

Letters to the Church: A Review

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***This is not a review of the theology of Francis Chan nor of the appropriateness of using denominational material. Those are important things to discuss, but too many of the comments surrounding this book seem to address those issues rather than what the book has to say. ***

Francis Chan's new book *Letters to the Church* has created quite a buzz among members of the church of Christ. I believe that this buzz comes from the fact that Chan taps into the very heart of the Restoration plea that we hold so dear. You see, Francis Chan is a man who I believe is really trying. He begins his book with an illustration that I have heard many faithful preachers lead their lessons with through the years—a man 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?” (pg. 9). What a great and needed question to ask! He goes on to explain that it was this question in part which led him to walk away from Cornerstone Church in Simi Valley, CA. Cornerstone is a megachurch founded by Chan 24 years ago.

Chan continues a discussion, began in his previous bestseller *Crazy Love*, of a frustration with Christendom in America at large. If you liked *Crazy Love*, which I did, you will probably like *Letters to the Church*. Chan contends, “God designed the church to be much more than

what the majority of us experience in America” (26). After seeing the church in other countries and cultures first hand, it is refreshing to read his words. It is similar to the what occurs when anyone does mission work in a foreign context. It gives us a better perspective on our strengths and weaknesses in the American church context.

The heart of *Letters to the Church* is about restoring in America the church we read about in the Bible. Chan’s focus of restoration is not so much on the structure of the church as it is the lives of those that make up the church. It would be difficult to not be challenged and inspired by this focus, and this is ultimately what was so profitable in reading this work. He begins with a plea for restoring a sense of sacred things that come from God and should be respected as coming from God. These sacred things that take the form of commands should be the way that the church is evaluated rather than our human expectation. It is refreshing to read his candid discussion about how people have elevated the culture’s desires over the will of God. He writes, “Too often we add in our own voices, thinking if we offer just the right services or package, the gospel in just the right way so no one get offended, we can convince people to stay. By catering our worship to the worshippers and not to the object of our worship, I fear we have created human-centered churches” (53).

Much of his emphasis of restoration comes in the form of restoring a celebration of Jesus in the Lord’s Supper, engaging in a devoted and passionate prayer life, and embracing our role as servants in the kingdom. All of these calls for restoration come from a very biblical appeal and are needed among all of God’s people. I personally was provoked by his comments about going out and talking to members of their congregation who didn’t serve concerning their lack of service (98). He spends several chapters discussing why it is important for leaders to be convicted of these things lest they lose sight of their original mission and fall into various traps of ministry (108).

The last third of the book focused on Chan’s attempt to remedy this problem he sees in the American church by embracing a house church model of organization. He draws a lot of this concept from what he saw overseas. He illustrates effectively by saying the American church is like a Blockbuster Video and we need to transition to more of a Netflix model in order to be what God calls us to be in our culture. He describes these house churches as gatherings of 10-20 people who meet in homes and are annually breaking apart and forming new congregations. The leadership is formed by at least two men who are also training others to be future elders. The preacher is almost always bivocational and very little emphasis is given to formal education. While there were some interesting thoughts about how one might form a Scriptural congregation in a culture that was not friendly to Christ, Chan almost seems to argue that this is the only/right way to be the church. He says he is not pushing for this, but his arguments seem to say otherwise. There is very little Scriptural support given for the structure beyond what they have decided. There are several things

such as the “regular multiplication of churches” (179) that I don’t think anyone would come up with if alone on a desert island with only the Bible as his guide. Overall, his solution was interesting and maybe even promising but not convincing that this is a change that must be made in order to be pleasing to God.

On the downside, *Letters to the Church* does contain many strange concepts about demon possession and a direct operation of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers that did not add to the value of the work. He seems to believe that Christians have continuing revelation directly from God and can still have miraculous gifts today. (Check out his reference to kids healing sick people in Africa on page 160!) He still seems to think one can be converted before being baptized, as he quotes someone without any clarifying comment (166). However, perhaps the biggest concern I had was the very negative tone with which he portrayed the church. In order to call for restoration, he seemed overstate the problem, in the process indicting a lot of godly people. He created many strawmen in order to topple them over. Another reviewer of the book noted, “it would be easy to read his book and conclude that house churches are the only faithful churches left, the only ones that are really honoring God”¹. Of course, this tone is mitigated somewhat by the fact that Chan consistently puts himself and his role in the church as a part of what he is criticizing. I am well acquainted with the problems he described as plaguing the American church, and I could even give personal illustrations for almost every area Chan focused on. The fact remains, however, that I can also give illustrations of congregations that are active in service and prayer. I know of many congregations that evaluate everything that they do by the Scriptures and give very little attention to how that is going to affect numbers. He asks, “Can you name a single church in our country that is known for the way its members love another?” I think I can answer that positively and tell you about some very large congregations that are known for that very thing. While it will inspire many to deeper devotion, I fear that reading this book will certainly feed the cynicism of some who are already doing damage to the Lord’s body. Perhaps Chan has never witnessed the love, generosity, reverence for God and His word, biblical model shepherding, and the simple, Scriptural worship that is so prevalent in the church of Christ. Many of these qualities that Chan is searching for are already embraced by the congregations in which I have grown up.

I love the restoration concept present in *Letters to the Church*. Chan does seem inconsistent at times in his application of restoration principles. For example, the book begins with a plea to go back to the Bible but even in the midst of that argumentation he talks about their multiple Saturday night worship services (13). I don’t think this inconsistency is intentional, but it should speak to those striving for restoration about the importance of consistency and continuation in that restoration. There is no doubt that Francis Chan is walking down the restoration road in his *Letters to the Church*, but he hasn’t yet arrived at the destination. I praise God for most of the bold things he has written, and you will be challenged by many of the things he highlights. It is my prayer that we can all continue to walk down that road a

little further.

Footnotes

1. <https://www.challies.com/book-reviews/francis-chans-letters-to-the-church/>