



ROBERT MORRIS

Author of *The Blessed Life*

The Simple Secret
to Growing
the Church You Love

The Blessed Church

The
Blessed
Church

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to Growing the Church You Love

ROBERT
MORRIS



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This book is dedicated to Bill Hybels, who has exemplified to me a Blessed Leader and Blessed Church. He continues to walk in humility, transparency, integrity, and determination to turn irreligious people into wholly devoted followers of Christ!



Bill, I'm grateful for our friendship and the personal times you have spoken into my life. Even if we had never had a single face-to-face meeting, your life, example, teaching, and writing still would have inspired me to live my life a certain way and to stir others to do the same: to nurture a wholehearted passion for Jesus and people, and to keep His bride healthy so she can have the greatest impact!

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Introduction

TO THE BEST OF OUR ABILITY, WE HAVE BUILT GATEWAY CHURCH on principles that have brought God's blessing on us so that we might reach and disciple more people—who in turn will reach others. I'm writing this book to share these principles, because I desire to do everything in my power to build God's kingdom through His local church.

What I have tried to clearly address in this book are the principles upon which healthy churches are built. I speak from the reference of Gateway Church because that's where I serve, not because I believe it is the only or the healthiest. We are continuing to learn from many others in the body of Christ. I'm so grateful we're laying down our swords and picking up our plowshares to work together!

A while back, Pastor Jack Hayford and I were speaking to some pastors when all of a sudden Jack said, "You guys are asking the wrong questions! You keep asking Robert *how* Gateway does this and that! You need to be asking him *why*. What's the principle behind the policy?"

That comment made me stop and think. Had I been guilty of telling young inquiring leaders of integrity *how* I do it but not *why* I do it? Had I focused more on the methods than the motives, the actions rather than the attitudes, and the head rather than the heart?

When I began writing this book, I gave it the title *Healthy Things Grow*, because I believe with all of my heart that spiritual health is the key to church growth (and when I say church growth, I mean reaching people who don't know

Christ and discipling them to do the same). God's blessing brings spiritual health, and spiritual health brings God's blessing! I believe we need to understand the *how-tos* of church growth but more importantly, we must also understand the *whys*.

This book has been a collaborative project incorporating the insights of many on Team Gateway. Foremost among them is my dear friend and Gateway's executive senior pastor, Tom Lane. Tom has been searching God's Word, praying, and thinking deeply about biblical models of church governance and administration for most of his adult life. He is an amazing gift to the body of Christ, to our church, and to me personally. And he has graciously made the riches of his wisdom and insights fully available to this work.

One of our founding elders, Steve Dulin, has contributed his insights and anecdotes, as have many of Gateway's key staff pastors, including the associate senior pastor, Thomas Miller (Gateway's original and only lead worship pastor), and the associate senior pastor, David Smith. Indeed, I got pretty much the entire staff involved in this project, asking them for their insights, perceptions, and stories.

Please read this book with an open heart and mind. You will undoubtedly find things you would say differently, outright disagree with, or don't wholly relate to you, but don't write off the rest. These principles are based on my understanding of Scripture and are being put to the test every day. It is my sincere desire that God will give you some insight—some revelation—that will take you much further than I have and that together we will plunder hell and populate heaven! May we pastor churches that God blesses to be a blessing!

To you first, God, having raised up His Servant Jesus, sent Him to *bless* you, in turning away every one *of you* from your iniquities. (Acts 3:26)

 PART ONE

The Gateway Story

God's Story, Not Ours

SHORT OF BEING A PASSENGER ON A ROCKET SHIP TO MARS, I was about as far away from my North Texas home as a man could be. I had just finished speaking at a pastor's conference in Australia when a young minister from New Zealand approached me with a question. It was a familiar one: "What's the key?"

He didn't have to elaborate. I was pretty sure I knew what he meant. But I encouraged him anyway.

"The key to what?" I responded.

"Gateway's growth. I mean...what in heaven's name is going on up there? What are you guys doing?"

He was referring to Gateway Church, the fellowship that it's my privilege to pastor. The "what's going on" at the heart of his question has been an ongoing story of astonishing growth and rising influence.

How astonishing? Well, Gateway began with a handful of friends and me in a living room Bible study back in 2000. As I write today, the church sees more than twenty thousand people participate in live worship and teaching each weekend. The growth has been steady, dramatic, and shows no sign of slowing down. On the pages that follow, I hope to reveal why I think we've experienced the blessings we have.

Nevertheless, I confess that I've had to work through some feelings of reluctance and awkwardness about writing this book.

That's because the last thing we—myself or any of our team—would ever want to do is appear to be bragging or patting ourselves on the back. The very

thought of anyone saying “Who does that guy think he is?” makes me want to shrink back and count my blessings in grateful silence. But the Lord won’t allow it.

The fact is, I don’t think I’m anything special. And of all God’s people, I’m the most aware that what we have experienced over the last twelve years has absolutely nothing to do with any smarts, special talents, or abilities I might possess.

On the contrary, I might be the most unlikely candidate you’ll ever meet. But that’s God’s MO, isn’t it? He chooses the rustic, barely educated fisherman Peter to carry the gospel to the cream of Jewish society. And He sends Paul, with his elite education and sterling religious pedigree, to pagan Gentiles who couldn’t care less about his Jewish credentials.

Thus, I’m not a walking advertisement for the church-growing power of natural talent, clever strategy, and brilliant marketing. I’m a living, breathing testament to the power of God’s unfathomable grace.

Nevertheless, it’s impossible to deny that God has done something remarkable at Gateway Church. Wherever we go, I and members of our team are asked about it. Those questions take a variety of forms:

- “What’s your secret?”
- “To what do you attribute your church’s amazing rate of growth?”
- “How did you become one of the largest and fastest growing churches in America in just a few short years?”
- “How have you been able to remain balanced, healthy, and focused while riding a virtual rocket sled of increase?”
- “How do you identify, develop, and/or attract leaders to your cause?”

It is to bring clear answers to these questions in a spirit of transparency, humility, and gratitude that I have finally undertaken this book. Frankly, God will not let me off the hook.

In the end, the Lord has made it clear that He wants the Gateway story told

because it's *His* story—not because we've done everything right, but rather because He has accomplished something special *in spite of* our weaknesses and mistakes. He wants these principles shared because they're *His* principles. And the church bodies scattered across planet Earth by the tens of thousands are *His* too. He wants to see them healthy, growing, influencing, and overcoming.

So on the pages that follow, I'll share what we've learned and what I've seen in the Word. Not because I have all the answers, but because I have *some* answers. A few of them may surprise you. Thus, throughout this book you'll find little nuggets of truth and insight labeled "Keys to a Blessed Church."

To begin, I will share a brief overview of how I came to found Gateway Church and the amazing journey of grace and favor we have been on over the last dozen years. I'll follow that by sharing the spiritual principles, biblical precepts, school-of-hard-knocks lessons, and surprising insights that have made that journey so extraordinary.

Hearing from God

I GREW UP A REBELLIOUS, SIN-ATTRACTED BOY in a wonderful Christian home. But when the Lord got hold of me at the age of nineteen, His grip of grace was firm and unbreakable.

Very soon after my dramatic salvation experience—*too* soon in retrospect—I entered ministry as a youth evangelist, preaching and speaking all over the country. Paul offers some clear warnings about thrusting young believers into high profile ministry positions too quickly (see 1 Timothy 3:6). Nevertheless, I loved the Lord, sensed His call, had a burning heart for souls, and committed myself to serve Him for the rest of my life.

That led to Bible college and then ultimately a ministry staff position at a wonderful, Spirit-filled church in Grand Prairie, Texas: Shady Grove Church, led by a wise and gifted man of God, my friend and spiritual father, Olen Griffing.

I had served there under Olen's leadership in a variety of roles, including evangelism pastor, for more than a decade. At the ripe old age of thirty-one, I was the father of three young children; I was happy, content, and fruitful. Then one day Olen and I were riding in a car together when out of the blue he mentioned something that would change my thinking and ultimately the course of my life.

He mentioned that he knew he couldn't serve as senior pastor of Shady Grove forever and that one day—in perhaps three to five years—he'd want to retire. To my surprise, he said he wanted me to know that he viewed me as the most likely candidate to succeed him when that day came. He encouraged me to add that prospect to my thinking, praying, and preparation for the future.

I can tell you with complete truthfulness that serving as the senior pastor of any church, not to mention Shady Grove, had never entered my mind before that day. My assumption had always been that if the day ever came that the Lord called me away from Shady Grove, it would surely be to return to traveling evangelism.

Of course, after I arrived home, I immediately told my wife, Debbie, about the surprising conversation. In fact, she noted it in her journal that night. The next morning in my quiet time, I asked the Lord directly about it: *Lord, is this what You have for me? To be a senior pastor of a local church someday?*

I didn't ask about Shady Grove specifically. Before I heard from Him about my future at Shady Grove, I needed to hear from Him about the broader issue of what it was I was called to be.

Yes, Robert, was the reply that I heard from the familiar voice in my spirit. And then He said something else.

Before I tell you what it was, you need to understand that I have always had the type of relationship with the Lord in which I hear Him very clearly. When I attune the ear of my heart to His voice, He speaks to me very precisely and with great detail, just as my wife or any other intimate friend of mine speaks.

If this seems odd to you, please also understand that this ability is not a gift reserved for a few special prophets. The ability to hear the voice of God is the birthright of every believer. (This book is not the place to elaborate on this, but it is a subject I explore in great Bible-centric detail in my book *The God I Never Knew: How Real Friendship with the Holy Spirit Can Change Your Life.*)

After telling me that, yes, I was indeed destined to ultimately be a senior pastor, the Lord went on to let me know that this was something that would not happen right away for me. Indeed, He was very specific. He said I would become a senior pastor of a church when I was thirty-eight years old. In other words, in seven years.

At that point in my life, seven years into the future seemed like an eternity away. So I just tucked this nugget of direction away in my heart and made it a matter of prayer on those occasions when the Lord brought it to my remembrance.

The years that followed were filled with parenting, learning, and growing—both in my personal spiritual life and in my ministry experience. Olen was a wonderful mentor, and I learned much about leading a congregation from watching and listening to him.

Of course, as my thirty-eighth year approached, I couldn't help but wonder what door the Lord would open to fulfill His yes to me all those years earlier. For most of that time, my default assumption was that I would transition into leading Shady Grove Church whenever Olen decided he was ready to retire. But in the final months of that seven-year period of preparation, I started to sense that perhaps that was not what the Lord had in store for me.

Finally, on the day before my thirty-eighth birthday, the picture sharpened. Something happened that made it clear to me that it might be several more years before the senior pastor position at Shady Grove would be open. In hindsight, this was clearly God's providential hand working for the good of everyone involved—Shady Grove included. But at that moment, it forced me to reexamine my expectations and plans.

Immediately following this revelation, I was speaking with a few close friends about the news. I wondered out loud if perhaps there might be another existing church somewhere in America that needed a senior pastor. Then someone threw out the suggestion that I should simply plant a church in another part of the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex.

Someone else jumped on the idea and pretty soon a what-if discussion was underway. At first my response was, "Hey, that might be a good idea. I could start the church far enough away from Shady Grove that it wouldn't tend to draw members away..."

I was getting caught up in the hypothetical flow of the conversation when suddenly a holy fear swept over me. I blurted out, "Wait! Stop! We can't be talking about this. I can't run down this road in my mind because God hasn't spoken to me about it."

The presumption of even considering a move of that magnitude without

having a clear word from God made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I said, “I love you guys and appreciate the support, but this simply isn’t something we can talk about unless God speaks.”

I took the next day to be alone with God and pray. I had a wonderful time of fellowship with the Lord, and in the process He directed me to two passages that pointed me in the direction of my God-ordained destiny.

The first was Genesis chapter 35. In this passage, the Lord speaks to Jacob and says, “Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there; and make an altar there to God” (Genesis 35:1). As my eyes fell across this verse, the Holy Spirit strongly witnessed that it had special meaning for me in this moment. I recalled that *Bethel* (Beth-El) literally means “house of God.”

God’s instruction in this verse was quite literally, *Get up, move to another place, and build a place of worship—a house of God.* For a preacher asking God what his next move is supposed be, this verse was packed with significance and meaning.

Keys to a Blessed Church

When faced with a major decision or challenge, don’t make a move without first getting alone with God and obtaining His counsel.

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path. (Psalm 119:105, NIV)

Then the Lord found a way to direct my attention to another, even more obscure, passage—Deuteronomy 11. This entire chapter contains God’s instructions to His people as they are about to move in and finally possess the land of promise. These verses are filled with references to taking a new land, and each one seemed to speak to me.

The next-to-last verse in the chapter rolled like thunder through my spirit:

You are about to cross the Jordan to enter and take possession of the land the LORD your God is giving you. (Deuteronomy 11:31, NIV)

In the years since that day, God has used this rich chapter to speak to me on scores of occasions. (I'll share a few of these later on.) For now just know that I walked away from that day of prayer, study, and communing with my heavenly Father with a clear word about my future.

Planting a church wasn't merely a *good* idea; it was a *God* idea for me. I discussed this direction with Olen, and he responded with characteristic grace and wisdom. He recommended that we take what I had shared with him to the elders of Shady Grove, let them hear my heart, and get their take on how to proceed.

This could not have been an easy season for my friend and mentor. Olen was like a father to me and I like a son to him. Hearing of my planned direction was like a business owner's son suddenly declaring that he didn't want to take over the family business.

Ultimately, we all agreed that I should step away from Shady Grove before beginning any new endeavor. This would minimize any tendency for current Shady Grove members with a special affinity for me to try to follow me to my new work.

I was in complete agreement. I didn't want to launch this new phase of my life and ministry in the wrong way. The words of Deuteronomy 11 had made it clear to me that, if I wanted God's blessing on my time in this new land, I needed to enter it in absolute purity and obedience.

Be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them. Then the LORD's anger will burn against you, and he will shut the heavens so that it will not rain and the ground will yield no produce, and you will soon perish from the good land the LORD is giving you. (Deuteronomy 11:16–17, NIV)

Next I asked Olen and the Shady Grove elders if they wanted to play a key role giving birth to this new work by officially planting my church and serving as its covering. After praying about it, the sense of the group was that Shady Grove was not to be the parent of this embryonic church. Once again, these men were hearing clearly from the Lord, as future events would bear out.

Throughout this season I had sought the counsel of Jimmy Evans, the pastor of Trinity Fellowship Church in Amarillo, Texas. Trinity was and is one of the finest, healthiest churches I've ever seen. Under Jimmy's leadership, the church has grown from about nine hundred members to more than eight thousand—this in a community with a population under two hundred thousand. He and his wife, Karen, are also the founders of a remarkable marriage and family ministry called MarriageToday.

In those years, Trinity Fellowship had organized and led a cooperative association of like-minded churches in West Texas, New Mexico, and Oklahoma. Trinity Fellowship Association of Churches (TFAC) had provided counsel, covering, ministry, and help to dozens of young churches in and around the Texas panhandle.

After hearing of Shady Grove's decision, I went to Jimmy for wise counsel. After praying about it, he came back to me with a suggestion that proved to be a heaven-sent solution.

He suggested I come on staff at TFAC for a season and preach as an evangelist at the various TFAC member churches as needed. This would provide a base of income for my family while I honored my commitment to Shady Grove to wait a season before starting another church. This I did with gratitude while pressing into God for specific direction about matters such as *where* to plant the church, *what* to call it, and *when* to begin.

A number of confirming signs had nudged us toward Southlake, Texas, a rapidly growing bedroom suburb of both Dallas and Fort Worth.

As for the name, the Lord used the Old Testament's Jacob once again to point the way. I was praying and reading the Word with this location question in mind when I came across the twenty-eighth chapter of Genesis. This is the

passage in which Jacob famously sleeps out under the stars, so ill-equipped that he has to use a stone for a pillow. In a dream he sees heaven open up and angels rising and descending between heaven and earth.

In his dream, Jacob then has an encounter with God Himself in which God makes a remarkable promise to him. Upon waking up, Jacob is understandably excited. He cries out:

“Surely the LORD is in this place, and I wasn’t even aware of it!” But he was also afraid and said, “What an awesome place this is! It is none other than the house of God, the very gateway to heaven!” (Genesis 28:16–17, NLT)

One phrase leapt out at me: “the very gateway to heaven.” What Jacob described in his excitement that morning was exactly my heart’s desire for this new church. I wanted it to be a place where people encountered the presence of God. Where people who had never experienced the love, power, and peace of God would feel it the moment they walked in the door and declare, “Surely the Lord is in this place.”

Always an evangelist to my core, I wanted desperately to lead and steward a place that pointed people to the God who loves them by introducing them to the Way, Jesus Christ. In other words, to have this new place be a supernatural connecting point...a gateway.

So, Gateway Church it was.

God was equally vocal and specific about the timing of our launch. One day toward the end of 1999, I was reading a book that made reference to a church that had been launched on an Easter Sunday. This got me thinking about the pros and cons of beginning the church on that day. Part of me felt that no day could be more appropriate. After all, Resurrection Sunday is the day the Son of God conquered death and the grave, opening the way for all mankind to come to God and enter heaven. On the practical side, it’s the day of the year people who are not deeply involved in a church are most likely to attend a service.

Still, I didn't want a *good* idea. I wanted *God's* idea. Throughout my adult life, God has used my wife, Debbie, to confirm His voice to me and impart wise perspective. So I laid my book aside and walked into the next room where Debbie was reading.

I said, "Honey, I think I may have gotten some direction from the Lord about when we're supposed to have the first service."

She looked up from her book and said, "I think I've just heard from God about that too."

"Really?" I said, trying not to look too hurt or disappointed that God wasn't speaking only and exclusively to me.

"Yes," she continued. "Easter Sunday." She had just been reading a book about a church that had experienced a major outpouring of God's presence during an Easter service.

"That's what I was thinking!" I said. "Let's call Jimmy Evans and see what he thinks."

When I got Jimmy on the phone, I excitedly told him that Debbie and I believed we'd heard from the Lord about exactly when to launch Gateway Church. Before I could drop the news flash, Jimmy said, "Oh, I know when you're supposed to launch. It's Easter."

As if that wasn't ample confirmation, not too many days later I was in a church service in which a wonderful minister and friend, Wayne Drain, was speaking. Now Wayne has a very sensitive heart to the voice of the Lord and is used often and mightily by God to deliver words of encouragement and comfort to others. In this service he was right in the middle of delivering such a message to a member of the congregation when he suddenly stopped, wheeled around, pointed at me and said these words: "Easter. Easter. Easter." Then he turned back around just as abruptly and continued his ministry message to that other person.

Needless to say, I felt I had clear direction from the Lord about when Gateway Church was to begin. It would be April 23, 2000. Easter Sunday. Whether

there would be anyone in attendance besides me, Debbie, and our children was a separate question.

With the name, place, and timing of the launch established with clear words from heaven, I checked in once more with Olen and the elders at Shady Grove.

I let them know that TFAC was standing by with some seed funding to plant Gateway Church if I chose to use it, but that I wanted to make sure Shady Grove didn't want to do it themselves.

The response was gracious and supportive. They let me know that after praying about it they believed Trinity/TFAC was the ideal entity to play the role of midwife in this birth. They blessed us and let us know they were praying for us.

In the months leading up to that God-ordained Easter date, Debbie and I had the support and encouragement of Trinity Fellowship as well as that of some longtime friends from the area. We led a regular Bible study in our home that grew rapidly.

For our very first service, we took our seed money and rented a small ball-room in the Hilton hotel. It was far from the cheapest place in the area, but I wanted to honor the Lord by making our first service special. The fact was, we knew we didn't have the budget to meet there on an ongoing basis and that we would need to find a much lower cost site going forward.

To our delight, we had one-hundred-eighty people in attendance. We were off to an amazing start.