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Interview: Francis Chan
Subject Area: The Church & Radical Charity
Organization: Cornerstone Church
Books: Crazy Love, Forgotten God
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By: Christian Buckley

It was a rainy morning as I started to drive from my home in San Diego to Francis Chan's church in Simi Valley, just north of Los Angeles. With just a tad over 150 miles to log, I had plenty of time to think about Francis and our discussion. A friend turned me on to him for this book and to prepare I had purchased and read his two books and watched his video blogs. I was intrigued by his ideas, his church commitment to give away 50% of their income, and the biblically solid messages preached in his books (which have sold well over 500,000 copies). I quickly realized that Chan was not another example of a now tired genre – over packaged “cool” pastors preaching soft theology in artistic ways – but I wanted to know why. I wanted to find out more about his personal journey and how he has handled the challenges of doing what this book suggests we all must...

CB: In the Preface to your book Crazy Love, you make the following statement:

“God put me in Simi Valley, California, to lead a church of comfortable people into lives of risk and adventure. I believe He wants us to love others so much that we go to extremes to help them. I believe He wants us to be known for giving – of our time, our money, and our abilities – and to start a movement of ‘giving’ churches. In so doing, we can alleviate the suffering in the world and change the reputation of His bride in America. Some people, even some at my church, have told me flat-out, ‘You’re crazy.’ But I can’t imagine devoting my life to a greater vision.”

What triggered those perspectives?

FC: When it started, it took some faith in my personal life. I got to a point where I just knew God was going to provide because He showed me He would over and over again. I began to realize that the more we gave, the more we were fine. And

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after a while, it almost didn't feel like faith anymore because He'd shown me so many times. I got to the point that I just wasn't worried about myself. I'd tell my wife we could give everything away right then and it would work out. It's supernatural, God's watching. And He's shown us too many times.

So I had that personal conviction, but for some reason there was a block in my thinking because while I believed it for me, I didn't believe it for you. I knew God would take care of me, but I was scared to even ask people to give in case He wasn't going to come through for them like He did for me. I had to really think and ask myself, "Do I believe this for the sake of this church?" And I began to realize that I'm obviously not His favorite child, the only one He's going to do this for. He makes these promises in Scripture and I need to trust that the same principal that's been true in my life is true for all believers and true for the church at large.

As our church started to give more and more, it was overwhelming. It was like tears to my eyes type of good. Our congregation just came alive. It was such a great change in our church, that my desire was for every church and Christian to experience it. It's just good.

CB: One of the things I find interesting in your process is where you started. You're a Masters Seminary graduate, right?

FC: Yes.

CB: So, I think the average person who knows the teaching of John MacArthur [founder and head of the Masters Seminary] would guess that a student of that school would be evangelically conservative, highly focused on Scripture, and very focused on the Gospel, perhaps to the exclusion of humanitarian service and social justice. I would guess that the idea that we don't need to preach the gospel because "they will know we are Christians by our love" was not a favorite on that campus. I am not asking for a statement on MacArthur personally or the seminary specifically, but is that a fair characterization?

FC: It was true of my life. I don't want to make a general statement about other students or say that's the way it was for them, but it was true of me. And in reality my theology hasn't changed a ton as far as on paper, but it's this conviction to live it out. We had the orthodoxy, but maybe not the orthopraxy. In Scripture, its one thing to declare who Jesus is and what He was like, but it's another thing to display what He was like. That's what I wasn't doing. All through Scripture,

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we're taught to walk as Jesus walked. That's as much a doctrine as teaching the way that He walked and that was my big concern with the church – we've told people what Jesus was like, but we really didn't show it.

CB: So it is both?

FC: Scripture does emphasize both – watch your life and doctrine closely. If you do that, people are going to be saved. There's a power in that. But people neglect one or the other. Just doing a bunch of good stuff is not enough. Having your doctrine right on is not enough. Your doctrine is not right on until you're living it out.

Even now, I have to look at my life – like recently I confessed to the church on Sunday – I said, "I'm okay. I'm preaching grace, but I'm not living it. I haven't been showing grace to everyone I run into." And biblically, that's when you look at the roll of an elder, it wasn't just to teach the right doctrine, but you really had to live it.

CB: It seems like we tend to be either – or type people. The last 10-15 years involved a "Christianity" defined by what we were against - a morality movement – we're anti-gays, we're anti-abortion, etc. And now, with Obama and others talking about Christianity as a notion of loving, compassion, and unity we may be moving in a very different direction. It's almost a pendulum swing. Do you sense that?

FC: Absolutely, absolutely. I'm not a balance guy. I don't see balance this, balance that. I see an extreme faith that we have. So I have to be hard core defending doctrinally what I believe on paper and I have to be hard core living it out. It's not like okay, balance the two of them. No. I want to know and be able to defend biblical truth and I've got to study and study hard, but I've also got to give and live and love with some desperation.

CB: You make the comment in *Crazy Love*, "The point of your life is to point to Him. Whatever you are doing, God wants to be glorified, because this whole thing is His. It is His movie, His world, His gift." And you talk in other places about the reality of how short and fragile our physical existence is. I take these comments to suggest a belief that what matters in the final sense is somebody's eternal status before God -- are they forgiven, have they been reconciled.

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At the same time, when you look at poverty, when you look at human trafficking, when you look at these great social evils that exist – that we walk in – they matter. They matter deeply to you and your church. So how do you confront both these issues? How do you say to the poor person, “Your poverty matters to me, but your soul matters more...”?

FC: First, there are these tensions we have in our lives, like those you mentioned, that only the Holy Spirit can accomplish in us. For example, lately I’ve been wrestling with how to have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart and at the same time rejoice always. I’m to always be rejoicing over my salvation and always anguishing over these people who are lost – bawling on this end and rejoicing on that end. How do I do that? Somehow it’s got to be supernatural because on paper they seem mutually exclusive. I don’t get it completely and that’s where I go to the Holy Spirit and say – somehow these truths are in Scripture and you need to make both of those things a reality in my life.

I would say the same is true in this instance. On the one hand I hurt for those in need. I wonder how I would feel if I were starving, if I couldn’t find clean water for my family, what if I was being raped repeatedly all day or my daughter was being raped repeatedly all day. On the other hand, there is a reality that if that’s anguish in this life, there’s going to be even greater anguish afterwards for those that don’t know Him. There’s an even bigger issue there.

Only the Holy Spirit at work in me can allow me to carry all of these burdens. I hate to be so simplistic, but I don’t think you can write it out on paper. It’s not going to work. It doesn’t compute. It has to be supernatural because both are true and happening simultaneously. I have to look at that person as though it were Jesus. I’ve got to feed him, give him water, cloth him. At that same time I’ve got to deal with his eternal reality and need of the gospel.

CB: I don’t like to live in a place where I realize it’s going to be a day by day grind. I wish I could work out my Christianity so that it makes sense. So that there is nothing left of the Holy Spirit. I don’t want to constantly look at that poor person in their poverty as both spiritual and physical because that’s going to leave me without a comfortable resolution. What is it about us . . .

FC: I talk about that in *Forgotten God*. We’re control freaks. We like to fix things, organize them. We don’t like to follow. As a general rule, we like to be in control. I don’t know if it’s that we like to be in authority or that we want to know that we can package it and explain it and have it right there. Then we’re sort of

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above the situation, we've got control of it versus just following even though I don't know where I am going and why I'm going. We don't like that type of life where we just turn left here and trust that God is going to tell us where to go when we get to the end of the road. We say to God, "Why don't you just map everything out for me?"

CB: We do the same thing with the Word of God. You talk about it in the beginning of *Forgotten God*, that we don't go to the Scripture to really find out and do what it says. We want it to validate what we're doing. We don't adopt the position that whatever it says about an issue, that's what I'm going to do. It doesn't matter how I personally feel about it.

For example, it's easier to care about poverty than it is to care about people going to Hell. And it's more popular. So is the answer to simply say, "What does the Scripture tell me and what is the Holy Spirit directing based on that?"

FC: It seems like it. It really does, but that doesn't leave you a whole lot of security for tomorrow outside of God. When Christ called His disciples, He was so clear with them, He was leading them into a life of uncertainty. Extreme uncertainty of not knowing what tomorrow was going to hold or even where they were going to sleep. So why should I believe that the Holy Spirit is going to do anything different in my life? I'm a very, very simple person. I wish I could grasp and memorize some of these deeper truths and be able to explain them; but the one thing the Lord has given me is clarity on the obvious and the simple and how we can distort it, not because it's confusing, but because we want to.

CB: You talk about that in the end of *Crazy Love*. You say the gap is so extreme in our world that we have to take lightly passages that challenge us to give and love radically. You are right. We don't take those passages seriously. You take them literally. You look at those passages and say, "I've got to do something with this literally in my life, in my church . . ."

FC: I was saying the other week that when I was a kid, it was really easy. Follow the leader -- you did whatever the leader did. In church, follow Jesus is a totally different game that we created. You can follow Him in your heart, but not in life. As a kid you can't just sit there and say I'm flapping my wings in my heart rather than actually do what the leader was doing. Simon Says was really simple, you just did whatever Simon said to do. But Jesus Says is a totally different game in church. The way you play Jesus Says is you memorize what He said, you study what He said, and you quote what He said in the Greek; but you don't really have

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to do what He says. My head says its simple - like childlike - you do what He did. You live how He lived. Certainly there is some thinking to do of contextually and culturally, how does that look and what's the best; but it's not going to look that different, it's not going to be that off – that whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus walked. I see Scripture saying that over and over again. “Why do you call me Lord when you don't do what I say?” Those passages scream out to me. Jesus stating very obviously “Why do you call me Master if you're not going to obey me?” But we've created a system where you can call Him master and not do what He says as long as you believe it in your heart. That doesn't compute with me. You can't just write these things off. They're very basic.

CB: That is not a popular idea. What has been the fallout for you?

FC: It's not taken well. There's a lot of resistance, but the reason why I have peace about continuing down this road is that the resistance I get is not with chapter and verse. People say things like “God helps them who help themselves¹” my “favorite non-verse” and quote me theories and Christian slogans we've created or verses like “...the ant saves and works hard...”² They'll really twist Scripture, they'll say things like “Jesus said you'll always have the poor” – and argue that it means we shouldn't worry about them. Are you kidding me? Who's twisting the Scriptures here to get what they want? This is not what I want in the flesh. People say, “Oh, you don't like stuff, you don't love your kids, you don't want the best for them like I want for my kids.” Their arguments are so off.

CB: You talk in the Afterward to *Forgotten God* about the experience you had two years before the book came out about going to a dinner and sitting next to somebody who was involved in the human trafficking issue. The passion you felt and how that was numbed by other well meaning Christians. Talk about that...

FC: It was such a process. It was David Batstone by the way from Not for Sale. He didn't even talk about it a whole lot. When I went back to the hotel and tried to dwell on the few things he did say, and just the concept of it – when I put a face to it and thought of my own daughters, I came home and wanted to really get involved in the issue.

What I got was the typical American church response. Don't get me wrong, there are plenty of people here that are hard core – hearts' broken and doing things about it. We've got people going back and forth to Thailand. But the general

¹ Heraclitus [*floruit* (he flourished) 513 B.C.] in *Seven Against Thebes*, fragment 223.

² Proverbs 6:6

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populace is never going to go for that. And I started listening, listening, listening and I've got temptations myself and so many distractions. That's my biggest weakness. I love to play anything. My perfect day is wake up, surf, golf, . . . dinner with my wife and a bunch of friends – a great day. So that temptation is there. When people say, settle down. Let's go do this, let's go do that . . . I jump right back into that world. I'm no saint whose gotten rid of all these fleshly passions. It's all there. I'm going to gravitate toward that unless I really fast and pray and seek the Spirit and ask what do you want me to do right now?

It's the sick side of us that doesn't want anyone to be too radical. It's convicting. People make these statements like – you're a radical. God doesn't call us all to be that way. "Listen Francis, you have this weird idea that there's this little group of radicals and that they're the real believers, you know there's a middle of the road too. There's this middle road where people do good things." I see a narrow road and a wide road. That's all I read about.

CB: Picking up on that last idea. It really personalizes God's call in your life. What is the difference in your mind between focusing on individuals rather than focusing on institutions or issues?

FC: It's interesting that I was never motivated sadly by the issue of poverty. It wasn't until I became friends with people and I started interacting with individuals in Africa and there was a face to it – that's when everything changed for me. It was that personal side. At least that brought it to light and now I have these people in mind, these faces I saw, and these conversations we had, and suddenly it was my friend who was starving, and she has a name, that no one takes the time to get to know, but she does. It's interesting that it was never an issue because I separated myself from the issue, but I couldn't separate myself from those individuals, looking into their eyes...