

# LETTERS TO THE CHURCH

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## STUDY GUIDE

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# CONTENTS

Introduction: Getting Started 9

1. The Departure 19

2. Sacred 29

3. The Order 39

4. The Gang 49

5. Servants 61

6. Good Shepherds 71

7. Crucified 83

8. Unleashed 93

9. Church Again 105

“One Another” Verses in the New Testament 117

About the Author 123



# THE DEPARTURE

*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.*

## VIDEO

Share session 1 from the *Letters to the Church Video Series* with your group. The video should be used at the beginning of your time together to introduce some of the concepts you will be discussing and to provide spiritual direction for the session.

## DISCUSSION

The experience many Christians in the West have today in their churches looks very different from what we read in the New Testament. It is a scary thought that this has somehow become okay with us. God desires faith in His people, and it grieves His heart when we live in a way that shows we don't believe His promises and power are for us in the same way they were for the early church. The journey back to faithfulness won't be a quick one, and this book does not contain any magic formula to get us to where we are supposed to be. Change is going to require dedication and humility. We will have to lay down some things, like our desires and traditions, but it will be more than worth it. God has so much more for the Church to experience. Hopefully this vision will take root in your heart and push you to take action and pursue it.

1. Consider the thought exercise presented in the first few sentences of *Letters to the Church*. Write down

what you would understand church to be if the Bible was your only source of information. Compare that with your church experience. What are some discrepancies?

2. Reread the opening quotation to this session on page 19. Has this ever been true for you? Why or why not?

It is so important that this book not be viewed as a call to cause division. Over and over in the New Testament, the importance of unity within the Church is emphasized. We need to take an honest look at the state of the Church and be willing to consider and repent of the areas where we have

fallen short. But we need to do it out of hearts of genuine love for the Church and respect for the authorities therein. It is easy to point fingers from the outside looking in, but that's not how change occurs. We need to come at this with an attitude of humility and not fall prey to the temptation to criticize or become defensive. It would be better for you to put down this book right now and stop reading than for it to become a tool for feeding pride and causing division. Nothing will destroy the Church faster than that kind of attitude.

We have all had hurts in the Church because it is filled with people who aren't perfect. But the challenge is to handle them well. Sometimes we can use those hurts as an excuse to speak against people or undermine people's confidence in leadership. We may think we are looking for support, but we are actually causing people to view others negatively. This is a big issue we must avoid. If you are hurt, it's important to go to the person who hurt you. If that person doesn't receive your words well, you can tell one other person in order to have them go with you. If they still don't receive what you are saying, then you include leadership at the church. This is what Jesus laid out in Matthew 18 as the process for dealing with sin. Behavior outside of this quickly becomes divisive.

3. Have you ever found yourself unintentionally speaking against another believer, causing others to view him or her negatively? What caused you to do that?

Without using names and doing further damage, spend some time repenting and deciding to stop doing this going forward.

4. In 1 Samuel 24 and 26, David had opportunities to remove King Saul from power and claim the throne he had been promised by God. But he didn't do it. Read 1 Samuel 24:6 for David's response. This attitude of deference toward one God placed in a position of authority seems foreign in today's context. Have you ever been guilty of displaying a critical attitude toward people in leadership in the Church? List some of the reasons for behaving that way. Beside each reason, write one way you could have handled the situation differently instead of responding with criticism. Share some examples with one another.

There are times when God hates our worship. That statement was probably hard for many of you to read. It was not written lightly. It is a difficult reality to accept. But we all need to be willing to consider the possibility that our worship is displeasing. Worship is not about our feelings; it is all about God. He is the object of our worship, and His thoughts should be our sole concern when we come together to worship. So often we are busy thinking about what we or others want while neglecting what God wants in His Church! And it's not as though we have to go around guessing about what God wants. God gave us Scripture to guide us in our pursuit of Him, and we need to start heeding what it says, even when it is difficult to accept.

5. Read through Malachi 1:6–14. Notice that the people did not see anything wrong with their offering. Why do you think that is? What about their attitude or their worship was displeasing to God?



6. How we behave—how much we give of ourselves—reflects how we view God. If we just show up to services, serve in a ministry or two, and give money to our church but do little else for the Church the rest of the week, what does that really say about how we view God? Should we assume God is pleased? He demands everything and is pleased with nothing less. What weaknesses can you identify in your commitment to the Church? How can you address them?

The reality is that many people try to change what it means to worship God because they don't want to do what He has asked. When you look at your heart and life, do you see someone who is willing to do whatever God asks? Or do you see someone who will be in a church as long as God doesn't ask too much of you? We can come up with so many arguments to defend our way of life or decisions we make in our churches, but what is most important is that we are willing to do whatever He wants.

7. As you've begun reading *Letters to the Church* and this study guide, do you sense yourself getting defensive or protective of what you're used to with the church? Anytime you sense yourself getting defensive or coming up with a counterargument, think of that as a red flag—a time to stop and consider, *Why am I feeling this way? Am I being open to whatever God wants?* Share with your group any statements in this study so far that have made you feel uncomfortable, guilty, or defensive. Be open to learning about what those reactions tell you about yourself and your relationship with God.

These are serious and weighty topics. It is easy to get overwhelmed in the face of what seems like a very daunting task. But we can take comfort in the fact that, ultimately, God has a vision for the Church and He will empower us for the work required to achieve that vision. We need to take ownership of and be devoted to stewarding the Church well, but we can also

find rest in knowing that we are simply joining in what He is already doing.

8. Read Revelation 3:19–21. Rejoice at the fact that Jesus stood knocking at the door of a church that had a lot of issues. If Jesus came knocking on your church's door, what would be some of the responses people would have?

9. Write down or share with one another some moments in your life or experiences you've had when you have seen God do amazing things. Think of times you have had your prayers answered. Think of stories in the Bible that display God's faithfulness. Let these things fill you with confidence and hope for what He will do in your church.

We need to live in light of the eternity that is coming very soon. As we have been discussing, this means we need to live with hope and vision for what the Church here on earth can be. But it also means living with a sense of urgency. We need to be willing to lay aside anything that hinders us or any sin that could entangle us in our pursuit (Heb. 12:1). This is so much more important.

10. Take some time to pray together. Ask God to give each of you a passion for His Church and a dedication to her health. Pray for a heart of humility and grace as you examine yourself and your church. Pray that God would direct your steps and give you a spirit of boldness and urgency as you pursue this mission.