

Selected Excerpts from
Letters to the Church by Francis Chan

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IMAGINE

Imagine you find yourself stranded on a deserted island with nothing but a copy of the Bible. You have no experience with Christianity whatsoever, and all you know about the Church will come from your reading of the Bible. How would you imagine a church to function? Seriously. Close your eyes for two minutes and try to picture “Church” as you would know it.

Now, think about your current church experience. Is it even close? Can you live with that?

WHY I LEFT MY MEGACHURCH

In 1994, when I was twenty-six years old, I decided to plant a church. It wasn't something I planned on doing. After all, I had been married for less than a month ... I wish you could have seen how God worked in those early days! Things took off! Nothing was perfect, but there was so much excitement ... God was stirring hearts, the number of people who were gathering to sing and hear the Word of God kept growing, and we had to keep adding services. Our podcast was gaining subscribers every day from all over the world; we were pouring out our hearts to God with our singing, and there was great conviction ...

There came a point when some of the leaders of the church began to question if our idea of success was somehow inadequate ... It was humbling to discuss biblical commands we had neglected. We decided we wanted to bring change into the church. At the time, I didn't realize how difficult it was going to be. I became frustrated with the way things were, but I didn't have clarity on what we needed to become. I was certain that things needed to change, but I didn't know how to make it happen. Some of my messages probably sounded like the rants of an angry old man rather than a wise and loving shepherd guiding his sheep to greener pastures ...

As I look back now, I realize that I didn't lead very well. I was anxious for change but I didn't have a good plan, and I wasn't patiently helping the people get their minds around such a major paradigm shift. I ended up frustrating some of the people I loved. When I left Cornerstone, it was with the genuine belief that my time was done and the church could move forward better without me.

LETTERS TO THE CHURCH

This is definitely the most difficult book I have written, mainly because I have been trying to stay mindful of 1 Thessalonians 5:14. Here God tells us that we should rebuke those who are rebellious and encourage those who are faint-hearted. That's doable if you know your people well enough to determine what they need. The problem with a book to the masses is that some of you need a hug and will feel kicked, and some of you need to be kicked but will feel encouraged!

To the lovers of Jesus who are feeling discouraged, I pray this book gives you hope for what is possible. To those who knowingly or subconsciously are harming the Church, I pray God gives you the grace to repent. It recently dawned on me that Jesus wrote seven different letters to seven different churches in Revelation 2 and 3. I'm trying to write to thousands of different churches with just one book! And Jesus writes better than me.

SACRED

Many today treat the Church as optional, as some outdated way to connect to God that has long outlived its usefulness. They'd rather connect with God on their own, in their own way, without all the weird people making things more difficult. We can empathize with many of their feelings about the Church. But when we see the Church from God's perspective, when we appreciate it according to God's design, we're left in wonder. Who but God could come up with such a beautiful and ingenious plan?

I can't help but see our own lameness in failing to see the beauty in God's design for the Church. Heavenly beings are shocked by God's Church while many on earth yawn. The early church didn't need the

energetic music, great videos, attractive leaders, or elaborate lighting to be excited about being a part of God's body. The pure gospel was enough to put them in a place of awe.

Aren't you at least a little embarrassed that you have needed the extra stuff? It's not all your fault. For decades church leaders like myself have lost sight of the powerful mystery inherent in the Church and have instead run to other methods to keep people interested. In all honesty, we have trained you to become addicted to lesser things. We have cheapened something sacred, and we must repent.

THE GANG

One of the elders of my church, Rob, spent most of his life in gangs. He encountered Jesus when he was imprisoned and placed in solitary confinement. Today, he is the one of the most loving people I know.

Rob tells me stories of gang life and the fear he felt when he left his gang to join the body of Christ. To do this in prison can be suicidal; he had to make a serious break with his gang, and gangs are anything but casual about breaking those ties. But the Lord intervened to spare his life. It wasn't just the physical torture or death he feared; he dreaded the rejection by those he loved. The gang was his family. These were loyal and dear friends who looked out for him twenty-four hours a day. There was a love and camaraderie from being in a gang that he had enjoyed since childhood. Now he would lose those relationships and be hated by them all.

When Rob describes gang life, much of it sounds like what the Church was meant to be. Obviously, there are major differences (drugs, murder—you know, little details like that), but the idea of "being a family" is central to both gang life and God's design for the Church. Yet while we use family terminology in our churches, Rob's stories have convinced me that the gangs have a much stronger sense of what it means to be a family than we do in the Church.

From what you know about gangs, could you ever imagine gang life being reduced to a weekly one-hour gathering? No group would meet briefly once a week and call that a gang. Imagine one gang member walking up to another one and saying, "Yo, how was gang? I had to miss this week because life has been crazy!"

SERVANTS

At the core of our faith lies this belief that almighty God humbled Himself to serve us and die for us. At the root of our calling is a command to imitate Him by serving each other. After washing the disciples' feet, Jesus commanded them to wash each other's feet. Yet on any given Sunday, what percentage of "Christians" show up eager to serve others?

God wants you to resemble His Son, especially when you gather with your church family. ... Have you ever been in a room filled with humble people who count others more significant than themselves? It's anything but burdensome. When servants gather together, everyone is built up. No one hates consumerism more than God, because that mentality keeps the church from having the vibrancy He intended. Don't give up on the dream. The church doesn't have to remain a group of needy people complaining that they haven't been fed well enough. It really can become a group of servants who thrive in serving.

GOOD SHEPHERDS

I was deeply impacted by a pastor in China who said to me, "In America, pastors think they have to become famous to have a big impact. In China, the most influential Christian leaders had to be the most hidden." My soul leapt when I heard that, imagining a chance to fight for impact and obscurity all at once. It feels like our current way of doing things in America sets us up for failure. Those who pursue massive Kingdom impact seem to always be fighting a losing battle with pride. It is how the Enemy lures us away from the very character that makes us effective.

"Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith." Hebrews 13:7

Leaders, I want to challenge you to examine your lives and see if you can truly tell people in good conscience to follow you as you follow Christ. For those not yet in positions of leadership, as we go through the qualities that are essential for good biblical leadership, I urge you to examine your leaders in a spirit of

grace and humility to discern whether their faith and way of life is something you want to imitate. For some of you, God may be calling you to step into leadership, and I implore you to devote yourself to growing in the following areas.

CRUCIFIED

Suffering is rarely talked about in the American Church. I find this ironic because suffering is *all through* the New Testament. I did a sermon one time, where I went through every book of the New Testament and started reading verse after verse about suffering to show it's not just in one book. It's not just one verse. It's all over the place. It's one of the clearest doctrines in the New Testament. Over and over it says that as followers of Christ we're going to suffer for Him; we're going to be hated; we're going to be rejected. I preach messages on suffering and people think it's some kind of strange or new teaching, which is crazy given how prominent it is in the Bible. But we just don't talk about it.

The fact that this is such a major theme throughout the New Testament, yet such a lost concept within our churches is a huge problem. The more I study the Gospels, the more I am convinced that those of us who live in the United States have a warped view of what it means to be a "Christian." It is for that reason our churches are in the state they are in. A warped view of Christianity can only result in a warped church. But what if we started over? What if we bulldozed what we currently call "church" and started over with actual Christians?

A believer from a house church in Iran (who can't be named for obvious reasons) explained that anyone who wants to join the church has to sign a written statement agreeing to lose their property, be thrown in jail, and be martyred for their faith. Many Christians are arrested in Iran and either executed or imprisoned for years. Fellowship looks a lot different when the church consists of those who have a biblical understanding of Christianity. Interestingly, some research shows that Iran has the fastest growing evangelical population in the world!

UNLEASHED

Are we sure our churches aren't zoos?

Rather than producing powerful and fearless missionaries who go to the ends of the earth, we are left with thirtysomethings who live in their parents' basements and complain about not having a singles' group. After all, how can a Christian possibly survive outside of a singles' cage with weekly feedings? We're busy reassuring each other that God wants us to do what's safest for our families and to pursue God in a way that looks suspiciously similar to what we'd naturally do if our only concern was our own comfort and happiness.

Church, the answer is not to build bigger and nicer cages. Nor is it to renovate the cages so they look more like the wild. It's time to open the cages, remind the animals of their God-given instincts and capabilities, and release them into the wild. Alan Hirsch says, "In so many churches the mission of the church has actually become the maintenance of the institution itself." The way to destroy the victim mentality is not by giving them more but by sending them out.

CHURCH AGAIN

If I could go back and hand a note to the twenty-five-year-old version of me, here are some things I would write:

- "Definitely marry Lisa. You won't regret it."
- "Have plenty of kids. And don't stress about your oldest—she ends up fine."
- "Know God. Don't just serve Him. You tend to spend your time accomplishing tasks. God wants you to sit with Him. It's not a waste of time."
- "When you start your church, don't just copy others. Study the Bible with fresh eyes, and search for what He actually commands. You will be constantly tempted to do what you want or what others want. Do what pleases God most. The years will fly by faster than you can imagine. You are going to face God sooner than you know, so don't let people talk you out of your convictions."

We would all do things differently if we could go back and relive the last twenty-five years. One of the blessings in my life is that I actually had an opportunity to start over. God gave me a chance to start another church, and the older (hopefully wiser) me is approaching Church much differently than the younger me did. We are still far from what I believe the Church can become, but I am loving the process.

While part of me wishes I had spent my whole life doing things this way, I also see how God used the path I took for His glory. In hindsight, I see how God used even my pride for His purposes. When Cornerstone was growing, some pastors tried to convince me that growing smaller churches was a better strategy for cultivating the love and obedience God wanted. In my arrogance, I thought to myself, *They are only going small because they are incapable of building a large church, and their vision isn't as big as mine. It's great they are being faithful with the three talents they have been given. I need to be faithful with the eight or nine talents He has given me.* That is so embarrassing to publicly admit, but maybe some will find my confession helpful. There is a prevailing attitude that the best thing we can do is build the largest church we are capable of building. Maybe my flawed journey can dispel notions that going small is merely the default of the less competent and show that it can actually be a choice made out of biblical conviction and a desire to reach the masses.

I went back and forth trying to decide if I even wanted to write this chapter. Up to this point, the book has been about biblical absolutes. I have addressed sin issues that no church can afford to ignore. These are clear commands from the mouth of God. You would be crazy to see failure in these areas and do nothing.

I don't want to confuse the issue now by writing about my current church experience, but I know there are a lot of people who are curious how we try to flesh out these commands in twenty-first-century America. The purpose of this chapter is to describe some things we have done in an effort to be obedient to the commands mentioned in the previous chapters. Those commands are perfect and holy, and my hope in this book is simply to motivate you to change anything necessary in order to be obedient.

If our church in San Francisco grows to 100,000 people, then you shouldn't be motivated more. And if it shrinks to a dozen people, then you shouldn't be motivated less. God's commands are sacred. They came from the mouth God. That should be more than enough to motivate our tireless pursuit of obedience.

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