

A Fresh Biblical Challenge from Francis Chan

By Bryan Gilde

I am confident the longer we live, the more we change our minds . . . and the more we don't change our minds. If I could do things over, I would . . .

80 years really isn't a long time to learn life lessons, but it is the time we have been given so we need to do the best we can with what we have been given. Francis Chan operates from a clear position of high privilege. His family is still intact and seems to be thriving, he has (access to) millions of dollars, he has experienced success in church planting (2x!), and he is very well liked. Some would say that greatness only comes through failure and suffering, but Solomon himself learned his lessons from the highest privileged position possible. Chan is in good company.

You can read a select few books on church structure and design (such as *9 Marks*, *Trellis and the Vine*, *Reaching the Next Generation*, *Simple Church*, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* or dig into the Reformers thoughts), but then you should critically read Chan's latest book on the church, *Letters to the Church* (2018). He has done what many pastors and elders long to do: plant and shepherd a healthy body of Christ as best we know how. **But, these modern American models have some blind spots which Chan points out.**

My Summary of *Letters to the Church*

In 2010, Chan left megachurch Cornerstone, which **he planted** in the 90's, because he felt **his leadership "was holding back others who should have been leading"** (15). Most people in his church were not using their gifts even if they were well connected to the body (attendance, giving, small groups). The church, by his own design, was also doing things which he didn't think were biblical and created a culture of professionals catering to needs (**consumerism** with too many paid staff).

Chan's message to the church in America:

- He doesn't hear enough people talking about their church like it is the precious bride of Christ that they love. Instead, he mostly hears people complaining about their churches (22).
- Don't walk away from the body of Christ because there are problems. Maybe you do need to change where/who you worship with, but don't walk away all together (23).
- However, Chan shows that God is not happy with some churches and it could be that God wishes somebody would just close the doors because worship is so vile (24, 66; Malachi 1:6-14).
- Acts 2:42-47 has more than just teaching/preaching, it also has breaking bread, fellowship and prayer. They were devoted to all four (55-56)! Do we take seriously (measured by the amount of time we spend) a commitment to share meals, the Lord's Supper, and **prayer** (60-64)?

- “The fact that we have reduced the sacred mystery of the Church to a one-hour service we attend is staggering” (70). Do we see ourselves as a family or a service to be attended (71)? **What does fellowship and discipleship look like during the week?**
- “Even if we wanted all people to use their gifts, is it even possible with the way we currently do things? There isn't time. When we reduce ‘church’ to a 90-minute service where one person teaches for 45 minutes and another person leads music for 30 minutes, we are left with 15 minutes for announcements and forced handshakes with the people sitting near you. Are we creating the space necessary for every person to feel like he or she can be used by God to encourage and build up others? Have we made our churches so professional and impressive that only the polished few can contribute?” (92)
- “As pastors, we began having talks with people in our congregation who didn't serve. Not only was it selfish, hurting the body, keeping them from manifesting the spirit, but it was clearly sinful. It was out of a deep love for them that we wanted to see them have victory in this area. Sometimes a little pressure is good.” (98)
- “The church was supposed to be a breeding ground for pastors and elders. Every church should be equipping people and sending them out. Unfortunately, the trend is the opposite. We send out want ads, asking for pastors to come serve at our churches. . . . Rather than sending, we are recruiting. This has become normal” (100).
- Do you include children in your ministry or are they a distraction? (159ff) Do you see children as a blessing?
- Chan concludes with the following challenge: “Jesus is coming. I meet very few people in America who live as if they believe this. He gave the strongest warning ever written. It's called the book of Revelation. No one has ever given a stronger warning because no one else is capable of carrying out the threats he promised. Out of his love, he gave terrifying warnings to the Church of his day. Over and over, his message was repent or else. He then spent the rest of the book explaining what his “or else” looks like. He did this so no one will ignore his commands, yet we still do. Somehow we have become immune to warnings from almighty God. (195).
- One such warning is found in Hebrews 10:37-39, “For, ‘Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.’ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.”

My Response to Chan's Message

- I get the impression most of us would have labeled Cornerstone (Chan's original church plant) as a healthy church, with much in common with a 9 Marks church . . . yet was still lacking. Chan has pointed out some blind spots in the American church and I am all ears.
- It is very important to ask: What is *your* motive for doing cultural maintenance (change) in your church? Are you angry at your church or your leadership? Are they morally wrong for what they are doing? Are their motives pure? Are you trying to make changes that are your preference instead of biblical? **Do you love your church as the bride of Christ and should you be grateful for your leaders?** Remember, no church is perfect (ideal).
- The 7 Letters to the 7 churches in Revelation 2-3 serve as a reminder that while no church is perfect, the **primary qualities of the church are truth and love**. If these are not present, then it could be that God wishes somebody would just close the doors because worship is so vile (24, 66; Malachi 1:6-14).
- Does your church treat what is sacred as common? Is there a sense of God's holiness among you? Is the Fear of the Lord real? Do people leave saying "Surely God is among you!" (I Cor. 14:25)?
- Chan rightly points to a lack of authenticity in many church leaders and this is convicting. In addition to the qualities of truth and love, suffering is a hallmark of the Christian life. **Are you suffering with joy?** (Chapter 7, cf Js. 1)
- I think too many people are scared of the God of the church in Acts so they label the entire book as descriptive and not prescriptive. Chan seems to go the other extreme and even takes "house to house" as the guiding model (Acts 2:46). It will require discernment to rightly interpret parts of Acts as prescriptive descriptions, or merely descriptions. (Does I Cor. 11:22 imply they were *not* meeting in a house?)
- I love how he points out Acts 2:42-47 having elements which are neglected in the life of many churches, especially in the main worship service. Is there too much talking and not enough **prayer and singing worship** in your church body? It seems while the Reformation rightly elevated the Word and demoted the sacraments from seven to two, **the Lord's Supper remains neglected** in both frequency and consideration of the elements. Is an emphasis on preaching causing us to neglect a focus on worship in song?
- What is the solution to a consumer mindset in the main worship service? Tim Keller has said church's change their structure as they get bigger. Bigger and older churches have more established routines (which are good and reliable). It seems this is why Chan ends up preferring small house churches of 15-20 people (181-188). He has a good point, do we need a million-dollar building to do church? I think both small and big can work, but **we should always be intentional in our worship services and the culture of our church (172). This requires (on-going) prayer and reflection, especially from the elders. Therefore, they should regularly ask "Why do we do _____?"**

- I think an elder board should be made of lay elders and vocation (even bi-vocational) pastors. Some of these vocational pastors should be raised up from within your own body. Eventually, some of them should be sent out to **plant a church or be missionaries**.
- Are you a praying man? Chan “once told [his] staff to let me know if they were not praying at least an hour a day. This way I could replace them with someone who would” (113). (A little too harsh towards his staff, but we get the point.) When Peter was facing temptation in Luke 22:31-32, Jesus didn’t have anything to say to him, no counseling or teaching. But he did tell Peter that he **prayed for him** (113)!
- Chan finds a solution in the reproducing small house church model. Is this an over-reaction to the established and institutionalized church? When you go to his “following,” www.WeAreChurch.com, the concept feels a bit exclusive. Does this leave room for immature believers to take years to mature? While I agree with his emphasis on being an active part of the body, I think it needs to be voluntary activity. This could be done by regularly working with people to get them to **participate**.

What Does a Healthy Biblical Church Look Like?

Live out the various marks of a healthy church by faith, trusting God will bless and be pleased by our efforts to be and make disciples. Yet, do this asking what blind spots your church has in common with other American churches. The effects of the Enlightenment (modernity) have wrongly over emphasized the learning aspect of church. For example, a popular question after the worship service is “What did you learn?” While it is true Romans 12:1-2 says our minds need to be renewed in the public and private reading of God’s Word, Acts 2:42-47 *directs* us to equally be devoted to prayer, fellowship meals, and the Lord’s Supper—including (with the result) that we praise God!

Make sure your leadership and their use of spiritual gifts does not hinder others from using their gifts. When others are actively involved in using and developing their spiritual gifts, they will be effectively trained to be sent out.

A distinction between the formal Sunday morning gathering and other less informal times of gathering is helpful to see we need to participate in both. The institution of the church is clearly seen in Jesus’ direction for the church to have elders, deacons, preaching and corporate worship along with the Lord’s Supper; but we are also told to have vibrant times of teaching, making disciples, being on mission, having fellowship, and being light in a dark world. While formal and informal gatherings of the church have much crossover, we must see *both types of gatherings as manifesting the church*, for “through the church, Christ gathers his church” (Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, v4, 330).

Ironically, the current lead pastor of Chan’s old church in California, Cornerstone, says the worship service is a launching point instead of the focal point.

While we are glad that you joined us today, it is important that you know that this is only one part of the life of this church. We love to gather as a family to be encouraged and challenged, but we understand that this Jesus who has made us different has called us to join Him in this lost and dying world. We count it an honor and privilege to declare and demonstrate the message that transformed our lives. If you have been changed, we want you to join us on this incredible mission. (Todd Nighswonger)