



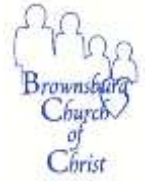
# Surprising Insights from the Unchurched

Brownsburg Church of Christ

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## Introduction:

**Acts 11:21** says, “And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.” But after reading that we say, “Yeah, that was then. This is now. It doesn’t work the same. People just aren’t interested in spiritual things. All they want is entertainment and fun.” So we are convinced we cannot make disciples and grow as a congregation even if we work really hard and the hand of the Lord is with us. So we back off, waiting to learn about some magic bullet that might cause us to convert gobs and gobs of people. And it never comes. Don’t get me wrong. We want to grow as a church. More importantly, we want to make disciples. So we teach on it all the time. Nick Petre just concluded a Bible class that is intended to help us share the gospel with others. Next week, I’ll be starting a class to help us in our teaching efforts answer stubborn and difficult questions when they arise. We have Gospel meetings, VBS, special conferences. And on April 24, we are having a special evangelistic push to bring in friends and family who aren’t Christians so they can hear the gospel. But for all this teaching and opportunity, we still think no one will be interested in what we have to offer, so we hang back. We look at the wild and crazy religious world around us and we think no one would be interested in a conservative church like ours. How can we grow when people are only interested in rock music, social clubs, and social agendas? With all that in mind, I was recently shocked.

Several months ago, I saw an intriguing book title while perusing the shelves at Half-Price Books in Avon: Surprising Insights from the Unchurched and Proven Ways to Reach Them, by Thom S. Rainer<sup>1</sup>. I didn’t actually expect much, but it was only \$1, so I bought it thinking I might peruse it some time. Because of some other study I was doing, I picked up the book a few weeks ago. I expected to read a lot of denominational drivel and find a lot of advice about having fellowship halls, youth group trips to Holiday World, rock music, and other inane and unscriptural advice. I was in for a shock.

In this lesson, I want to share with you what I learned from this book. We’ll begin by explaining the premise for the book. Then I’ll share the conclusions this book draws about how to reach the unchurched. Finally, I want to share the scriptural lessons I got out of it. Before we go on, I want to be perfectly clear. Thom Rainer is just a man. His book is not the Bible. I have no interest in sharing the research of a man as if that research is authority for our action. That is not my purpose. I have no desire to do something because a man’s research says it will get more people in our pews. God’s Word reigns supreme and everyone who contradicts it is a liar (**Romans 3:4**). Rather, I want to share this with you to show that his research about our society demonstrates there are people looking for what God has to offer through us here. Therefore, we need to get to work sharing it.

## Discussion:

### I. The premise of Surprising Insights from the Unchurched.

- A. Though the title of the book is Surprising Insights from the Unchurched, a more accurate title would be “Surprising Insights from the *Formerly* Unchurched.” This establishes the premise of the book. First, let me explain “unchurched.” Unchurched does not necessarily mean never ever attends with a church. It does not necessarily mean hates churches. It simply means someone who is not part of a congregation, committed to a local church, nor regularly attends with a church. It includes someone who has never attended with a church. It would also include fallen Christians. It would include people who were brought up in a church but turned their back on it when they left home. It would include people who attend only on Easter and Christmas. It would include children of church members. It would include spouses of church members. It would include parents of church members.
- B. Second, I need to explain clearly who Rainer’s group actually researched. They did not research those who are currently unchurched, but those who had recently moved from being unchurched to being a part of a church. He did not ask unchurched people what might cause them to attend with a church. Rainer describes his research group like this: “The formerly unchurched are people who have recently (typically within the past two years) become active in a church. For all or a large portion of their lives they were not in church. Some of the formerly unchurched considered themselves Christians even when they did not attend a church. Most were not Christians before they found a church home.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Surprising Insights from the Unchurched and Proven Way to Reach Them, Thom S. Rainer, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p 22. (Please understand that the term “Christian” in this book is used with the common denominational understanding of those who believe in Jesus, not those who have been baptized for the remission of their sins.)

- C. While Rainer suggests that valuable insight can be gained by researching those who are not presently part of a congregation, he recognized there could be a problem with that. Other studies have shown that 80 to 90% of the completely unchurched may never attend with a church no matter what is done or changed<sup>3</sup>. He further explained, "...when they [the formerly unchurched] tell us why they chose a church, we have an actual case study of someone moving from the ranks of the unchurched to the churched. When the unchurched tell us what *might* attract them to a church, we do not know for certain if they will respond as they indicated."<sup>4</sup>
- D. So, understand that what I'm about to share with you comes from research conducted among people who, at the time of the book's writing, had recently moved from not being a part of a church to being a part of a church. This isn't what caused people to change churches (which seems to be our big focus). This is about getting people who aren't connected at all to be connected. I think we can all agree that we might gain great insight if we ask people who recently decided to move from unchurched to churched why they did it and why they chose the particular congregation.
- E. While I don't have time to share with you everything that was in the book, let me give you a couple of tidbits of information that shocked me. "We" (and I put that in quotes because I don't want to paint with too broad a brush) have a tendency to think people choose churches today for the musical entertainment value or because of the programs for the young people. And with that in mind we try to mimic them as much as we can while staying in what we sometimes consider biblical restrictions. Further, we think that folks aren't too interested in the doctrinal side of things as long as they are entertained and their kids have fun. However, when those researched for this book were asked to select factors that caused them to choose a church home, 88% said the doctrines taught were a factor, 25% said the youth and children's ministries were, and only 11% said the worship style/music was a factor. Think about that. 9 out of 10 said the doctrinal stance of the congregation influenced them while only 1 out of 10 said the musical style was a factor. Why are we so worried about the music? 9 out of 10 people aren't factoring that in. And who knows how many of those 1 out of 10 will actually like our music? This will give you a little insight into why I claim the book surprised me.

## II. Conclusions from Surprising Insights from the Unchurched

- A. As I said, I don't have time to share with you everything this book claimed. But I do want to share its conclusions with you. The final chapter is entitled "Conclusion: To Become a Church for the Unchurched."<sup>5</sup> And it provides 15 conclusions drawn from the research about what any church needs to do if it really wants to be effective in reaching the unchurched.
  1. *Major on Majors*: Don't get bogged down in things that don't matter. Churches that effectively reach the unchurched don't spend a lot of time arguing over which songbook to use, what the order of the assembly is, if the sermon was 5 minutes too long, what building the church meets in. They focus on what matters.
  2. *Be Biblical, Conservative, and Convictional*: Have a high view of the Scripture and show conviction about what you believe. One respondent said of churches: "I visited a few churches before I became a Christian. Man, some of them made me want to vomit! They didn't show any more conviction about their beliefs than I did. And I was lost and going to hell!"<sup>6</sup>
  3. *Give Evangelism Priority and Passion*: We have to realize that discipling is the work that we do. Folks won't disciple themselves. It takes us getting connected with friends, family, and especially our guests. Sure, some folks won't respond. But don't focus on them; recognize that the only people who do respond are those who have been evangelized and discipled.
  4. *Provide Deep Biblical Teaching*: One of the respondents to the research said: "I didn't have a church background, but I sure could tell a lot about churches after a visit or two. There was this one church where the preacher went through all sort of gyrations to say nothing. It was like he was afraid he would offend somebody. Personally, I was offended that he was such a dud. I could've turned on the TV and watched *The Simpsons* and learned as much about the Bible!"<sup>7</sup> Another respondent said, "You know what frustrated me the most when I started visiting churches? ... What really frustrated me was that I had a deep desire to understand the Bible, to hear in-depth preaching and teaching...But most of the preaching was so watered-down that it was insulting to my intelligence. I went to one church where the message was on fear. I was eager to hear what the Bible had to say about a subject that described my state of mind...It was more of a pop-psychology message. The biblical view was never explained. Bible texts were hardly mentioned."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p 20.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. pp 22-23.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. pp 223-234.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p 127.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p 134.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p 45.

5. *Develop an Effective and Comprehensive Small-Group Ministry:* Relationships matter. And people relate better in small groups. This might be done through Bible classes, through work groups, through study groups, home Bible studies, or accountability groups. But get folks relating in small groups so they are less likely to fall through the cracks.
6. *Discern Patterns of Relationships in Your Own Church:* This isn't about how we relate to each other. Rather, it is about recognizing the relationships that each of us have with presently unchurched people. Instead of focusing on a bunch of "cold-call evangelism" (though there is a place for that), pay attention to the relationships we have. Some of us are married to unchurched people. Some of us are children of unchurched people. Some of us are parents of unchurched people. Some of us are cousins, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews of unchurched people. Some of us are neighbors to unchurched people. Some of us work with unchurched people. Effective evangelistic churches discern the patterns of those already established relationships and start to capitalize on those.
7. *Check Your Facilities:* Our property, landscaping, and building give an unspoken message. Some Christians seem to believe having unkempt, outdated, dirty property is a sign of more spiritual priorities. To the unchurched, it says we don't care about what we are doing. This, by the way, is why the cleaning groups we have are so important. Please don't think of your work as menial or unimportant. You really are playing a part in how our guests perceive the presence of God with us.
8. *Cultivate a User-Friendly Greeter Ministry:* I'm glad we had already started our guest evangelism program with greeters and follow-up before I read this book. That made me feel good. How about you?
9. *Keep the Friendliness Issue Before the Church:* It's easy to get in a rut of just paying attention to ourselves and the friends we have already developed within the congregation. This means we need to be reminded in sermons, announcements, articles, and conversation to be friendly to everyone who walks through our doors.
10. *Seek Excellence:* Here is what Rainer said about this: "The fellowships of many churches have become havens for mediocrity. The formerly unchurched were completely turned off by poor music, unkempt facilities, poorly prepared sermons, and ill-equipped Sunday school teachers. The typical American unchurched person has come to expect excellence in the business world, in the marketplace, and in the entertainment industry. Often we heard the formerly unchurched voice surprise that God's church would accept anything that did not approach excellence. 'I got to the point as I visited churches,' Doug L. said, 'that I began to believe that churches didn't give a rip about anything. It was a big letdown...'" He then spoke about the church he finally attended, "Their attitude of excellence may have been the difference between heaven or hell for me."<sup>9</sup>
11. *Provide an Inquirers'/New Members' Class:* Have a special class for folks to learn what the church is about and what being a member of the congregation is about.
12. *Expect Much/Receive Much:* Too many churches think the way to get more members is to lower expectations. Don't expect them to get involved. Don't expect them to work. Don't expect them to contribute. Don't even expect them to attend. But that isn't what the Rainer Group found. They discovered that the formerly unchurched were moved by the expectations to be part of something significant.
13. *Know Your Church's Purposes:* Be aware of what a local congregation is here for. Preach and teach that we exist in order to worship God, spread the Word, serve each other, pray, teach, disciple. Keep this constantly before the congregation to remind us we aren't a social club, we are a working organization.
14. *Foster Ministry Involvement:* Figure out how to get people working. Don't just let people be bench-warmers and place-holders. Get folks involved in the work in some way as quickly as possible.
15. *Never Forget the Power of Prayer:* "Evangelizing the unchurched is spiritual warfare. Satan and his demonic horde will do anything they can to hinder someone from becoming a believer. Only prayer can effectively break the bonds of complacency, tradition, and nit-picking that keep a church's focus off evangelism."<sup>10</sup> These churches believed God would cause their growth, not them. So they prayed.

B. There it is. Being a church for the unchurched takes work and purpose. Do you think we can do that?

### III. What I learned from this book.

A. Lesson #1: We don't have to sell out God's will to reach the unchurched.

1. **Colossians 3:17** says, "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus..." **II Timothy 3:16-17** says we are equipped for every good work by the Scripture God has breathed out. We look at the churches that appear to be growing these days and we begin to think we have to sell out the truth to bring people in.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p 229.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p 231.

2. But consider that list of 15 items again. Do you see something that all of those items have in common? Every single one of them is scriptural. We don't have to entertain in order to evangelize. We don't have to recreate in order to re-create. We don't have to feed in order to fellowship. We don't have to dumb-down in order to disciple. We don't have to sell-out in order to sanctify.
- B. Lesson #2: I need to quit salving my conscience with bad excuses and, instead, get to work.
1. We learned a few weeks ago that **Matthew 28:19-20** says we need to get busy discipling wherever we are going. But I have a tendency to put that off. Why? Because I've come to believe the conventional wisdom among our brethren that churches that grow too much must have sold out. Too many of us have implicitly accepted that in order to get any bigger than we are now, we have to make appeals to the flesh and sabotage sound doctrine. So, I make excuses for my lack of work by blaming it on all those people out there who don't want what we have to offer.
  2. But that is just salving my conscience with bad excuses. Instead, I need to get to work. Why? Because clearly there are people who are looking for what we have to offer and if we aren't the ones offering it to them, they may accept something that looks good but doesn't actually work.
- C. Lesson #3: We can do this.
1. I can't help but notice another thing that each of these 15 have in common. We can do them. I don't just mean we can do them scripturally. I've already said that. I mean they are things we have the ability to do. According to **Ephesians 4:15-16**, every congregation can grow as each part works and fulfills its role within the congregation. Look around you at the people resources we have. When we all work, God will grow us.
  2. We just need to remember the principle of **I Peter 4:10-11**. Whatever gifts and abilities we have, we need to remember that God has given them to us to use to His glory and to serve His people. We need to exercise those gifts within the context of the Lord's body so that we can grow individually and as a congregation.
- D. Lesson #4: We need to depend on God's power.
1. **Acts 11:21** says it all. Many turned to the Lord because the Lord's hand was with them. We can plan special days and special events. We can set up special programs. We can work hard. But as **Psalms 127:1-2** says, unless God is building this house, our labor is in vain. We can rise early and work late. We can eat the bread of anxious toil. But only God can make what we are doing worthwhile.
  2. I was humbled when I read what Rainer said about the effectively evangelistic churches being devoted to prayer. The leaders of those churches prayed an average of 45 minutes per day. They believed God was going to help them grow. I am humbled because in my opinion, most of the churches mentioned in that study do not teach the truth on God's plan of salvation. They believe people pray their way into salvation or are saved in a moment of faith. They do not worship God according to His pattern but based upon the doctrines of men. Yet, they have an intense faith that God is working through them and so they work hard. And they are growing.
  3. I don't believe prayer is a placebo. I don't believe it is simply a means to motivate us to do all the work. But, my brothers and sisters, I sincerely hope we, who are truly in Christ, are not being outshone in prayer and dependence on God by those who do not even teach the truth about God's salvation. We must depend on God. We must be devoted to prayer. That is why the anchor of our guest evangelism program is the two prayer groups. That is why I preached this morning about praying on purpose. I know my previous point was "we can do this," but we only can when we depend on God. Remember, **Ephesians 3:20** says that God can do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think. That means we need to ask big.

Conclusion:

Do you remember what we learned a few weeks ago from **Matthew 28:19-20**? Jesus said, "And behold, I am with you always..." God is with us. He is working in us. We cannot fail. We just need to surrender to Him and get to work for Him. Let's work and grow together.