

Q&A with Francis Chan, author of *Letters to the Church*

Q: How do you see the future of the American church?

A: I wrote this book during one of the happiest seasons of my life. I don't remember ever being this excited about ministry or the future of the Church. I have never been one to proclaim, "Revival is coming!" But it does currently feel that way.

There have been stirrings throughout our country, and some of these are not the usual critics but true lovers and servants of the Church—which is awesome. I get excited about the possibility of the consumer mentality in the American Church disappearing. I dream of this happening in my lifetime, and I'm excited to give what remains of my life to it. I think the starting point is for all of us to ask, pray, and dwell on the question: *What does God want for His Church?* This question can change everything.

Q: Fans of your books may not be aware that you are in a new season of ministry and church planting. How are things going?

A: Things have been going great. Do we have the perfect church? No way—we're people. But I think we are on to something.

While I believe I have loved Jesus for years, it feels totally different now, and I love it. The strangest part about this season of my life is that my intimacy with God has been directly tied to my connection with the Church. This is really weird for me because for years, I felt closest to God when I was away from people and alone in my prayer room.

For the first time in my life, I actually feel closer to God while praying alongside my church family! It's like I can sense His actual presence in the room with us. It makes me want to stay in a room with them all because I want to get as close to Jesus as possible. Just the other day, a one-hour teaching session spontaneously turned into thirteen hours of prayer! We were enjoying His presence together so much that no one wanted to leave!

It is an awesome thing to experience God's presence in a room full of people who truly love Him.

Q: Your new book, *Letters to the Church*, reflects on the state of American evangelical churches – including lessons learned from your own mistakes.

A: Yes, God has graciously shown me the good fruit from my Cornerstone days as well as some of the fundamental mistakes I made early on. I hope to help others avoid some of the same mistakes. I realize now that I built a church designed around what I wanted in a church.

Honestly, I struggled in writing this book because the Church is such a sacred topic. I have not always treated the Church as such. I spent years doing "whatever works" to get people's attention. I had joined millions of Americans in being too quick to speak and too sure about my opinions. Over the last few years, I have spent time crying in the presence of God, confessing my arrogance. 25 years after launching that first church, I'm asking myself, "Who cares what Francis Chan wants?" Is there anything less significant than *my* opinion of what church should be? Could anything matter less than the kind of church I want to create?

The good news is that by the grace of God, some of us are seeing our failures now and are training ourselves to prioritize *His* desires. Scripture is our starting point, not desire or tradition. Rather than thinking of what we would enjoy or asking others what they would like, we ask the simple question: What would please God most?

Q: You write passionately about God’s desires for His church. Does 30 years of ministry change your sense of urgency?

A: Yes, I believe it does. I’ve seen a lot and experienced a lot over these 30 years of ministry. I became a grandpa recently. (It’s weird to say that sentence.) The older I get, the more aware I am that the end is near. There is no time to care about what I want in Church. There’s no time to worry about what others are looking for in a church.

Typically, when I speak at a conference, there is a countdown clock letting me know how much time I have remaining on the stage. Sometimes I pretend that the clock is a countdown clock of my life. I imagine that I’ll be standing face to face with God when that timer expires, and I try to say everything I think He would want me to say. If I really was going to die, I would care very little about people’s complaints.

I have the same thought now. If I knew I was going to die right after writing this book, what would I write? But even more than that, the warnings in Revelation are very real and we need to take them seriously. Over and over, His message was repent or else. Repent or else.

Jesus is coming. We should be urgent about eternal things. I tried to write the book from this perspective.

Q: In Acts 4 you point out a pattern that could transform American churches. Describe that pattern for us.

A: Yes, there is a clear pattern of common elements in the early church:

- God is present in His Word: As we read, we encounter God and allow others to do the same.
- God is present in fellowship: As we join together for the mission, people see God.
- God is present in Communion: As we break bread together, we proclaim the sacrifice of Jesus.
- God is present when we pray: As we cry out on our knees, we will see God act.

This pattern is simple, and it will work today as powerfully as it did in Acts.

Our job is to reveal God to people. He is present in His Word, fellowship, Communion, and prayer. Rather than creating our own pep rallies, our calling is to simply put Him on display and watch as He draws people to Himself. If they are not interested in Him, what do we think we’re accomplishing by trying to lure them by other means? We have to accept the fact that not everyone is interested in God. We just need to make sure that it’s really God that we are putting on display. Otherwise we run the risk of people attending our services who have merely fallen in love with us.

Q: But will it work today?

A: You mean, will anyone show up on Sunday? We are consumed with this question, but it is the wrong question. Paul actually told Timothy that teaching sound doctrine will *not* “work,” in fact it will drive people away (2 Tim. 4:1–5). Yet he is commanded to preach truth because it is what God wants! Remember, it’s not about what I would like, what others would like, or what “works.” Church is for Him.

Having said that, I think we would be surprised. We may find that people are actually attracted to a group that is devoted to the presence of God. After all, it was enough to attract over 100 million people to the underground church in China. It could be that God is waiting for a group of people to strip away all that they think will work and devote themselves to what He commanded.

Q: You have visited a variety of churches in China and other persecuted regions. How different is their experience of church from ours?

A: I recall when my daughter and I went to an underground gathering in China years ago. Young people were praying so passionately, begging God to send them to the most dangerous places. They were actually hoping to die as martyrs! I had never seen anything like it. I still can't get over the fearless passion for Jesus that this church embodied.

As they shared stories of persecution, I sat in amazement and asked for more stories. After a while, they asked why I was so intrigued. I told them that the church in America was nothing like this. I can't tell you how embarrassing it was to try to explain to them that people attend 90-minute services once a week in buildings, and that's what we call "church." I told them about how people switch churches if they find better teaching, or more exciting music, or more robust programs for their kids.

As I described church life in America, they began to laugh. Not just small chuckles—they were laughing hysterically. I felt like a standup comedian, but I was literally just describing the American church as I've experienced it. They found it laughable that we could read the same Scriptures they were reading and then create something so incongruent.

The same is true in India. Years ago, my friend from India drove me to a speaking engagement in Dallas. When he heard the music and saw the lights, he said, "You Americans are funny. You won't show up unless there's a good speaker or band. In India, people get excited just to pray." He proceeded to tell me how believers back home love Communion and how they flock to simple prayer gatherings. I imagined God looking down on the earth and seeing people on one side of the planet gathering expectantly whenever prayer was happening. Meanwhile, on the other side of the planet, people only show up for the most talented people and the "atmosphere."

It's embarrassing. We should be better than "needing atmosphere" in our American churches. We should desire to meet with God above all else.

Q: You employ a "churchBNB" model as you plant churches in the San Francisco area. These are small home-based churches which grow then intentionally divide and multiply. Is this a model you believe will work in other locations?

A: First of all, the New Testament avoids laying out a model for precisely how the Church ought to be structured. The biblical authors could have been very clear on this, but instead they leave us with a lot of freedom. I think that's important, and it is part of preserving the mystery of the Church. What works for us in San Francisco, may not work for every church in the Body.

So, I do not argue that all churches should be small. I thank God for many of the large churches that currently exist, and I hope they thrive. I have many friends who don't know Jesus. Some might not come to a gathering in someone's house but would be open to visiting a large gathering. I just want to see them saved.

Yet I do believe that God is leading a movement in this country toward simple, smaller gatherings, and I long to see this movement gain greater traction. I get so excited when I dream about the Church spreading in small, invigorating expressions that look and feel like the early church. I want to help others begin dreaming as well.

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