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Breakout Churches: Discover How to Make the Leap

Reviewed by Gordon Penfold

Rainer, Thom, Breakout Churches: discover how to make the leap, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2005. 259 pp. \$22.99

Breakout Churches is a monumental work that tracks the ministries of thirteen churches that moved from plateau or decline to significant growth through evangelism. Thom Rainer followed the pattern of research used by Jim Collins in his book *Good to Great: why some companies make the leap . . . and others don't* as he and his research team examined 50,000 churches in the U.S. They asked the simple question; "What happens 'When Good Churches Become Great'" (13). He was looking for common denominators and transferable principles in these "breakout" churches.

Thom Rainer is imminently qualified to write a book like this. He is the president of Church Central and the founding dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is also the president of Rainer Group Church Consulting. He has researched churches and church ministry for over twenty years. He has written numerous books on evangelism and church growth and has also served as pastor or interim pastor of fourteen churches.

Breakout Churches is the result of a research project initiated in 2002. Rainer and his research team examined 50,000 churches looking for churches "that fought the temptation to be satisfied with mediocrity" (14). Chapter 1 begins with the words,

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

Christians refer to Matthew 28:18-20 as the *Great Commission*, not the Good Commission. Jesus himself said that the words we read in Matthew 22:37 and 39 are the

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Great Commandments, not the Good Commands. And the apostle Paul did not call love something that is good; instead he said “the *greatest*” of these is love (1 Cor. 13:13, emphasis added) (15).

The research for *Breakout Churches* focused on two sets of churches. The churches in the first set were designated as “breakout churches.” Thirteen churches fell into this category. In order to be considered a breakout church the following criteria needed to be met. These standards paralleled the business requirements found in Collins book, *From Good to Great*.

1. The church has had at least 26 conversions annually since its breakout year.
2. The church has averaged a conversion ratio no higher than 20:1 at least one year since its breakout year. It takes 20 members one year to reach one person.
3. The church had been declining or had plateaued for several years prior to its
4. breakout year.
5. The church broke out of this “slump” and has sustained new growth for several years.
6. The slump, reversal and breakout all took place under the same pastor.
7. Since the breakout point, the church has made a clear and positive impact on the community (20-21).

“Comparison churches” make up the second set of churches. Thirty nine “good” churches were selected to provide points of “comparison” for the breakout churches (three churches per breakout church) (23). The comparison churches that were selected had similar ministry backgrounds to the breakout churches, but all of them had failed to attain a breakout in ministry. Two sets of great churches were not included in the study. These are churches like Saddleback Valley Community Church and great churches that became great with pastoral change. Neither of these sets of churches met the established “breakout” criteria for the study.

Real accounts of real churches and their struggles are sprinkled liberally through the book. Anyone who has been in pastoral ministry can identify with the pain, the struggles, the heartache and the triumphs depicted on the pages of this book. The accounts are so true to life that I found myself aching with the pastors as they moved through the breakout process from mediocrity to greatness.

What was the purpose of the book? Rainer was searching for the common traits found in all the breakout churches. “What did

we learn from the breakout churches? What can you learn from them? What does it take to move a church to greatness?" (20). He further states, "The research team was motivated by much more than curiosity and intellectual stimulation. We wanted not only to find out what happens to churches that move to greatness, under the sovereignty of God, but also to apply what we learned for the benefit of the kingdom and other churches" (26). I believe that the genius of the research and the findings are tied up in his drive to understand the factors that have propelled these thirteen churches from being good churches to being great churches so that others can learn lessons that will aid them in their ministries.

It is obvious that the research was not denominationally driven. The thirteen breakout churches are from a variety of denominational and ethnic backgrounds. They were selected simply because they met the criteria established by the team! Thom Rainer, a Southern Baptist, is the consummate researcher who sought the truth wherever it was found. The unbiased research on this project makes this an invaluable resource for those committed to excellence in ministry regardless of location, ethnicity or denomination!

Rainer and company defined what they called the Chrysalis factor—six components that were essential in transforming these thirteen churches . . . factors that set them apart from 50,000 other churches! These are listed below:

- Acts 6/7 Legacy Leadership. Rainer describes these leaders as leaders "who equip others for the work of ministry while deflecting recognition for themselves.
- The ABC Moment. There was an **A**wareness that something was wrong. **B**elief takes place when the leader becomes willing to seek out and confront the brutal facts about the church's inadequacy. **C** is the **C**risis that ensued.
- The Who/What Simultrack. Church leaders sought to close the gap between what the church is and what God desires it to be.
- The VIP factor. The churches discovered vision through the intersection of three factors: the passion of the leader; the needs of the community; and the gift abilities, talents and passions of the congregation.
- A Culture of Excellence
- Innovation Accelerators. Breakout leaders used innovative techniques in ministry but they were very discerning when applying them to their ministry experience. These innovations then help create momentum in their

ministries (27-31).

- Several recurring themes struck me as I read this book. First, every breakout church found itself in crisis. The breakout churches were willing to face the crisis and prevail. Could it be that many churches are idling simply because they avoid crisis and conflict?

A second factor common to all the breakout churches was a return to prayer, passionately seeking the face of God. The crisis drove them to pray.

The third common element in breakout churches is the element of intense pain endured by the pastor through the breakout process. The descriptions were so true to life that I could identify with the pain of these pastors who dared risk for the sake of the Gospel. Many of them seriously considered resigning from their churches because the pain was so intense. One who endured great suffering for the Gospel was Bishop Graves of Temple Church in Nashville, Tennessee. At one point the church lost 300 leaders because he would not compromise his vision that the church be multiracial and multiethnic. "He internalized much of his pain, resulting in several weeks of hospitalization. His physician recommended he leave the ministry altogether. But leaving the church was never an option for the pastor" (238).

That leads to the fourth observation. Breakout leaders did not quit! They persevered.

A fifth theme captivated my attention. In every breakout church there was an uncompromising vision of what God wanted to do through the church. Bishop Graves mentioned above is just one example of living out the vision. Temple Church grew from 710 to over 3000 because the Bishop would not compromise the vision.

The breakout churches also had a very narrow focus in their vision and they had simple structure in their ministry. Xenos Christian Fellowship in Columbus, Ohio, was a counterculture church that was organized in 1982. In 1991 the church returned to its original vision of simply "evangelizing lost persons and mentoring new Christians" (119). They lost 1400 attendees that year who desired the church to go in different directions. As a result, the more sharply focused vision caused the church to break out and grow to 4200 (239).

I believe this book lives up to its billing in pointing churches and pastors to the essential elements that can help move churches from good to great. I appreciated the candor of the pastors and churches that were willing to share their stories of crisis, pain, conflict and triumph. I also found it refreshing that many of these churches could be the church next door. The pastors are

unassuming people who are simply servants of the Most High God.

I did struggle in two areas as I read this book. The first is a factor that is prevalent in much church growth literature. All of these churches are large churches where the breakout criteria could be satisfied. Most of my ministry has been in more rural settings where 26 conversions a year would be absolutely phenomenal. In the average church in America with 75 members (and many of those churches serve the 75,000,000 rural Americans) that would be a conversion rate of 3:1. There are certainly small churches that maintain a conversion rate of 20:1 that demographically could not consistently sustain a rate of 26 new believers each year. Second, I have pastored four churches in 28 years. I wonder if there is hope for effectiveness for those of us whom God moves to different ministries.

Nevertheless, I found *Breakout Churches* stimulating and encouraging. I believe it should be a book read by every pastor who desires to be on the cutting edge of ministry. However, breakout will only occur for those who are willing to pay the price for significant change in ministry. I was also convicted about some areas of my own ministry. I certainly need to sharpen my focus on the mission and my determination to capture God's vision for the ministry. Above all, I must continue to passionately seek face of the Lord as I serve Him and His church.

Reviewer

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