

# LETTERS TO THE CHURCH



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# THE GANG

We live in a time when people go to a building on Sunday mornings, attend an hour-long service, and call themselves members of the Church.

Does that sound shocking to you? Of course not. This is perfectly normal. It's what we grew up with. We all know good Christians go to church.

But have you ever 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?

Try to imagine Paul and Peter speaking like we do today:  
“Hey Peter, where do you go to church now?”

“I go to The River. They have great music and I love the kids’ program.”

“Cool. Can I check out your church next Sunday? I’m not getting much out of mine.”

“Totally. I’m not going to be there next Sunday because little Matthew has soccer. But how about the week after?”

“Sounds good. Hey, do they have a singles group?”

It’s comical to think of Paul and Peter speaking like this. Yet that’s a normal conversation among Christians today. Why? There are so many things wrong with the above conversation I don’t even know where to start. The fact that we have reduced the sacred mystery of Church to a one-hour service we attend is staggering. Yet that’s the way I defined it for years! I didn’t know anything different. It’s what everyone did, so I didn’t think to question it.

## LET’S GO TO GANG

Think about it this way. One of the elders of my church, Rob, spent most of his life in gangs. He encountered Jesus when he was imprisoned and placed in solitary confinement. Today, he is one of the most loving people I know. In fact, I’m not sure I know of anyone who loves Jesus and people as well as he does.

Rob tells me stories of gang life and the fear he felt when he left his gang to join the body of Christ. To do this in prison can be suicidal; he had to make a serious break with his gang, and gangs are anything but casual about breaking those ties. But the Lord intervened to spare his life. It wasn't just the physical torture or death he feared; he dreaded the rejection by those he loved. The gang was his family. These were loyal and dear friends who looked out for him twenty-four hours a day. There was a love and camaraderie from being in a gang that he had enjoyed since childhood. Now he would lose those relationships and be hated by them all.

When Rob describes gang life, much of it sounds like what the Church was meant to be. Obviously, there are major differences (drugs, murder—you know, little details like that), but the idea of “being a family” is central to both gang life and God's design for the Church. Yet while we use family terminology in our churches, Rob's stories have convinced me that the gangs have a much stronger sense of what it means to be a family than we do in the Church.

From what you know about gangs, could you ever imagine gang life being reduced to a weekly one-hour gathering? No group would meet briefly once a week and call that a gang. Imagine one gang member walking up to another one and saying, “Yo, how was gang? I had to miss this week because life has been crazy!”

We all know enough about gangs to know that's ridiculous. Yet every week, we hear Christians asking each other, "How was church?" Something that God has designed to function as a family has been reduced to an optional weekly meeting. And this has become normal. Expected. How in the world did we get here? Any gang member will tell you his homies have his back. They're there for him. They're loyal, committed, present. Meanwhile, in many churches, you have about as much of a connection to the people who are supposedly your spiritual family as you would to someone who visited the same movie theater as you.

## SUPERNATURAL LOVE

Is it just a nice cliché to say the Church should be like a family? I mean, it's a great thought, but our *families* are our families! Does God really expect us to be this close with people we're not related to, people we wouldn't even choose to be friends with? I agree that it's natural to be close with your family, and unnatural to experience this with people who are not like you. But that's exactly the point! It's not supposed to be natural—it's supernatural!

*"A new command I give you: Love one another.  
As I have loved you, so you must love one  
another. By this everyone will know that you  
are my disciples, if you love one another."*

John 13:34–35 NIV

One thing the New Testament makes clear is that the Church is supposed to be known for its love. Jesus says our love for one another is the very thing that will attract the world. But can you name a single church in our country that is known for the way its members love one another? I'm sure you can think of churches known for excitement or powerful preaching or worship or production value. But can you name a church known for supernatural love?

When the phrase "one another" is mentioned over a hundred times in the New Testament (love one another, care for ..., pray for ..., admonish ..., etc.), why is it that you can't think of a single church known for the way they take care of each other? God clearly cares about this. Why don't we? As elders at Cornerstone Church, we asked ourselves if anyone would notice supernatural love when they walked into our gatherings. It was not that we were void of love, it just didn't stand out. Honestly, the love in our midst was a far cry from anything that we could attribute to the Holy Spirit.

At this point, some of you are probably thinking, *Well, that's Francis's experience with his church. I'm actually part of a very loving congregation, probably more loving than what he experienced at Cornerstone.* It's possible, but you need to know that Cornerstone was a very loving church, as far as American churches go. We really enjoyed being with each other, had some good small groups, and served the poor in our area and around the world. We were a very nice and kind church, and

we definitely witnessed some Spirit-inspired acts of love. With some notable exceptions, we just weren't experiencing what we saw in the Bible.

As elders, we weren't content to just love people better than the church down the street. We were looking for biblical love. Our love felt too similar to the love we received from coworkers and neighbors. Sometimes we are too quick to label our church experience as "Christian love." Jesus made it clear that even sinners know how to love each other (Luke 6:32–36). Haven't you ever worked in a restaurant, joined a gym, or bonded with other parents at your kids' sporting events? Is the love you experience in your church really that different? It's supposed to be.

Jesus said, "As I have loved you, you also are to love one another" (John 13:34 NIV). Our King who allowed Himself to be tortured and killed for us tells us to love each other in the same way. Have you ever even considered loving a fellow Christian as sacrificially and selflessly as Christ loved you? When was the last time you looked at a Christian brother or sister selflessly, wanting to bring them life no matter what the cost?

Think of a few of the people in your church. Picture their faces. Now think about the lengths to which Jesus went to bring those specific people to Himself. Think of the whippings He endured so that they could be forgiven. Imagine the way He thought of each of those people as He hung on the cross.

No sacrifice was too great; there was nothing He would hold back. He did everything necessary to redeem and heal and transform those specific people.

He did the same for you. So ask yourself: Who does God want you to pursue? Who could you desire to spend time with more? Jesus went to the ultimate extent for them; why would you hold anything back? Jesus pursued those people from heaven to earth to bring them into His family, what barriers could hold you back from pursuing a deep familial relationship with them?

We have experienced the greatest love in the universe. Shouldn't that profound love flow out of us? And shouldn't that be enough to shock the world?

*“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.”*

1 John 4:7–12

Did you catch that? Right there is a promise that *if we love one another*, God will *abide* in us, and His love will be *perfected* in us. Is there anything in the world you want more than that? We don't live like this statement is true. And that breaks my heart, because there is also a serious warning in this passage that those who don't love don't know God. What does this say about our churches? The importance of loving one another is emphasized all throughout Scripture (Rom. 12:9–10; 1 Pet. 4:8; 1 Cor. 13; etc.), and I can't help feeling like we're missing out on something extraordinary because of our lack of love.

## SUPERNATURAL UNITY

When Jesus was approaching the cross, He prayed a fascinating prayer. This prayer was for His disciples, and some of His statements have really challenged my faith.

*“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may*

*become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”*

John 17:20–23

Jesus prayed that the unity of His followers would be equal to the oneness of the Father and Son! He wants you and me to be one *just as* the Father and Son are united. Have you ever considered pursuing this type of unity with your church?

Do you even believe this is possible?

Let me keep going with this. Jesus’ prayer was not that we would just get along and avoid church splits. His prayer was that we would become “perfectly one.” He prayed this because our oneness was designed to be the way to prove that Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus said the purpose of our unity was “so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them.”

For some of us, that prayer doesn’t make sense. How could our unity result in the world’s belief? How could seeing us love each other make someone believe that Jesus truly came from heaven? It feels like saying two plus two equals a thousand. Just remember that Scripture is filled with impossible equations. Marching around a city seven times doesn’t seem like it would result in its walls collapsing, but then it happened (see Josh. 6). Church unity doesn’t seem like it would result in people getting saved, but it actually did happen (Acts 2:44–47).

They were united and the result was people being saved. Acts describes the extent of their unity like this:

*“Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.”*

Acts 4:32–35

I don’t know about you, but that passage always moves me. The Church looks so beautiful, so attractive. It is that kind of love that makes our message believable. Scripture is clear: there is a real connection between our unity and the believability of our message. If we are serious about winning the lost, we must be serious about pursuing unity.

*Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for*

*the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God.*

Philippians 1:27–28

If you skipped past the verses above, please go back and read them. Then read them again. Notice the promise at the end: our fearless unity is “a clear sign to [those who oppose Christians] of their destruction”! We are living in a time when very few people believe in the wrath of God. Even the vilest people we know have no fear of a literal judgement day. Have you ever tried to convince someone of their future destruction? It’s not a simple task. Yet Scripture tells us that our fearless unity will convince them.

When are we going to take these promises seriously and spend our energy seeking unity? Not just the kind of unity where we avoid arguments with each other, but the kind where we truly live together as a family. Where we meet each other’s needs and care for one another regardless of the time or effort required. Unity doesn’t come easily. Think of everything it takes for a family to stay together—all the acts of service it requires, all the forgiveness and grace that must be constantly extended, all the times when one person’s desires have to be lovingly laid aside for the desires of others. It’s easy to talk about unity, but it requires a kind of mutual commitment that is all but absent from our churches. If we’re going to see this

become a reality, we need to count the cost and decide if we will commit. I don't know about you, but this doesn't come naturally to me. I'm an introvert who is happy with a few close friends. Obedience often grates against our natural desires; but if we only obey when it feels natural, then Jesus is not truly Lord of our lives. What often results from obedience, however, is unexpected blessing. Now that I am starting to experience true unity with my brothers and sisters, I don't want to ever live without it.

Pushing the Church to live as a family is not some gimmick, some flavor of "church" that would be fun to try; it's commanded. And it's offered. Crafting the Church into a truly united and supernaturally loving family is the very thing God is wanting to do. Do we believe God is capable? Do we trust that His design for His Church is what will be most effective?

We have come up with countless strategies to reach the lost when God promises that unity is the method that will work. Think about that: God gave us instructions on how to reach the world, yet we abandon the one set of instructions He gave us even as we scramble to create classes and programs and events that promote everything but the strategy God gave us!

## HAVE WE GIVEN UP?

When you read about the unity of the early church, does it make you jealous? Something in you wishes you were born

two thousand years ago so you could be a part of a group like this. You can get depressed by the dual realization that this is the very thing you've always wanted and you're not going to find this in the typical American church today.

It's sad that our churches look nothing like this. It's devastating that we don't believe it is possible.

What I see today is many people choosing to opt out of the Church. Claiming a continued love for Jesus, they have decided that the Church only gets in their way. It's a sad time when those who want to be close to Jesus have given up on the Church.

There is this terrifying verse in 1 Timothy where Paul talked about two men who rejected the faith. Paul said that he had handed them over to Satan, by which he meant that he'd put them outside of the Church (1:20). Basically, these men were actively opposing the works of God, so rather than pretending everything was fine, Paul removed them from the safety and blessings of the fellowship of believers. He was hoping that the misery of being separated from the Church would lead them to repent. Are you catching the weight of this? Paul equated removal from the Church with being handed over to Satan! It is crazy to me that we live in a time when people are voluntarily doing this to themselves! No church has placed them outside of the fellowship; instead, they've handed themselves over to Satan!

Real love, unity, and blessing were supposed to be found in the Church. Many are having a hard time finding that,

so they're setting off on their own. Jesus said that the world would see the supernatural unity and love we share in the Church and believe in Him through that. But we're not experiencing it. We've given up on it. We no longer believe it is possible.

What if we took God's description of the Church as a family seriously? What would happen if a group of people sought Jesus fervently, loved each other sacrificially, and then shared the gospel boldly?

Sadly, there are a lot of people in our churches who aren't interested in living out loving family like this. I'm going to say something that might be hard to hear: What if we let them leave? I know that goes against all of the wisdom of modern church-growth strategies, but it's exactly the kind of thing Jesus would do. While we design strategies to slowly ease people into Christian commitment and grow attendance at our services, 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). The people who leave your church because they're turned off by the level of relational commitment will find another church that can provide what they're looking for. You can't shape the life of your church around who might leave if things start to feel too much like the New Testament.

Jesus doesn't sugarcoat anything, but He does promise that His Spirit can bind us together in a way we've never

experienced. Maybe we've just been too distracted by our efforts to make our church services exciting that we've hardly noticed the people the Spirit wants to unite us with.

What if we followed God's design for the Church, and in doing so allowed the Church to be pruned down to only those who wanted to obey His command to "love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12)? We might actually find that a pruned tree would bear more fruit (John 15:2). We might discover that the branches that weren't bearing fruit were actually sucking all of the life out of the tree.

Don't forget that there are times when God doesn't just want us to let them leave, He wants us to ask them to. There is a difficult reality to face, which is that there are going to be people who try to take advantage of churches that are committed to love. In order to love each other like family, we will need to have grace and forgiveness. However, sometimes the most loving thing to do for someone is not to enable them in their sin, but to follow the aforementioned example of Paul in 1 Timothy who separated people from the Church. It was for the good of the Church as well as the individuals who were removed. Biblical unity is not achieved by overlooking sin, but through firm pruning which can lead to repentance. Unconditional love doesn't always look the way we expect it to. It takes tremendous love to risk rejection for the hope of loving a sinner to repentance.

## BE ENCOURAGED

For years I honestly didn't have faith that it was even possible for a church to possess the love and unity I saw in Scripture. People kept telling me this couldn't happen in America. I would see examples of this in places like China, but church leaders would tell me it only worked there because people already lived communally and because they were experiencing persecution that forced them to bond. There was always a part of me that doubted those voices, but it was only a few years ago that I mustered up the courage to try. It was harder than I expected, but it's also been more rewarding than I could have dreamed. This can happen wherever you are too. Holy-Spirit love and unity are not confined to persecuted countries.