

Summary of *Breakout Churches* by Thom S. Rainer

In his book, *Breakout Churches*, Thom Rainer and his team researched the most effective evangelical churches in America to find:

- What they are doing to reach the unchurched
- What they are doing to retain and assimilate members
- They are effectively reaching young people.

Chapter 1 – Why Good Is Not Enough: The Chrysalis Factor

Can a good, but plodding church become a great church? YES! However, moving to greatness is never easy and the transition often involves great pain.

Rainer used a 5-Stage process in finding the breakout churches.

Stage 1 – Define the Criteria

- The church has had at least 26 conversions annually since its breakout year. Any healthy church should be reaching at least one person with the gospel every 2 weeks.
- The church averaged a conversion ratio no higher than 20:1 at least 1 year since its breakout year, meaning it takes 20 members one year to reach 1 person.
- The church had been declining, plateaued, or had stagnated for several years prior to breakout.
- The church broke out of its slump and sustained new growth for several years.
- There was no change in leader – only change in leadership values.
- The church made a clear and positive impact on the community.

Stage 2 – Find the Churches

The project was started with data on some 50,000 churches and they found 13 that clearly met the strict criteria.

Stage 3 – Look for Comparison Churches

“Good” churches became the source for direct comparison with the breakout churches. These have good pastors and laypeople, but haven’t broken out of their mediocrity, are not making a significant impact on their communities, and do not see significant numbers of changed lives. The differences between “good” churches and breakout churches became the focal point, or the “chrysalis factor.”

Stage 4 – Discover the Chrysalis Factor

Identify as clearly as possible the events, patterns, plans, strategies, crises & other factors that took place when a church made the transition to greatness.

Stage 5 – Apply What We Learned

There are six major components of the Chrysalis Factor.

- Acts 6/7 Legacy Leadership – these leaders seek to equip others for work of ministry while deflecting recognition for themselves, make decisions that will benefit the church after they are gone, and are quick to praise others and equally quick to accept responsibility for anything that may go wrong.
- ABC Moment – “Awareness” that something is not right in the church they serve. “Belief” stage when leader becomes willing to seek out and confront the brutal facts about the church’s inadequacies. “Crisis” that ensues in the leader’s heart because of the gap between what is and what God intends.
- The Who/What Simultrack – *What* really is the purpose of the church? Church leaders sought to get the right kind of people on board to move the church to a more purpose-driven posture. *Who* will these leaders be?
- VIP Factor – Leaders discovered vision through the intersection of three factors: the passion of the leader; the needs of the community; and the gifts, abilities, talents, and passions of the congregation.
- Culture of Excellence – The leaders desire to be certain that such gains achieved in the other components are not quickly lost. Everything the church does and is gets measured against a barometer of excellence.
- Innovation Accelerators – Innovative approaches were typically brought on more slowly and with discernment. Innovation was seen as a tool that could enhance an already healthy transition.

The breakout churches studied are biblical churches whose leaders hold a high view of scripture, are intensely obedient to the Great Commission, and exist to bring glory to God.

It is a sin to be good if God has called us to be great.

Chapter 2 – Acts 6/7 Leadership

There are many common characteristics of breakout church leaders, but one trait that manifests itself repeatedly is persistence. They stay with a church during the difficult times even though there may be numerous temptations to move to a greener pasture. The leaders see a clear goal, and though it may take years to reach, they do not see giving up as an option.

The combined characteristics of the breakout leaders formed the pattern Rainer calls “Acts 6/7 Leadership”. The process of breakout included more than the transformation of a church; it included the transformation of a leader.

There is hope for struggling leaders and churches. In God’s power, transformation can and does take place.

Acts 1 – The Called Leader

All of the breakout leaders have a definitive testimony of God’s call in their lives for vocational ministry, particularly in the local church.

Acts 2 – The Contributing Leader

Breakout leaders spent approximately twenty hours per week in sermon preparation and prayer, compared to only five hours per week of the leaders of the comparison churches.

Acts 3 – The Outwardly-Focused Leader

This stage in leadership is found in leaders who consistently and persistently move the church to look beyond itself, giving evangelism a priority, and leading the congregation to other types of ministries beyond the church walls.

Acts 4 – The Passionate Leader

Leaders of healthy churches have an obvious passion for their ministries, which is evident in their preaching, conversations, and their numerous leadership roles. They exude an obvious energy and love for the work and ministry God has called them to do.

Acts 5 – The Bold Leader

This leader knows the mission and purpose of the church and is willing to take incredible steps of faith and make tough calls that few other leaders will make, in order to keep the church focused and on track.

Acts 6/7 – The Legacy Leader

Fewer than 1% of the senior pastors that were studied have attained this level of leadership. These leaders are quick to give ministry to others and let them take the credit for their work, desiring to deflect recognition to others. This type of leadership is needed for the long-term health of churches.

Breakout pastors tended to approach the role of leadership for change with three levels of awareness:

- They desired to communicate clearly the love they have for their congregation and recognized that the established church is often entrenched in tradition, therefore change is difficult and takes time. Change must ultimately take place and goals must be achieved if the church is to move forward.
- These leaders are sensitive to criticism, but they do not let their critics deter them from the goals and visions they sense God has given them. They persevere, but often at great personal cost.
- Many of the Acts 6/7 leaders are reluctant leaders. They neither planned nor desired to serve in their present position.

Chapter 3 – Eight Keys to Acts 6/7 Leadership

Fierce Biblical Faithfulness

All of the Acts 6/7 leaders are evangelicals who hold a high view of Scripture. These leaders do far more than merely believe the truth claims of Scripture, they also passionately live out these beliefs in their preaching, teaching, leadership, and ministry.

The Tenure Issue

Acts 6/7 leaders are willing and even want to have long-term ministries at one church. They have a long-term view of ministry and are ever persistent in moving the church forward. Rainer notes that a direct correlation is present between pastoral tenure and evangelistic effectiveness in churches. The average tenure of a breakout church leader exceeds twenty-one years, while the national average is about four years.

The breakout church leaders endured the pain of conflict and did not leave. They were tenacious. Their short-term pain brought long-term gains.

Long tenure is *one* of the key requisites for churches to move from mediocrity to goodness to greatness.

Confident Humility

The breakout church leaders displayed unmistakable confidence in their leadership ability and had a focus, determination, and unswerving faith in what could be accomplished. In addition, they displayed an unpretentious humility with their confidence.

The Acts 6/7 leaders' confidence centered more on what God was doing in their lives and less on their own inherent abilities. While they confidently believed their leadership was critical to the health of the church, they also believed their leadership abilities were a gift from God upon whom they were totally dependent.

Acceptance of Responsibility

Weak leaders of churches blame people and circumstances. Breakout church leaders accept responsibility and see God's possibilities in even difficult situations. They refuse to blame others.

Unconditional Love of the People

Despite the pains and trials they experienced, the breakout church leaders still express an intense, unconditional love for the members of their congregations.

Persistence

Because these leaders have a long-term perspective of their ministries at the churches they serve, they are able to lead toward progress one incremental step at a time.

An obvious parallel exists between persistence and long tenure, however persistence includes the fulfillment of goals regardless of the time needed to complete the task.

The Outwardly-Focused Vision

The Acts 6/7 leaders did not just grasp, communicate, and implement vision. They consistently had a vision that was outwardly-focused. They were passionate about reaching the lost and unchurched, which was a key component of their vision.

A Desire for a Lasting Legacy

Breakout church leaders desire to see the church do well and to make a difference well beyond the ministry of the current leadership. They are ambitious for the church to be thriving and healthy well beyond their ministries and even their lifetimes.

Acts 6/7 Leaders: Made or Born?

The final analysis cannot show what portion of Acts 6/7 leadership is inborn and what portion is acquired.

Most of the leaders said that their leadership skills are God-powered rather than human-centered. They sought to be the type of leaders God called them to be.

Chapter 4 – The ABC Moment

Although most leaders are unable or unwilling to confront reality, good churches do not become breakout churches until the leaders confront reality.

One of the key reasons many churches today are in a slow but deadly path of erosion is the failure of the people to accept that the church is in trouble and that immediate changes are needed.

The ABC Moment is a wake-up call.

- **Awareness:** Leadership and key persons become aware that the church is not nearly all God intended it to be. There is a keen desire to learn and improve.
- **Belief:** Leadership confronts the brutal facts of the church's reality. They have a strong belief that God can use them to make a less-than-desirable situation good.
- **Crisis:** Once change has begun, a crisis takes place in the heart of the leader, in the church members, or in the attitudes of the members toward the leader.

The American Church: Mired in Mediocrity

- **Doctrinal Ignorance:** There is a well-documented ignorance that many Christians have about the doctrines of the faith. Without a clear understanding of what we believe, we lose our distinction, our reason for existence, our direction, and our purpose.
- **Evangelistic Apathy:** The American church is a long way from keeping pace with the population growth. A growing number of Christians tell us that they are reluctant to be evangelistic because they do not want to impose their beliefs on others.
- **Ministry Irrelevance:** Most of the ministry in the church is focused on the membership. From the community's perspective, the church is irrelevant.
- **Fellowship Fractures:** When inwardly-focused, self-serving members do not get their way in worship styles, pastoral attention, music choices, and carpet colors, they pitch holy temper tantrums and begin to ask what the church is doing for them. A divided church is inevitably an inwardly-focused church.

Slow Erosion: The Deadly Path

Slow erosion is a weapon of Satan that is even more lethal than church splits and the moral failures of church leaders. When the erosion is so slow, it is incredibly easy to be oblivious to negative trends.

Awareness: Waking up to Reality

Pastors of the comparison churches did not want to face reality, therefore they never move their churches out of slow erosion. Many admitted that if they faced reality, they would feel compelled to lead their churches to make changes. The inevitable pain of conflict that change brings was just too great for potential gain.

There were three distinct stages in the breakout church leaders' attempts to see reality more clearly.

- **Accept Painful Reality:** The failure of church leaders and members to take the first step of accepting the painful reality that a problem exists is epidemic in American churches. The leaders of breakout churches do not hesitate to look at the statistics of their churches, even if the reality of the numbers is painful.
- **Is/Should Be Discernment:** The breakout church leaders had a clear understanding that the present state of their churches was not that of a healthy church. They not only faced the painful reality of where they were, they had some clear idea of where the church should be.
- **Positive Outside Influences:** Breakout church leaders had an insatiable appetite to learn and a persistent drive to improve. While comparison church leaders also utilized outside resources to implement change, breakout leaders *first* attempted to understand the reality of their context fully before embracing outside influences.

Belief: Faith During Difficulties

In the face of overwhelming bad news, breakout church leaders believed that better days were ahead and they refused to abandon the dream and vision God had given them for their churches. They had an unshakable faith that God would bring victory.

Crisis: The Cost of Victories

Unfortunately, difficulties are commonplace in churches that move to greatness. The cost of breakout leadership is great and often painful. We cannot become complacent with the status quo just to avoid conflict.

None of the leaders in this study desired conflict. They all weighed a plethora of options to avoid the conflict. But in the final analysis, they did not avoid conflict if no other options were available.

The ABC Moment and the Congregation

The ABC moment cannot be limited to one person if a church is to break out. In most of the breakout churches, a significant number of the laity experienced similar wake-up calls.

ABC Moment, Then What?

Neither the staff, nor the lay leaders, of the breakout churches were content to have a moment of revelation and then continue business as usual. They could no longer be content with the status quo. Their lives and ministries would never be the same.

Chapter 5 – The Who/What Simultrack

The breakout church leaders seem to have little problem finding people of excellence to be a part of their ministry teams for two reasons: these churches tend to attract the best people because of their clear and compelling vision, and these leaders often do not wait for an opening before bringing a person on staff or providing a place for a lay leader to serve.

Within a short time of becoming aware of the great need for the church to make significant changes, the leaders were pursuing both the right people and the right infrastructure for the church.

What Exactly is a Simultrack?

A simultrack is one or more tracks being pursued at the same time. Not only were personnel needs of the church immediately apparent, but the structures of the church were in need of a major overhaul as well. The leaders multitasked and began tackling both projects simultaneously.

Right People = “The Who”; Right Structures = “The What”

The Structure Issue

The structure, or infrastructure, refers to the basic facilities, programs, and organizational systems needed to keep the church running day by day.

Some comparison churches decided against much-needed structural changes because of the conflict or perceived conflict the decision would engender, or they made structural changes that seem to have little relationship to the true needs of the church. In contrast, the impetus behind the structural changes in breakout churches was to follow the vision of the church.

Acts 5 Leaders and Acts 6/7 Leaders on The Who/What Simultrack

Acts 5 leaders are just as quick to move on the issue of structural change as an Acts 6/7 leader. The difference is that the Acts 6/7 leader was much more likely to voice concerns about any church member who felt left behind in a major structural move in the church.

On the “who” issue, the ministry staff of the breakout churches typically asserted three factors that held them at their churches: the compelling and clear vision of the church they served; the dynamic leadership skills of the senior pastors with whom they served; and the great caring attitude of the pastor. The staff of the churches with Acts 5 leaders typically affirmed the first two issues, but they rarely mentioned the issue of a caring pastor.

Key Lessons Learned About The “Who” In Breakout Churches

- **When in Doubt, Wait:** The breakout churches would often leave a position unfilled for a long period of time rather than get the wrong person. When in doubt, they said, it is better to wait.
- **Act Quickly and Compassionately:** When “people” mistakes were made, or when personnel mismatches became obvious, the breakout churches would act quickly and compassionately. This process is described as the “three Cs” – closure, compassion, and communication. Despite the difficulties in making decisions to not allow troublesome people issues to continue, breakout churches did so and brought closure, and it was done with compassion. Breakout churches insisted that any decision affecting people in key positions in the church would entail clear communication to the congregation about the reasons for such a decision, without revealing any confidential information.
- **Compatibility Is as Important as Competency:** The breakout churches did not just look for the best qualified people to be a part of the ministry team. They sought people who would be the right fit with their personalities and philosophies of ministry.
- **Micromanagement of Staff is a Formula for Failure:** Senior pastors of the breakout churches are not micromanaged and they don’t micromanage the people who work with them. The compelling culture in these churches exudes teamwork and compatibility, equipping the right people, and letting them go to do the work of ministry without worry of some micromanaging body or individual.

Key Lessons Learned About The “What” In Breakout Churches

- **The Church Must Learn What Its Purposes Are:** Structural changes are meaningless, if not harmful, unless churches grasp the reality that a church must know why it exists in order to know what it is supposed to do. Any structural decisions must be based on the purposes of the church.

- Facilities and Location Are Means and Not Ends, But They Are Very Important: Without ignoring the desires of church members, breakout churches persistently evaluated if a facility decision would have a positive impact on reaching the lost and unchurched.
- Small Groups Are Essential to the Health of Churches: Breakout churches understand that church members must get connected with a small group, whether in a Sunday School model or a more nontraditional model, for them to grow in spiritual health and to remain connected with the church.
- Leadership Groups Are Clearly Defined: The roles of key leadership groups such as elders, deacons, and staff are understood clearly in breakout churches.

A Final Observation On Who And What: A Culture Of Serious Fun

An obvious joy was present in both the staff and the laity of the breakout churches. Purpose in their lives and ministries engendered joy, fun, and laughter.

Chapter 6 – The VIP Factor

Breakout church leaders don't seek to *discover* their vision, yet they all have a clear and compelling vision. What these leaders had in common was a vision that "discovered" them rather than a painful search to find out God's specific plan.

The Discovery of the VIP Factor

The VIP Factor stands for Vision Intersection Profile. Three different factors – leadership passion; passion/gifts of congregation; and community needs – merge, and their overlapping point is the vision of the church.

One of the amazing features of the breakout churches is their ability to discern and communicate essential matters simply, instead of developing some elaborate plan to discover and communicate vision.

Rediscovering the Vision

- VIP: Leadership Passions: One of the three critical components of vision is a clear grasp by the leadership of their ministry passions. Rainer's study indicates that only 6% of church leaders indicate even a modest level of passion for their ministries.

- VIP: Congregation's Gifts and Passions: In breakout churches, a climate of ministry freedom encourages members to pursue ministry according to their own passions and gifts.
- VIP: Community Needs: The breakout churches were passionate about discovering the needs of the community and then meeting those needs. They sought to provide for the community even if they received nothing in return.

Implications of the VIP Factor

- Choose What You Can Do Best (But You Can't Do Everything): The breakout churches focused on doing a few things and doing those few things well. They did not attempt to do everything.
- The VIP Factor Assumes Leadership Passion: Rainer's research found no churches that had anything resembling a true vision unless the leadership, particularly the pastor, was clearly passionate about something.
- A Clear and Compelling Vision Must Include the Congregation: Breakout churches did not see the members as mere spectators of the leadership's performance. Their primary approach was to have a climate of openness to members' involvement in and development of ministries in the church.
- You Must Be Passionate About Your Community: A congregation cannot be an island in a community of needs. Breakout churches had a passion to reach and minister to the community. They did not first ask how the community might benefit the church.
- Vision is Dynamic: Any of the three major components of the VIP Factor can experience change over the course of time. Nevertheless, breakout churches did not chaotically and randomly shift vision from year to year. They had consistency of vision over time and any change in the vision was gradual and incremental.

Breaking Out...And Visionary

The breakout churches had visionaries – staff, senior pastor, and laypeople – who believed in a God of miracles and attempted things that would be impossible without a supernatural God.

Chapter 7 – A Culture of Excellence

Anything attempted for God should be done with excellence.

Excellence in All Things

This is a clear characteristic of the breakout churches. These churches were not fanatical about excellence, but instead had a drive to glorify God, to please the Savior, or to do their best in His power for His sake. Their drive for a culture of excellence was theologically and biblically driven. This included excellence in evangelism, ministry, facilities, commitment of the ministry staff, and commitment of the laity.

Never be satisfied with “being satisfied”.

Excellence in Many Places

The breakout churches were not churches of excellence in every conceivable area. They chose the areas in which they could be excellent and did not attempt to do everything else.

The VIP Factor and Excellence

Quite often the area in which the focus of excellence was most obvious was the Vision Intersection Profile. One of the major changes the breakout churches made in their transition to greatness was their near fanatical focus on those few areas where they could excel.

A Vision For “Those Who Are Not Yet Here”

The move to do a few things with excellence means that everything the church does has to be evaluated ruthlessly. “Sacred Cows” are handled with care, but the church has to move forward.

Breakout churches were extremely careful in their evaluations of new opportunities. They typically asked two questions: Does it fit our vision? Can we take on this new responsibility and do it with excellence?

The Freedom/Expectation Paradox

Paid staff comprises a very small portion of the “workforce” of a church. Yet the breakout churches consistently had both staff and lay workers who demonstrated excellence in their ministries.

In interviews with lay and staff leaders, the research team consistently heard two themes that were a magnet for them in their work in the breakout churches.

- These quality workers relished the freedom given to them to carry out their work.
- They cherished the high-expectation environment of their churches.

Those who minister had much freedom as long as they remained focused on the vision of the church and carried out their ministries with excellence.

This is the Freedom/Expectation Paradox, which has four quadrants. Quadrant 2 is “High Expectation/High Freedom”. Of the churches studied, only the thirteen breakout churches were in this quadrant. None of the thirty-nine comparison churches were identified to be Quadrant 2 churches. Twenty-five of the comparison churches were Quadrant 3 “Low Expectation/Low Freedom”. Little is expected, but if someone does accept a task in these churches, they are bound by many rules and traditions. Seven of the comparison churches were Quadrant 1 “High Expectation/Low Freedom” churches. They were led by an autocratic pastor. The other seven comparison churches were Quadrant 4 “Low Expectation/High Freedom” churches. “Chaos” would be the best description of these churches.

The Culture of Excellence as Autocrat

The Quadrant 1 leaders were autocratic. They demanded their way instead of earning it, tended to view losses of dissenting members not only as inevitable but desirable, and they frankly had an insecurity that left little room for opinions other than their own.

The churches in Quadrant 2, the breakout churches, did have strong leaders, but they were not autocratic. To the contrary, they had a humility that defied many stereotypes of strong leaders. That humility, however, was not a sign of leadership weakness. The breakout church leaders were intensely focused on achieving excellence.

The breakout churches did not have autocratic leaders, they had autocratic cultures. In other words, it is the culture of excellence that demands much of those who minister in the churches.

The Culture of Excellence and the Right People

The environment of excellence began when the leadership got the right people, laity and staff, in the right place. The right people led in the transformation of the church from an environment of mediocrity to an environment of excellence.

The Culture of Excellence and the “Not-To-Do” List

A culture of excellence will never become a reality until the church takes the often painful step of “not doing.” The decision to discontinue something in the church often proves to be more difficult than starting something new.

One of the key reasons breakout churches have a culture of excellence is because they do a few things well and are “not doing” the rest.

Chapter 8 – Innovation Accelerators

The breakout churches are not adverse to change or innovation. Several of these churches made dramatic changes. However, they are sometimes surprisingly slow in adopting new and innovative approaches and are careful in making major changes.

The Road Less Traveled

Most churches in America fit one of two categories:

- Traditionalist/Resistor: These churches avoid nearly all changes.
- Innovator/Embracer: These churches continually chase the latest fad.

The breakout churches, however, neither rejected innovation nor embraced it blindly – “innovation acceleration.” Innovation typically *followed* growth. They were slow in adopting innovation, and did so only after close scrutiny and much deliberation.

Innovation and the VIP Factor

The breakout churches sought innovation, not to create a vision, but to enhance an existing vision. They would embrace an innovation only if it could help them be more faithful to the vision.

The Tail and the Dog

The two reasons most often cited for an innovation misfit were its failure to complement the vision and the fear that the innovation would be the tail wagging the dog.

The “dog” in the breakout churches is the main vision – the VIP Factor. Innovation is the “tail.” Breakout churches kept the dog wagging the tail.

Innovation and the Purpose-Driven Factor

The church must be driven by its purposes. Churches cannot be program-driven, building-driven, or budget-driven. They must be driven by the five purposes of the church – worship, evangelism, discipleship, ministry, and fellowship. Purpose, to the breakout churches, was an innovation accelerator, not a methodical fad.

Buildings and Locations as Innovation

Breakout churches did not see the innovation of new building construction to be the driving force of the churches. Instead, they viewed it as a necessary step to move forward, not as a goal to be achieved. They sometimes moved slowly and deliberately in constructing new facilities or relocating, and did so after a lot of deliberation.

Innovation Trap or Innovation Triumph?

Many of the comparison churches either chased fads instead of pursuing God's plan for their ministries and their churches, or they were fearful of change, fearful of the unknown, and too comfortable with the status quo. Thus, they found themselves caught in the innovation trap.

Breakout church leaders, on the other hand, demonstrated both wisdom and courage.

- Wisdom in the proper use of innovation: They did not see the latest fad as the answer to everything, yet they were not afraid to embrace innovation if it accelerated the growth and enhanced the health of the church.
- Courage was demonstrated once the decision was made to move forward with innovation.

Breakout churches avoided the innovation trap and were rewarded with the innovation triumph.

Chapter 9 – Big Mo or Blind Erosion?

The “Big Mo” refers to what seems to be an inexplicable momentum in the breakout churches.

Persons interviewed in all of the breakout churches had difficulty identifying one event or development that led to the church breaking out. Instead they spoke of a relatively slow-building momentum that now is moving at an incredible pace.

In breakout churches, there is a struggle, followed by a buildup, followed by a breakout point, followed by a momentum. Whereas previous victories required laborious efforts, the Big Mo period seems to provide victory after victory more naturally.

“Not Just One Thing”

When Rainer’s group attempted to isolate the issues that led to the Big Mo, they could find no single factor or even a few factors. The issues were many and diverse.

The Long-Term Approach to the Big Mo

While longevity (long tenure) in itself is no guarantee of moving a church to greatness, the process of moving a church to greatness is long-term. The move to greatness is not achieved easily or quickly.

Preaching, Biblical Authority, Prayer, and the Big Mo

In the process of leading their churches in the breakout, the leaders reported a heightened awareness of the importance of their preaching ministries.

Consistently members of the breakout churches stated that one of the key reasons their church is experiencing a positive momentum is the consistent quality preaching of the senior pastor.

The breakout churches would never have sustained the momentum they have without consistent faithfulness to foundational issues. They believe in the total truthfulness of Scripture, and they hold to the priority of preaching and the primacy of prayer. These churches never abandoned the basics in their transition to greatness. They are truly Acts 6:4 churches: “[We] will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word.”

Blind Erosion: The Comparison Churches

A “hurricane” gets most of the issues on the table and forces the church to deal with them for good or bad. “Blind beach erosion” takes place in pseudo-comfort. Most members perceive that no change is taking place. By the time most members become aware of the years of slow erosion, the damage is severe and sometimes irreversible.

- **Blind Erosion and No Accountability:** There is little accountability in most churches across America. Few churches provide good information to their membership on key ministries, attendance, and growth.
- **Blind Erosion and Theology:** Very few of the laypeople in the comparison churches knew anything about their churches’ doctrinal position. They also often held theological positions in contradiction to the printed doctrinal positions of their churches. Even when interviewees of the comparison churches expressed positions congruent with the stated doctrinal positions of their churches, inconsistencies were often found in their willingness to practice their beliefs. Blind erosion took place because

the members gave only mental assent to the churches' core values and doctrinal beliefs.

- **Blind Erosion and Ignorance:** Conversations with members of the comparison churches indicated clearly that their first priority is looking after their own needs. They rarely expressed excitement about evangelistic outreach or ministry beyond the church. They do not know what the New Testament church should look like today. These members also have an apparent ignorance in basic statistical information about their churches.

Blind Erosion and Resistant Leaders

The research team noticed at least six issues present in resistant leadership.

- **Burned:** These leaders have made valiant efforts to lead the church to positive change, but the resulting resistance and criticism have caused significant pain, leaving them demoralized, hurt, and unwilling to try great things for God for fear of more conflict.
- **Ignorant:** These leaders do not have the understanding of what it takes to lead a church to greatness. They may be lacking in interpersonal skills and basic leadership abilities.
- **Lazy:** These leaders have discovered the low accountability of ministers in many churches. Because they have few people monitoring their daily efforts, they can become lazy.
- **Theologically Weak:** These leaders have doubts about cardinal doctrines, abandoning the core values of the organization and abandoning the gospel.
- **Conflict Avoider:** These leaders will steer clear of controversy and tough decisions at any cost. Ironically, they typically are not avoiding conflict; they are just postponing it.
- **Accolade Seeker:** These leaders thrive off the recognition and praises of the church members. They have difficulty reaching out to those outside the church and difficulty in making any decision that will lessen the praises of them and their ministry.

The leadership failure of these resistant leaders is one of the primary reasons their churches were declining. And, for the most part, this decline was not obvious to those in the church.

The Myth of the Plateaued Church

There is no such thing as a plateaued church. A church is either growing or declining. The term "plateaued church" is commonly used to describe churches that are marginally declining or marginally growing.

Sadly, most churches in America are experiencing blind erosion.

Chapter 10 – To Become A Breakout Church

To Be Great, To Make A Difference

We must confront the reality of the struggles our churches face. And we must acknowledge a sovereign and omnipotent God who is the source of any solutions to the plight of the church.

Those involved in the breakout churches sensed that they were making a difference because they were working in a church that made a difference.

What is Greatness?

Greatness doesn't depend on size. Great churches are not always big churches.

Great churches were, in this study, churches that had broken out of the mediocrity of losing as many people as they were reaching; had become outwardly focused and more intentional about evangelism; and moved to greatness under the same leader.

The meaning of greatness is not the size of a church or the budget it carries. It is a congregation of God's people making a difference for His glory.

Where the Cost is Greatest

The cost of becoming a breakout church, ironically, is most often the result of problems and conflicts with other believers. Many of the comparison church leaders grew weary of the struggle with fellow Christians. The breakout church leaders had no fewer conflicts, but they decided to persevere despite the pain and struggles and sought God's strength to see them through.

Right People and the Breakout Transition

The breakout church leaders dealt quickly and compassionately with the major people problems in their congregations, but they were patient to wait on solutions for dealing with the more minor issues.

The People Issue and the Freedom/Expectation Paradox

A church leader cannot simply declare that the congregation will now be a high-expectation church. Raising the bar of expectations is often incremental and painfully slow. The process can mean methodically increasing the expectation of a ministry position each time a vacancy occurs or a new position is added; the addition of a new members or inquirers class; and new and higher standards for leaders, who in turn attract high-expectation leaders to their ministries.

The blueprint for becoming a breakout church requires becoming a high-expectation church. Only then will the right people get on board, stay on board, and remain excited about being on board.

Passion and Choices

For breakout leaders, passion describes their everyday ministry. Their enthusiasm is contagious, and their visions are magnetic.

Passion means making the choice to do that for which we can make the greatest difference. It means saying no to opportunities that may be good but not the best. It means that the best path is not always the easiest path.

Innovation: Open But Cautious

The leaders of the breakout churches followed first the vision and passion God gave them for the church.

These leaders would embrace an innovation only after careful examination. They were more concerned about the vision God had given them for their churches and about equipping the right people who were attracted to that vision.

And the Greatest of These...

Expressive love was a vital part of the breakout church leaders' ministries. It was clear to the research team and to the members of the thirteen churches that they were loved by their leaders.

The research team believes that the leaders' decisions to love even the unlovable people in their congregations was a key factor in their churches' breakouts.

A Blueprint for Breakout Churches?

Greatness in a church is a deeply theological issue. Great churches are great only because of the power of a great God.