

“Letters to the Church”

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Book Note by Dave Kraft

I basically had three goals in mind with the new work in San Francisco:

- First, I wanted all of us to sing directly to God. And I mean really sing.
- Second, I wanted all of us to really hear the Word of God.
- And finally, I wanted all of us to live holy lives.

I wanted our church to be a group of people who pushed one another toward action. And that was basically it. If we could move toward these three goals, I would be happy. We began to wonder whether our definition of Cornerstone church actually fit God’s definition. One of the main things that we questioned was the level of love we had for one another. Another issue we saw was how everything had grown to be very dependent on one person. No church should be that dependent on one person. 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. 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. 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. It has been five years now since we started “We Are Church,”

Lots of Christians love Jesus but have a hard time finding the connection between what they read in Scripture and what they experience in the Church. Many want to change the Church, but it is often motivated by personal preference rather than biblical conviction. 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 believe there is a way to show kindness and grace toward one another without abandoning our convictions.

Social media gives everyone a voice, so everyone chooses to raise theirs. 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. God designed the Church to be much more than what the majority of us experience in America. Explain to Jesus 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.

I don’t know whether you’ve noticed, but young people are speaking more quickly. The world speaks quickly and loudly. It is tempting to speak faster and scream louder so your voice will not be drowned out. We live in a culture today where we are used to evaluating and giving our opinion on everything.

If achievement is your idol, you won’t make time for mystery. It’s no wonder we aren’t known as those who “rejoice with joy that is inexpressible” (1 Pet. 1:8). We don’t make time to meditate on His mysteries. In all honesty, Christian leaders have trained you to become addicted to lesser things. We have cheapened something sacred, and we must repent.

In the spirit of Cain, we bring an offering we think He should accept rather than what He actually asked for. Honestly, what is it that gets people in your church stirred up for change? Is it disobedience toward commands from God? Or is it falling short of expectations that we have made up? The answer to these questions might just show us whether our church exists to please God or please people—whether God is leading our church or we are. Jesus rebuked leaders so harshly because they had created their own traditions to obey (which aren't important) and emphasized them more than the actual commands God had given them (which are extremely important). It may surprise some of you that a forty-minute sermon isn't commanded but “bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” is actually in the Bible (Gal. 6:2).

It is imperative that we differentiate between what we want and what God commands. He gave them what they needed and what was best for them rather than what they were demanding. If we focus too much of our attention on what people want, we will only increase the amount of complaining. We're not doing people any favors by pretending they are the center of the universe. In essence, we want to know what God will tolerate rather than what He desires. Rather than thinking of what we would enjoy or asking others what they would like, we ask the simple question, what would please God the most? There's a keyword in this passage (Acts 2:42-47) that separates the attempts of our modern church from the first church: Devoted.

In our impatient culture, we want to experience biblical awe without biblical devotion. By trying to keep everyone interested and excited, we've created a cheap substitute for devotion. Once we add one more staff position or one more program, our churches will become healthy. It's a never-ending game. Haven't we tried that long enough?

“Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture” (1 Tim. 4:13). Maybe if we did more of this, we could raise a new generation that is addicted to God's Word and less fanatical about preachers. What would it mean for us to strip away the distractions and become a people who devoted ourselves to Scripture? I firmly believe that we would see a power in our churches like we've never experienced before. If prayer isn't vital for your church, then your church isn't vital. If you can accomplish your church's mission without daily, passionate prayer, then your mission is insufficient and your church is irrelevant.

Mike Breen said, *“Most of us have become quite good at the church thing. And yet, disciples are the only thing that Jesus cares about, and it's the only number that Jesus is counting. Not our attendance or budget or buildings.”*

Today we'd respond to this by saying, “Look at how bored they are! Let's make worship more exciting; then people will really get something out of it!” David Platt echoed this:

“I am also struck by our reliance upon having just the right speaker and just the right musician who can attract the most people to a worship service. But what if the church itself—the people of God gathered in one place—is intended to be the attraction, regardless of who is teaching or singing that day? This is enough for our brothers and sisters around the world.”

But have you really and carefully read the New Testament? Do you find anything in Scripture that is even remotely close to the pattern we have created? Do you find anyone who “went” to church? The fact that we have reduced the sacred mystery of Church to a one-hour service we attend is staggering; something that God has designed to function as a family has been reduced to an optional weekly meeting.

Crafting the Church into a truly united and supernaturally loving family is the very thing God wants to do. Jesus called people to count the cost from the very start (Luke 14:25-35). He didn't expect His followers to be perfect, but He did demand that they be committed (Luke 9:57-62). Don't forget that there are times when God doesn't just want us to let some church people leave; He wants us to ask them to leave.

If you think that sitting back and letting the church staff feed you will bring you the most fulfillment, you are so wrong. We have become too easily satisfied. We are content if a person leaves pleased. God wants them awed. I am saying that we have settled for the natural and our choices give little evidence that we believe in the Holy Spirit. Do our actions show that we expect supernatural contributions from every member of the body? Didn't Paul explain that it was through the overlooked that God chose to display His power? Are we not overvaluing the rich, beautiful, and talented just as the world does? We have to stop viewing church leaders as people who minister to us. God clearly explained their role. It was not to coddle you but to equip you.

Leaders have become like personal trainers who lift the weights for their clients. They run on the treadmill while their trainees sit and marvel. Then we wonder why the people aren't developing. Week after week, the same faces show up with little to no change in their lives. If there's no fruit, isn't it time for change? When we reduce "church" to a ninety-minute service where one person teaches for forty-five minutes and another leads music for thirty minutes, we are left with fifteen 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? If we give up on the goal of having all members exercise their spiritual gifts, we are destined for perpetual immaturity.

I echo what Mike Breen wrote:

"Are we just good at getting people together once a week and maybe into a small group, or are we actually good at producing the types of people we read about in the New Testament? Have we shifted our criteria for a good disciple as someone who shows up to our stuff, gives money and occasionally feeds poor people?"

"It is of far greater importance that we have better Christians than that we have more of them."
~ AW Tozer

No team puts up with players who refuse to contribute. No army puts up with soldiers who don't carry their own weight. Why do churches continue to put up with Christians who refuse to serve? Sometimes the most loving thing we can do is challenge those we love, and a little pressure doesn't hurt. Don't know where I would be today if I wasn't challenged to serve and pushed to lead at an early age. I would have missed out on a very full and blessed life. 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.

The Enemy is constantly trying to lure us all away from our first love and make us people pleasers. In my opinion, God spoke more severely to leaders than to any other group. Some of God's most condemning words were also spoken to leaders. As I look over my life, I believe I have been overly critical and disrespectful at times while being cowardly and too political at other times. This requires living a life that's worth duplicating, which is quite a bit harder than posting pictures and quotes.

We live in a time when people are so volatile. If we say one wrong word in public, it can wreak havoc. Those who pursue massive Kingdom impact seem to always be fighting a losing battle with pride. I can tell you that a degree can be proof of intelligence or discipline but not spirituality.

I would much rather hire someone who prayed and did nothing else than someone who worked tirelessly without praying. Pastors who are not drawn to prayer should not be pastors. A pastor from India told me that movements of God always start with a leader who knows God deeply, and they always end when the followers know only the leader deeply. One of the questions I often ask myself before I preach is, will this sermon draw attention to Christ or to me? Too many pastors are aspiring to be great writers, speakers, and leaders. There are not enough who are known as great spiritual moms and dads.

One of the most debilitating issues facing the Church is the lack of maturing her members. Churches are filled with children who never grow up to become parents. While many pastors boast of how many children sit under their care, doesn't it make more sense to boast of how many have graduated from their care? Isn't it more a sign of failure when children are unable to leave the house? Raising thousands of consumers is not success. Let's not confuse theological knowledge or general kindness with being Spirit-filled. Is your pastor Spirit-filled? Are you? It's no secret that church buildings are currently full of self-centered people coming to consume. God hates it when we underestimate the potential He created us with. I pray all existing leaders would be renewed or replaced.

If you listened only to the voice of Jesus, read only the words that came out of His mouth, you would have a very clear understanding of what He requires of His followers. If you listened only to modern preachers and writers, you would have a completely different understanding of what it means to follow Jesus. Could there be a more catastrophic problem than this? Jesus was very truthful and up-front about the costliness of the gospel, a concept that we completely neglect. The more I study the Gospels, the more I am convinced that those of us who live in the United States have a warped view of what it means to be a "Christian." It is for that reason our churches are in the state they are in. A warped view of Christianity can result only in a warped church. But what if we started over? What if we bulldozed what we currently call "church" and started over with actual Christians?

A believer from a house church in Iran (who can't be named for obvious reasons) explained that people who want to join the church have to sign a written statement agreeing to lose their property, be thrown in jail, and be martyred for their faith. Some research shows that Iran has the fastest-growing evangelical population in the world! I remember later speaking to a man who leads a whole network of churches in China. He explained further that they had started out with **five pillars** to the house church movement.

1. The first one is based on a deep, **deep commitment to prayer**.
2. The second is **commitment to the Word of God**. It wasn't about the speaker but about everyone learning the Word of God, reading the Word of God.
3. The third was being **committed to the sharing of the gospel**, so every member was sharing the gospel.
4. The fourth was a **regular expectation of miracles**.
5. "The fifth pillar was **we embraced suffering for the glory of Christ**." Until we embrace the suffering that so many Christians embrace around the world, we're not going to have an unstoppable Church.

In an effort to be sensitive to others, we often lose sight of truth. When we do this, we no longer help people but damn them. True compassion takes into account far more than what a person feels today; it takes into account what he or she will feel on judgment day. We want to be accepted, so we listen and coddle but refuse to rebuke. If that is love, then the prophets, apostles, and Jesus were the most unloving people to ever walk the planet. People are starting to water down their convictions because they don't want to offend anyone.

I think we have become much too accustomed to allowing sin to invade the church because it's part of our culture. Our commitment to the Kingdom must take precedence over culture. We need to return to a God-centered theology rather than a human-centered theology, and we need to be willing to flip some tables and suffer for it along the way. Other kinds of good news stir more emotion than the gospel.

You're stuck in the zoo, where everything is comfortable, everything is controlled. And you just want to get back to living in the wild. Once the people got comfortable in the zoo, they refused to leave. In fact, they no longer believed they were able to live outside the zoo. What started as a movement became a bunch of people sitting safely in services. Perhaps we're all so comfortable in the zoo that we dismiss "the wild" as a myth. Are we sure our churches aren't zoos?

We're busy reassuring one another that God wants us to do what's safest for our families and to pursue God in a way that looks suspiciously similar to what we'd naturally do if our only concern was our own comfort and happiness.

Church, the answer is not to build bigger and nicer cages. Nor is it to renovate the cages so they look more like the wild. It's time to open the cages, remind the animals of their God-given instincts and capabilities, and release them into the wild. We need to spend less time catering to the felt needs of people and spend more time praying Paul's prayers in Ephesians 1 and 3. It's time to train people to live in the wild again. How would you describe your gatherings? I'm guessing wild isn't applicable.

We can keep doing things the way we've always done them, but maybe we need to do more releasing and less taming. What would happen if we trained our young lions to attack rather than keep them sheltered? Our kids are simply a case in point for the way we function in the Church. We underestimate them, and we're afraid of what will happen if we let them loose, so we keep them entertained, educated, and insulated. Is this really any different from the way we treat the average member of our churches?

We've built our modern churches on the assumption that God works through a few talented, impressive, and wealthy people. And we give all the other people a comfortable seat from which they can be blessed by what God does through these leaders and influencers. We know we weren't made for cages. It's time to stop building and maintaining zoos. It's time for us to figure out what it means to be the Church in the wild.

Should we consider that placing people in comfortable classrooms and auditoriums for years may not be the best way to train fearless leaders? We have tried to attract people through so many different strategies. What if they saw an army of people with inexpressible joy, peace that surpasses comprehension, and immeasurable greatness of power? How could they not be intrigued? People were attracted to the early church. Who wouldn't be fascinated by a group that shared possessions, rejoiced nonstop, had peace beyond comprehension and immeasurable power, never complained and always gave thanks? We must stop creating safe places for people to hide and start developing fearless warriors to send out.

You are going to face God sooner than you know, so don't let people talk you out of your convictions.

Tim Chester and Steve Timmis borrowed the concept of "Heretical Structures" from John Stott. Does your structure demonstrate that the gift of every believer matters, or does it suggest that only the gifts of the teaching pastor, a couple of ministry leaders, and a few musicians matter? The theology that matters is not the theology we profess but the theology we practice.

We might find that the things we added to improve our churches are the very things that crowd God out. Some of our additions are birthed from a lack of faith. We don't really expect God to move, so we fill our gatherings with exciting elements that will entertain people even if God does nothing. We have to stop assuming that bigger and busier is always better than smaller and simpler.

Though the wording has changed over time, this is basically what we are striving to produce in our new work in San Francisco:

- Devoted Worshippers
- Loving Families
- Equipped Disciple Makers

It's easy to say these are our values, but unless we structure in weekly practices to achieve these goals and structure out anything that distracts, we will never become the church we want to be. Below are some of the practices we have found helpful in achieving our values:

- Daily Bible readings
- Meet in homes
- For this reason, we keep our churches small (ten to twenty people), meeting in homes to create a
- Family atmosphere
- Multiply leaders
- Elder Authority
- Everyone discipled
- Everyone disciples
- Everyone exercises gifts
- Regular multiplication of churches. Our churches aim to multiply annually to maintain a healthy pressure toward developing leaders and reaching more people. Let's face it: without deadlines, not much gets done
- Simple gatherings. We work hard to keep from adding elements to our gatherings that could distract us from what we must be devoted to
- Share Possessions
- Assume missions. It seems more biblical to assume you are going unless you believe God called you to stay.

Forget about "what we've always done," and ask what expressions of Church God wants to see in our setting.

If we continue to promote a model where people flood to a church building to congregate around a preacher, how do we expect to reach the billions of people who live where that model is illegal?

A CASE FOR CHURCHBNB

One leader I talked to used the Hyatt hotel chain as an illustration. In 2015 Hyatt had 97,000 employees. By contrast Airbnb had 2,300. Yet Airbnb had far more rooms available than Hyatt! In fact, three years later they have more rooms available than the top five hotel chains combined! How did they do this? They put the hotel industry into the hands of the everyday person. We try to multiply our churches as soon as they hit twenty people. Everyone has a home. If it's possible for a church to fit in a home, then we have an infinite number of potential churches no matter where we go. Going small is our best shot at getting big. I'm obviously not arguing that we change the gospel or water down the truth. I'm simply asking us to reconsider the vehicle we use to deliver it. If a widespread loss of wealth could eliminate our current church expressions overnight, what does that say about our model?

Many churches have been destroyed because leaders were unwilling to confront and remove divisive people. I am asking you to be aware that there are people in the Church who have become incredibly proficient at making themselves the victim of every story. They are professional victims, and this is usually rooted in pride. If at first you don't succeed, cry and cry again. Like parents, we must learn to distinguish between real cries, manipulative cries, and cries for attention.