doing now which threatens your ability to finish the race?

The fourth thing essential Christians do is to run this race by **"fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith..."** This focus is crucial! We remember the great models of the faith, but we focus like a laser beam on Christ alone. Why? He's the beginning and the end of the faith, the beginning and the end all. He is our only hope! Why would we not focus on him?

Because our sin makes us very distractible, and the Evil One is constantly manufacturing tantalizing new distractions. An article by Phillip Johnson on the loss of impact of the fundamentalist movement during the last century points out that distraction was one of the key causes. How much time, money, debate, and spiritual focus were spent fighting for the idea that the only Bible translation anyone

should ever read is the English version of 1611? Realize that the argument is not that it is merely superior or preferred, but that it is the only one God is blessing! I used to have a whole section of my pastoral library devoted to this debate. I threw it out because it was nothing but a distraction. While we are debating an untenable proposition we are failing to lead people to Christ, failing to visit the sick and those in prison, and failing to love our neighbors. Essential Christians do not have as their primary focus the church or even the lost, but Jesus only. Keeping this focus is a battle royale which must be fought every day.

A fifth thing is that essential Christians go for the joy of the Lord, as did Christ, "**who for the joy set before Him endured the cross...**" What joy could there have been for Christ in the cross? How about the atonement for sin? There was the reconciliation of man to God to restore the fellowship which God had always intended. There was the vanquishing of sin and death. There was his return to the present experience of glorification in the presence of his Father.

These are examples of indestructible God-things. When we take our joys from these things no earthly situation can take them away from us. These joys power us through the sufferings and shame. These joys become the fuel that we burn in the engine room of our souls. Sometimes we have to have just about every other joy pared away before we learn about true joy in the Lord.

A sixth thing essential Christians do is to endure suffering and despise the shame, even as Christ "**endured the cross, despising the shame...**" We must learn to say: "I will not let this temporary cost of doing the will of God turn me from running my race!" It is a moment to set our faces like flint toward the Lord and bear down.

I learned about despising discomfort as I learned to run in the winter here in the northeast US. The human body will stay warm in some very cold temperatures as long as you have sufficient energy and keep moving—even in lycra tights! But there are moments when you turn a corner and discover that the wind had been blocked by some trees and you are now taking a twenty mile-an-hour blast in the face. Suddenly you become chilled to the bone. This might sound goofy, but I have taken to shouting back at the wind! It makes it bearable somehow. Some members of our military are known to shout "Hooahh!" in the face of some of the most miserable aspects of their training. Jesus took the high position and looked down on his suffering and shame. Essential Christians man up or girl up and do the same in the name of the Lord.

Finally, essential Christians never forget the goal, as Christ himself went through his sufferings knowing that at the end of them he would be "**seated at the right hand of the throne of God.**" Our hearts and minds need to be shaped by our heavenly destiny. I cannot see how we can be any earthly good if we do not keep sight of where we are going. Eternity is our home, where every tear will be wiped away, and there will be no more sickness, suffering, or pain. We will no longer see our Lord, the sum of all goods, as through a scratched up piece of glass, but we shall see him face to face.

This is a transcendental focus—a focus above all others. It must be the focus of essential Christians, because it teaches us to put all earthly things into a new perspective. We gain a new assessment of everything in this life because we begin to measure everything by God's ultimate standards. We can say: "Take my coat because where I am going I will have robes of white!"

Dr. A. B. Simpson went through a transformative process where the stuff of this life, even the church and religious stuff, became reorganized. He discarded things which others grip like a vise because he resolved to see the divine priority structure.

His life is evidence that no one can stop you or me from running this race except us. Let us stop blaming our circumstances or the people around us. It's about focus, it's about endurance, it's about throwing off encumbrances—paring down our lives and worldview until we are genuinely ready to rely totally on the Holy Spirit of God.

What hindrances and sins are in your life right now? Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal them to you so you can abandon them. Ask God to teach you these seven crucial things to becoming an essential Christian. You will know when you are close when it becomes possible to accept that you are "**pitiable, miserable, poor, blind, and naked**" (Revelation. 3:17). Then you will be ready to be clothed with Christ and be pleased that he is all you have and all you want.

You will also then be in the position to participate in building an essential church, a church where Jesus Christ is so magnified that the human, earthly elements of the church will become "strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace." That is how The Christian and Missionary Alliance began. It can be our future if we will fight for it.

If this sounds good but you have not yet believed in Christ and become his follower, you must start by receiving the work which brought Christ his greatest joys: the atonement of your sins, your reconciliation to God the Father, and your eternal future in his presence. You can start your relationship with the Lord anytime you wish by telling him you are ready to believe. Don't put it off.