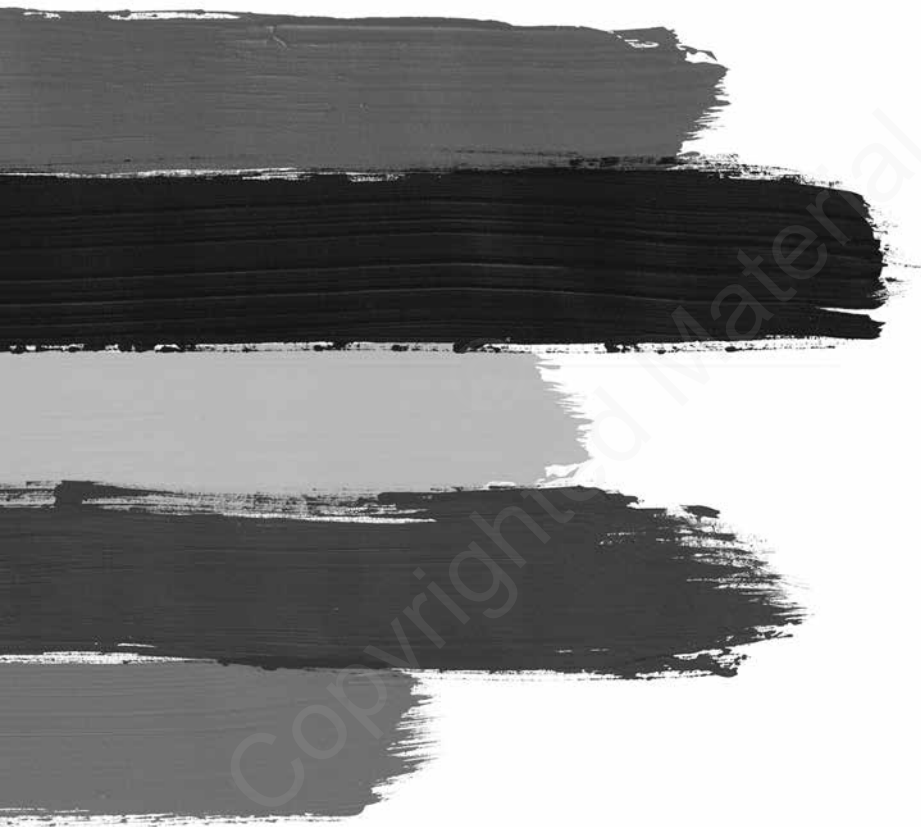


LETTERS TO THE CHURCH



FRANCIS CHAN

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DAVID  COOK™

transforming lives together

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THE DEPARTURE

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?

SOME BACKGROUND

Eight years have passed since I left Cornerstone Church in Simi Valley, California, yet people are still asking me the same question: Why?

Why did you leave a church that was doing great things? Why would you leave all those people you loved?

Why did you leave the country when you seemed to be gaining influence? Did your beliefs change? Do you still love the Church?

You built a megachurch, started a college, wrote bestselling books, had a huge podcast following, and then you suddenly walked away from it all and moved your family to Asia. It just doesn't make sense!

While I am anxious to share what God has been teaching me recently, it's probably helpful to share about how God led me in the past. I want to clear up any confusion and give some insight on why I am writing this book.

First let me say that my years in Simi Valley were so good. I am literally smiling as I type this. I spent over sixteen years as pastor of Cornerstone, so my mind is filled with both hilarious and meaningful memories. So many faces come to mind, deep friendships, spiritual moments, and periods of awe over the things God was doing. I believe I will be spending eternity with many people who fell in love with Jesus during those years. Nothing can ever take that away.

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. Lisa and I were having a rough time at our church. The elders and the lead pastor had been fighting, which eventually led to the pastor's removal. The members were also fighting as they were divided on who was more wrong: the elders or the pastor. Everyone was discouraged by all the division. Sundays were far from uplifting, and I couldn't see how any of this could be pleasing to God. It was at that time I told my new bride I had a crazy idea: What if we started a church out of our house?

Even if there were only a dozen people in our living room, wouldn't it be better than what we had been experiencing? Lisa agreed, and so began Cornerstone Church in Simi Valley.

I was determined to create something different from what I had experienced before. This was my chance to build exactly the kind of church I wanted to be part of. I basically had three goals in mind. First, I wanted all of us to sing directly to God. And I mean really sing. I'm not talking about going through the motions of singing out of routine or guilt. Have you ever been part of a group of people actually singing directly to God? Singing with reverence and emotion? Singing as though God is really listening to their voices? That is a powerful experience, and I wanted it to be central to our new church.

Second, I wanted all of us to really hear the Word of God. We weren't going to be those people who gather together to listen to some self-help nonsense, nor were we going to ignore half the Bible. I wanted us to dig deeply into Scripture—even the passages that contradicted our logic and desires. I wanted the presentation of God's truth to be powerful, and I wanted us to take it seriously. So I began to preach week after week, verse by verse through the Bible. We all set out to truly hear everything the Word of God was saying to us.

And finally, I wanted all of us to live holy lives. I had seen too many Christians packed into too many churches who seemed to have no interest in actually doing what the Bible said. I couldn't get past the tragic irony of this. These people would come back week after week to hear from a Book that demands that they “be doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22), but they never seemed to do anything. Not that I was perfect or expected anyone else to be, but I wanted our church to be a group of people who pushed one another toward action. It didn't make sense to teach the Scriptures without expecting change. So from the very beginning, we challenged one another to action.

And that was basically it. If we could move toward these three goals, I would be happy.

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. Visitors found our services compelling, so we kept growing. We rented the local middle-school cafeteria.

Eventually we moved into a converted former liquor store right next to Chuck E. Cheese's. After outgrowing that, we finally bought our own building. Before long, even that building had to undergo a major expansion. 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. We were up to two Saturday night services and three Sunday morning services when we realized we needed to plant campuses in neighboring towns. It was unreal. 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 was so much life at our services. People would cheer as I would talk about the ways their money helped needy people in Third-World countries. Many couples began adopting children out of the foster care system. Our attendance and offering climbed consistently for years. Baptisms happened every weekend. Lives were being changed. There was no church I would rather have been a part of. But over the years, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was still missing. It wasn't a problem with the church members or with the staff God brought to help me lead. We were successful in staying on target with the goals that had set the DNA of the church. But something was off.

There came a point when some of the elders of the church began to question whether our idea of success was somehow inadequate. Was this really what the Church is meant to be? Is this all God had in mind when He created His Church in the

first place? We began to wonder whether our definition of a church actually fit God's definition. The elders of Cornerstone sought the Scriptures with me and challenged my thinking as to what Jesus wanted of the Church. These men of God encouraged and spurred me on through this season, and it was a joy to serve alongside them.

One of the main things that we questioned was the level of love we had for one another. Cornerstone was by most standards a pretty loving church. But next to the example of the early church in the New Testament, it just fell flat. Jesus said the world should know us by our love (John 13:35). As elders, we came to the painful conclusion that when unbelievers came to our services, they weren't observing anything supernatural about the way we loved one another.

Another issue we saw was how everything had grown to be very dependent on one person. Even as we talked about building a new facility and the expenses involved with that, the elders questioned what would happen if I was no longer the pastor. Would Cornerstone become like so many other churches, stuck with a giant empty building? Again, this is a big issue! Not just because of the waste of money but because no church should be that dependent on one person. We wanted people to come to Cornerstone to experience almighty God and the moving of the Holy Spirit—not to hear Francis Chan.

Because my leadership was so prominent in the church, I also began to see that it was holding back others who should

have been leading. As I started to encourage some of my staff members and elders to leave and began releasing them into new ministries, I saw how much they grew from being given the opportunity to pastor.

The Bible tells us that every member of the body has a gift necessary to the functioning of the Church. When I looked at what went on in Cornerstone, I saw a few other people and me using our gifts, while thousands just came and sat in the sanctuary for an hour and a half and then went home. The way we had structured the church was stunting people's growth, and the whole body was weaker for it.

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.

We tried a lot of different things. We tried having me preach less to release some of the associate pastors into holding greater responsibility, but we found that it became hard for them to lead while still in my shadow, so to speak. We tried getting people to plant smaller churches out of their homes, but people had grown accustomed to the benefits of childcare

and preaching at the big service. Eventually they would give up. There was even a time when I stepped away from the main gathering in Simi Valley and helped launch several home gatherings in LA County. It started to gain traction, but then I was needed back in Simi. It was a difficult time. I give the church credit for enduring all the trial and error going on. Eventually people started to get tired and frustrated, and a small exodus began.

CHANGING THE RULES

One young person in the church articulated it so well. He said it felt as if the rules were suddenly changed on him. He explained that for years he was taught salvation was a free gift and the gospel meant he could have a personal relationship with Jesus. It would be like someone gifting him a pair of ice skates. In excitement, he went to the skating rink and learned to do all sorts of tricks. He enjoyed this and did it for years. Now suddenly he was being told that the skates were actually given to him because he was supposed to be a part of our hockey team working together to pursue a championship. He wasn't supposed to just twirl around by himself. That's a huge difference! While he did not disagree biblically, it would take time to realign his thinking and lifestyle.

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.

There were lots of other factors as well. When people ask why I left, it's really hard to point to just one thing. I was losing peace and humility as my popularity as a speaker and author grew.

Social media had just been invented, so now I had total strangers praising or cursing me. I didn't know how to handle so much criticism and flattery. I wanted to run from it all. I also struggled with the sheer number of Bible-teaching churches in our city when I knew there were many places on earth without a strong Christian witness. It didn't seem like it would require much faith to just keep doing what I was doing, and I wanted to live by faith. I was also very unclear as to how to lead Cornerstone into the future. Needless to say, it was a very confusing time.

Leaving Cornerstone was definitely not an easy decision. During the season when I was still wrestling with whether that would be the best thing to do, I went to preach at an event. Lisa came with me, and on the way there we had a conversation that shocked me. My debate about staying in Simi Valley up to this point had been completely internal. We had never talked about leaving before. Cornerstone was our baby, and Simi Valley was our home. But when I finally decided to ask her what she saw us doing for the rest of our lives, she surprised me by saying she felt

as if we had done all we could do in Simi Valley and it was time to move on. She even brought up going to another country, which was exactly what I had been considering.

Fifteen minutes later, I got a phone call from my friend Jeff, who was a member of Cornerstone. He told me he felt like God wanted him to tell me something: “Just go. Don’t worry about the church. There are others here who will step up and take care of the church.” That was so crazy to me! There was no way he could have known the conversation Lisa and I just had. No one knew what was going on in my mind.

After that, things kept falling into place, and I felt greater and greater peace about leaving. It got to the point where Lisa and I felt as if we would be disobedient if we didn’t leave. We ended up selling our house in Simi Valley and taking our family of six at the time overseas to India, Thailand, and China. It was an amazing adventure that knit our family so close together and helped us refocus on the mission. I saw such fearless dedication and boldness from the pastors in India, who had renounced everything for the Lord. We witnessed the simplicity of the lifestyles in rural Thailand and the joy of the men and women who faithfully served widows and orphans day in and day out. In China I saw the gospel spreading like wildfire as people endured and even rejoiced in persecution.

Throughout this whole time, Lisa and I were praying with the family about where God would have us live. We almost ended up staying in Hong Kong. We were looking at housing

options as well as schools for the kids. Then one day I really felt as if the Lord was speaking to me.

Please understand I do not say that lightly. My background is one that is extremely conservative. I trust only what I see written in the Bible. While my theology left some room for hearing directly from God, I'm not sure I had ever heard it before that day. Again, I'm not sure I heard from the Lord, but I had more peace in obeying what I thought I heard than in ignoring it. I really believe He was telling me to go back to the States and plant churches. While overseas, I had gotten to see a glimpse of what the church could be and the power it could have, and I felt like God wanted me to take that vision back. I was pretty scared of what I thought God was communicating to me. It felt like He was asking me to do something I did not have the intelligence or leadership skills to accomplish.

It was a sad day when I told Lisa and the kids that I felt God wanted me back in the States. We were so happy overseas. We were closer as a family, more dependent on God, and more fixated on eternal matters. While there were feelings of fear when we left the United States, now there was greater fear in returning. We didn't want to lose our focus.

THE JOURNEY HOME

I'll spare you some details, but we eventually ended up in San Francisco mainly because my brother had a one-bedroom

apartment we could stay in. I didn't have much of a plan. I just wanted to live as biblically as I knew how. In my prayers, I told the Lord I wanted to live like Christ, and it seemed like Jesus knew exactly whom to call as His disciples. I asked for that same grace: that I would be able to just walk around the city sharing the gospel, eventually meeting the people He would call me to disciple.

I made some friends over the first year, and we started a ministry where we ministered to the poor in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco. We fed the homeless and went door to door to pray for people in low-income housing. It was scary at times, but I loved the fact that I was living by faith in America. I was put in many uncomfortable situations, but it felt right. We saw God answer prayers in so many powerful ways, even though it didn't result in many true conversions.

I remember asking my kids what they felt after one of our first outreaches. Rachel, my oldest daughter, blurted out, "It felt like we jumped out of the Bible." I knew exactly what she meant. We were experiencing something in America that was congruent with what we read about in the New Testament! We felt alive, on an adventure that required faith, and it was right here in our backyard.

While the daily outreaches were going well and we enjoyed living by faith, we hadn't yet planted a church. I saw weaknesses in our ministry because it wasn't grounded in a strong, elder-led church. Knowing this was my calling, we

gathered some of our new friends into our home and started a church. Twenty years after launching Cornerstone out of a living room, here we were again. My wonderful wife and a group of friends, sitting in a living room, asking God to build His Church through us.

It has been five years now since we started We Are Church, and things are so different this time around. Lisa and I have grown in our understanding of Scripture and God's design for the Church. God has graciously shown me the good fruit from my Cornerstone days as well as some of the fundamental mistakes I made early on. Hopefully, I can help others avoid some traps I fell into.

I am writing this during one of the happiest and most peaceful seasons of my life. It's not because life is easy. It's not. The peace has come from knowing God more deeply than ever. While I believe I have loved Jesus for years, it feels totally different now. Lately I have become obsessed with knowing and experiencing Him. 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 as if 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!

One day the Lord may call me somewhere else on this earth, but right now I selfishly hope He doesn't. I don't want to be separated from this family. I love them because they bring me closer to Jesus. I have never felt less alone or more secure.

BIG PROBLEMS

I'm often sad when I speak to Christians across the United States because I don't hear many people speaking this way. Instead, I hear people complaining about their churches. I have spoken to many who have left altogether. This is a serious problem! I hope you haven't just grown calloused to it. This should break our hearts every time. The Church has real issues, but Jesus still refers to the Church as His body, His Bride! We must love His Bride, not gripe about her or leave her.

It is true that some who have abandoned the Church are rebellious and arrogant, but I believe there are others who are just confused. They love Jesus but have a hard time finding the connection between what they read in Scripture and what they experience in the Church. I'm not condoning their actions. After all, it is commanded by God that we gather with other believers and stir them to action (Heb. 10:24–25). I am

saying only that some of their concerns have biblical grounding and should be addressed. Even in writing this book, I hope to encourage the wanderers to return. The Scriptures tell me you are indispensable and the body cannot function perfectly without you.

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.

After I finished writing this book, I found that it read less like a book and more like a collection of connected but independent letters. Each chapter/letter addresses a different issue your church may or may not need to work on. I prayed that the Holy Spirit would help you discern which letters you and your church must take to heart. This book

is not about obscure details I found in Leviticus but rather about the most obvious commands repeated throughout the entire Bible. I've tried to pay attention to the times when God seems most bothered by what His people were doing. Many want to change the Church, but it is often motivated by personal preference rather than biblical conviction. I am trying to point out only the most obvious biblical truths about God's desire for His Bride—truths that none of us can afford to ignore.

There are times when God hates our worship. There are churches He wants shut down. So often we assume that as long as we show up to worship, God is pleased. The Bible tells a different story (Amos 5:21–24; Isa. 58:1–5; Mal. 1:6–14; 1 Cor. 11:17–30; Rev. 2:5; 3:15–16).

Since the beginning of time, there has been worship God loves and worship He rejects. As I examine the state of the Christian Church today, I can't help but think that God is displeased with many of the churches in America.

I don't say that lightly. And I say it not because of what I feel but because of what I read in Scripture. My hope is that you read this book with a Bible at your side to check whether I am twisting the Scriptures or just stating the obvious. This isn't meant to be an attack or a debate. I'd like to think we are on the same team, all seeking to pursue the kind of Church that pleases Him most.

A HUMBLE WARNING

Nowadays people are eager to fight. Many are on edge, waiting for anyone to misspeak so they can pounce. It is in this environment that the Lord tells us to be eager to maintain unity (Eph. 4:3). I am trying to write with a spirit of unity. While some of the things I write may sound critical, I really am trying to speak in a spirit of grace and unity. One of the worst things that could happen is for angry people to take these words and proudly confront their church leadership. There is enough division and arrogance in the Church already. I believe there is a way to show kindness and grace toward one another without abandoning our convictions.

For those who are not in church leadership, be mindful that this is a very difficult time to lead. I have been in leadership positions for over thirty years. There has never been a time like this.

Social media gives everyone a voice, so everyone chooses to raise theirs. Voices are plentiful; followers are not. Strong opinions are applauded; humility is not. I am not saying that changes do not need to be made among leaders; I am simply calling for grace. Imagine how difficult it would be to coach a team where each player refuses to follow because he or she has a better plan than the coach. Welcome to the American Church in the twenty-first century. Let's exercise some humility.

We see such a refreshing mind-set in young David. Do you remember the times when David refused to harm Saul? In 1 Samuel 24 and 26, David had already been anointed as the rightful king of Israel, and King Saul by this point was a murderous, power-hungry lunatic. David had two perfect opportunities to remove Saul from power and claim the throne he had been promised, yet he refused to take matters into his own hands: “The LORD forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, the LORD’s anointed, to put out my hand against him, seeing he is the LORD’s anointed” (24:6).

Why does this attitude seem so foreign? Saul was a terrible leader who had actively turned against God, but David somehow had a holy fear of harming those God had placed in authority. Nowadays, if a leader makes a mistake, no matter how small or innocent, we are quick to criticize and move on. Forgiveness is rare and almost nonexistent toward ministers. We flippantly use the strongest language to rant against leadership. I’m not arguing in favor of abusive leaders, nor am I saying that every leader has God’s blessing. All I’m asking is that we show some humility and respect, even to those who don’t deserve it. Let’s be people of grace.

JUST OPEN THE DOOR

God designed the Church to be much more than what the majority of us experience in America. There are many of us

who believe this and want change. The good news is that God wants this change even more than we do. And He doesn't just want these changes; He commands them! We can move forward in confidence, knowing God wouldn't command us to do something unless He also empowered us for the task.

“Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.”

Revelation 3:19–21

After giving a very strong rebuke to the church of Laodicea for being lukewarm, Jesus simply asked them to open the door. Before you get overwhelmed by all that is wrong with the Church, remember that He is not placing an insurmountable burden on your shoulders. He is asking you to fellowship with Him and join Him in what He is doing. We should be filled with faith and anticipation, remembering what He did at the Red Sea and the empty tomb. Take a deep breath. Lay all your stress at His feet. Explain to Him your confusion regarding the difference you see between your church and the Church you read about. Tell Him your dissatisfaction with the lack of power in your life.

THE CLOCK IS TICKING

“Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.”

Ephesians 5:15–17

I became a grandpa recently. It's weird to be able to type 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 the Church. There's no time to worry about what others are looking for in a church. I will be facing Him soon, so I have to stay focused on His desires. 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 of my life. I imagine that I'll be standing face-to-face with God when that timer expires. This gives me courage 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 would be obsessed with seeing the face of God and wanting His approval.

I have the same thought now. If I knew I was going to die right after writing this book, what would I write? If I didn't worry about the fallout but sought only to be faithful to God, how would this book read? I have tried to write from this perspective.