

"STOP TREATING THE BOOK OF ACTS LIKE HYPERBOLE"

(Acts 2:42-47)

(Francis Chan)

Eight years ago, Francis Chan resigned as senior pastor of Cornerstone Community Church in Simi Valley, California—the church he helped grow from 30 people gathered in a living room to a multimillion-dollar ministry. He wasn't burned out. There was no disqualifying moral failure. He'd simply grown convicted over his challenges in steering a large ministry in accordance with biblical values.

*Chan sold his house and spent a year traveling through Southeast Asia, visiting churches and interacting with church leaders. Returning to California, he began planting churches in his home and the homes of others in his San Francisco neighborhood. His latest book, *Letters to the Church*, is a pastoral call for American churches to consider whether their values and practices are consistent with Scripture. Writer and fellow Bay-area resident Rachael Starke spoke with Chan about the blessings that come from recommitting to church life as God designed it.*

Your book exhorts churches to recommit to Acts 2 practices like extended prayer, radical love and service, and intimate fellowship within the home. But many of these run counter to the digitized lives we live today, especially in places like San Francisco. How have revolutions in technology influenced American church practices and habits?

Technology is really about speed: doing everything faster and with less effort. We're tempted to want the church to be the same way—let me accomplish what I want in as little time as possible. But the blessing is going to come from the work itself, from the hard work you do to love and serve one another. What could be greater than that?

Many books about church ministry emphasize adults ministering to kids. But you propose some intriguing ideas about children serving the church. What does that look like?

My kids have all these "aunts and uncles" who are really just brothers and sisters in Christ. Right now my older kids are taking my younger kids and others and discipling them. We love each other's kids: Someone's always sleeping over at my place, or my kids are sleeping over somewhere else.

When we gather, my kids are involved in leading the music—playing instruments and singing. They share what they're learning in their Bible reading. During one gathering, my 12-year-old son talked about leading his friend to the Lord; this friend "has two dads" and isn't allowed to come to church. He talked about how he's the only discipler his friend, this new young believer, can have right now. On another occasion, they invited their science teacher to our gathering. They convict the room with their obedience more than I ever could. If Francis Chan leads someone to the Lord, it's kind of expected. But when my seven-year-old has been praying for her friend for weeks or months, and then that friend ends up in our house gathering, that's a beautiful thing.

You challenge churches to test their traditions and practices against the ones God actually prescribes in the Bible. What would you say to those who regard those traditions as contemporary means for accomplishing biblical ends?

There is a sense in which all things are permissible. What I'm saying is, let's obey the commands first. It may be that you've spent so much time on what's permissible, you've neglected what's actually commanded.



Let's also consider the byproduct of doing some things that seem harmless. Sometimes good things happen and we don't consider the cost, whether it's money spent or time invested. As a young pastor back in the '90s, I remember going to this church growth event, a Christmas musical. What if the people of that church had spent those hours actually talking to their neighbors? Some churches in America don't believe they can do discipleship or evangelism. But in countries like China and India, they fully expect they can do it, and it's done.

American Christians are increasingly paying attention to so-called justice issues, like alleviating suffering or fighting religious persecution at home and overseas. But your book doesn't mention these issues in much depth. Why not?

When I came back from Africa the first time, I was obsessed with the people there who were starving and suffering. I was so in love with the Sudanese refugees, and I wanted to learn as much as I could about issues affecting them, like human trafficking. Those were all good and necessary, and I'm grateful for how God was at work through those efforts. But I didn't have Christ at the center.

There has to be a way to care about suffering and injustice that doesn't elevate them above Christ himself. Do I hear people who call themselves Christians talk like Paul does in Philippians 3—that everything else is "garbage" compared with Christ (v. 8)? Loving Jesus has to be central. I wasn't trying to avoid justice issues in the book as much as I was trying to emphasize what the Bible itself emphasizes above all.

In many quarters, bivocational ministry is viewed, at best, as a necessary compromise when there isn't enough money to hire a full-time pastor. Why have you made this model a hallmark of your churches?

I don't say it's the only way; if I did, I'd be in sin. There's certainly biblical precedent for paying Christian workers. I only advocate bivocational ministry because I've seen the benefits. Right now, we have around 40 pastors, representing all walks of life—a cop, a school teacher, a tech guy, a restaurant worker, and a guy who was homeless two years ago. These are my leaders. When people see them, they think, "I have no excuse for not making disciples."

Adjusting to new paradigms for church life is hard; you mention a person in your congregation who compared it to switching from figure skating to competitive hockey. How should those in leadership positions—or those sitting in the pews—initiate conversations about making big changes?

I wrote an addendum titled "Surviving Arrogance" to address this exact issue. I could see people marching into their pastor's office and saying, "We're screwed up and Francis Chan says so." There's a humble way to raise these issues and a not so humble way.

When I was at Cornerstone, I wanted to change everything overnight. I was trying to do it through a sermon or a change in programs. But discipleship takes time. I thought if I preached this one sermon it would change everything right away. This work takes a long time and lots of effort.

I hope that people won't be attracted by the numbers. I'm hoping that new leaders will arise who will start their own churches. I'm hoping that some existing leaders will step away because they see sin in their lives and take some time to get their walk right. But I'm also hoping that people will read the book and have a new sense of hope—that the things I'm writing about are for today just as much as they were for the early church. I want them to stop looking at passages in Acts like they're hyperbole instead of the actual Word of God.

Some church leaders are leading out of arrogance, but others are scared to look foolish or make a mistake. That's their own pride or fear of failure at work. For those who are arrogant, I hope this book encourages them to humble themselves by leaving. But for those who are pridefully afraid of failing, I hope this book encourages them to humble themselves by doing—stepping out in faith and obedience.