

A CRITICAL READER'S GUIDE TO
FRANCIS CHAN'S BOOK CRAZY LOVE

A Paper

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by
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Foreword by Chris Tomlin

Chris Tomlin heartily endorses Francis Chan as one who “leaves you wanting more of Jesus” and “a man with great vision and resolve for the mission of Jesus.” Tomlin calls him a person “who believes that God is really who He says He is and that the true reality of this life is to follow Him wholeheartedly.” We should be wary when a person is built up too much. Francis Chan is not a unique in believing ‘that God is really who he says He is’ – nor does he have any special insight on what it means to follow the Lord wholeheartedly.

What should concern us more, however, is Tomlin’s implicit ‘put-down’ of those who don’t agree with Chan. Calling *Crazy Love* “the most challenging book outside of God’s Word you will read this year,” he says the “status quo and norms of the so-called ‘Christian’ life that so many of us are used to experiencing are in for a shock!” By putting quotation marks around “Christian,” Tomlin subtly implies that people should question whether or not they are “Christian” based on their works.

Tomlin is right in saying that the life to which Jesus calls us is “absolute craziness to the world.” But let’s be clear: The “us” in that statement is Christians – believers in Jesus! Jesus does not call unbelievers to a life that is ‘absolute craziness to the world.’ He calls them to believe in His Son! Seeds of ‘eternal insecurity’ are sown if the difference between becoming a Christian (having eternal life) and living out the Christian life is not clear. When Tomlin adds, “Sure it’s fine and politically correct to believe (*italics his*) in God, but to really love Him is a whole different story,” he begs an obvious question: Is believing enough to save you, or not? (See Acts 16.31)

In contrast, Chuck Swindoll in *The Grace Awakening* reminds readers both of their assurance in the finished work of Christ on the cross, received by faith in Jesus Christ alone, AND the call for them to live the Christian life as a response from a heart of gratitude. If the second call ever impinges on the first, then justification is no longer by grace through faith apart from works, and assurance of salvation is impossible.

Preface

Chan is certainly right in saying that “the (American) church in many ways is not doing well” (20). In fact, it’s an understatement. The spiritual quotient of church-goers in America is at a tragic level. But Chan’s follow-up statement is confusing: “I grew up believing in God without having a clue what He is like. I called myself a *Christian* (*italics mine*), was pretty involved in church, and tried to stay away from all of the things that ‘good Christians’ avoid...” Is he saying (implying) that he wasn’t a Christian? Had he believed in Jesus? Was he trying to be saved by works?

He adds that he doesn’t think his church’s teachings were incorrect, just incomplete. “My view of God was narrow and small.” That’s still true! Let’s be clear: If Chan (or any of us) came face-to-face with God (a la Isaiah), we would all say that our view of God is still ‘narrow and small.’ What follows is Chan’s testimony of how God changed his heart from his previous

incomplete understanding to his present ‘complete’ view. This ‘I have come to understand things other Christians just don’t understand’ is standard fare in Christian books today. It shouldn’t be. We’re all on the faith journey, and instead of ‘polishing our own halos’ while impugning others (both reflect pride), a dose of humility would go a long way!

Chan writes that he and his church are “willing to think biblically rather than conventionally.” So other churches aren’t? (Ironically, Chan seems to have since come to the conclusion that his church didn’t have it all right; see <https://www.premierchristianity.com/Past-Issues/2019/February-2019/Francis-Chan-Why-I-quit-my-megachurch-and-started-again>). Why do Christian authors do this? Is ‘conventional’ never ‘biblical’? If this were about theology, the distinction would be fine. We can examine Scriptural teaching. If we’re talking about how I think a person is supposed to live his or her life, it’s not. The Spirit guides us through His Word – not though ‘unconventional’ teaching. This replaces the Spirit and Scripture with the latest ‘Christian teaching fad.’

The first paragraph of p21 is poorly worded: “This book is written for those who want more Jesus...who are bored with what American Christianity offers.” ‘More Jesus’ means, we might assume, to be ‘a more faithful follower of Jesus in my life.’ But saying “more Jesus” is vague, and prone to misunderstanding. A believer doesn’t get “more of Jesus” by following Chan’s writings. He gets more of Chan! Jesus isn’t doling Himself out, only giving you a little at a time. You get ‘all of Jesus’ the moment you believe in Him. The second paragraph is clearer: “...by surrendering yourself totally to God’s purposes, He will bring you the most pleasure in this life and the next.”

While we can largely agree with Chan in his Preface, we should be wary. On p22, he uses ‘wobbly language’: “The core problem isn’t the fact that we’re lukewarm, halfhearted, or stagnant Christians. The crux of it all is why we are this way, and it is because we have an inaccurate view of God. We see Him as a benevolent Being who is satisfied when people manage to fit Him into their lives in some small way...but He never begs us to give Him some small part of ourselves. He commands everything from His followers.” Chan seems to accept that there are “Christians” (‘saved’ and going to heaven) who are lukewarm and stagnant spiritually, but then warns that this indicates we have an inaccurate view of God. Do we really ‘know’ God, then, or not? Is Chan suggesting that if a person has an ‘accurate’ view of God, he won’t be lukewarm or stagnant in his spiritual life? That’s simply not true. Scripture sometimes commands everything from followers or Jesus (e.g., Luke 14.25ff), but it also begs us to give ourselves to Him (Romans 12.1-2). Is Chan saying that if a person does not give everything (who really gives everything?!) to Jesus, he’s not a true follower, and not saved? Not clear!

Ch. 1: Stop Praying

Chan begins with a nice opening invitation to reflect on the grandeur of God reflected in creation. He writes that God is “glorious” – we might add omnipotent, omniscient, holy, merciful, gracious, and loving!

The second paragraph on page 29 is excellent (assuming the “us” here is Christians). Many Christians get so caught up in the world and distracted by the ‘stuff’ of this life (including mega-church pastors!) that they forget God. Chan ‘confesses’ on this page that some mornings he doesn’t feel like loving God, or just forgets to. He’s human!

One final note from this chapter: It is telling that in his catalogue of God’s attributes, Chan does not include love. Yes, God is omnipotent, holy, omniscient, eternal, and just, but God is love (1 John 4.8), and demonstrates it toward us in Christ (Rom. 5.8). His love motivates His mercy and grace. Why not mention it here?

Ch. 2: You Might Not Finish This Chapter

Pages 39-40 are good reminders of the shortness of life – that we can pass into eternity at any moment.

On page 41, Chan takes Paul’s exhortations to the Philippian church and calls them “commands” – in the sense that if we are not “rejoicing always” and “being anxious for nothing,” we are disobeying God’s commands. This is not Paul’s tone in Philippians; it is harsh and condemnatory, and unrealistic. It turns an exhortation to trust in God into a battering ram. Chan adds a personal testimony: He experienced heart problems till he surrendered his worries to the Lord, then they went away. A lifestyle of worry and stress is one thing; telling a person who doesn’t rejoice always or is ever anxious about anything they are sinning is another thing altogether. Neither Paul (nor God) was suggesting that in the maelstrom of life, a Christian must always “rejoice”! [While Jesus was hanging on the cross, when He said, ‘My God, why have You forsaken Me?’ was He rejoicing? If He was, isn’t there something unreal about that? If He wasn’t rejoicing, was He disobedient? We understand epistolary writing to be contextual. A few verses earlier, Paul wept over believers who wandered away from the faith (no rejoicing there!). An exhortation to “be anxious for nothing” doesn’t mean you sin if you’re ever anxious; it’s encouragement for us to take our anxieties to the Lord in prayer (see Phil.4.6).]

We agree with Chan’s desire that Christians not be overcome by worry, stress, and anxiety, but he misconstrues the purpose of God creating the world, and history. Reflecting the Westminster Confession, he sees everything as happening for God’s glory; this leads to Calvin’s macabre declaration that God is pleased for the sake of His glory to condemn non-elect people to eternity in hell. If it can be said that life is all about God – and it can – it can also be said that the entire scope of history is God telling us, ‘It’s all about you!’ Both are true, and we get ourselves in trouble if we forget either. Does God want us to bring Him glory in all we do? Yes! Why? Because He has an insatiable desire for more and more glory – the angels surrounding His throne just aren’t enough...He wants more?! This is an unbiblical and grotesque idea, nothing like what we find in Scripture. God desires us to reflect Him in our lives, thus bringing Him glory, because His desire is for our best, and He knows that only in obedience to Him can we experience that. [To better understand the purpose for God creating this world and us, see David Anderson, *Free Grace Soteriology* (ed. By James Reitman; Grace Theology Press, 2012), 47-50, and Joseph Dillow, *Final Destiny: The Future Reign of the Servant Kings* (Grace Theology Press, 2013), 7-11.]

This chapter provides a good reminder that our lives can be over at any time, and living each day, each moment, with that in mind, is a good thing. The use of Matthew 10.32-33 (p47) is unclear. Chan tells of inviting people at a funeral who wanted to know Jesus to “come up and give their lives to Him” (p49); did he make clear that ‘giving your life to Jesus’ means believing in Him? Scripture never calls unbelievers to ‘give their life to Jesus’ to be saved. To borrow Chan’s own words, ‘It’s not about us; it’s about Him!’ We are saved by believing in Him, not giving Him ourselves.

Chan’s lack of clarity as to whether he is talking about getting/staying saved or living a life which will result in rewards is troubling. Readers of this chapter could easily conclude that how they live their life will determine whether or not they will be saved. Chan never states clearly that eternal life is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. He may believe this, but imprecise wording can cause many readers to fall into the awful ‘Galatian heresy’ of works righteousness. This is dangerous ambiguity.

Chapter 3: Crazy Love

After the first four or five pages of this chapter, we can say “Praise the Lord!” Chan gives a compelling picture of God’s unconditional love for us, and the way that love can motivate in us a trust of Him in every area of our lives. Excellent! His description of his feelings about God as ‘reverent intimacy’ (p57) is good. His experience in the woods – discovering that God wanted intimacy with him – is spot on (Jesus’ words to the woman of Samaria in John 4.23 reflect this truth).

His reflections on Jeremiah 1 are good – until he slips into determinism on the bottom of p58. His presumptive interpretation that God “determined what Jeremiah would do before He was born” – taken to its logical extreme, would mean we have no choice to obey (or not). Chan leaves out of his quote of Eph. 2.10 (p59) the phrase “that we should walk in them” (because it doesn’t jive with his determinist reading of the verse?). His personal application from Jeremiah 1.6-10 (top of p60) that “God will ensure my success in accordance with His plan, not mine” is, again, presumptuous. Does our obedience have anything to do with our success (see Josh.1.7-8), or is it already ‘determined’ “in accordance with His plan”? Chan follows with the statement that “God...loves us and longs for us to love Him back.” Which is it? Is it all determined by God – even our ceasing to love Him – or is our response the key?

Chan realizes the Calvinist paradox he has created – stating that God has determined what we will do, but that when we don’t do it, He loves us and longs for us to love Him in return. He cannot meld the two, so he writes: “So why does God still love us, despite us? I do not have an answer to this question” (p60). The reader is prone to scream “Aaarrgh!” at this point. A book entitled Crazy Love should know the answer: God still loves us because of who He is! God IS love! That’s the answer to the question, and we should shout it from the rooftops!

Chapter 4: Profile of the Lukewarm

While we can quibble about some of Chan's teachings to this point, this chapter reveals deeper problems in his misuse of Scripture. He starts well, focusing on God's great love for us, and how valuable it is. His statement on p66 is excellent: "This kind of enthusiastic response to God's love is entirely appropriate."

Chan then starts talking about parables, and loses the plot. Jesus spoke in parables so that unbelieving Jews would not know the mysteries of the kingdom, which Jesus was at that time reserving for His disciples. That's it, period. Chan misses this completely, and writes: Jesus began speaking in parables – "so that" those who weren't genuinely listening wouldn't get it. They genuinely listened, but because of unbelief they didn't understand! Chan writes: Speakers [today] don't use Jesus' tactic to eliminate people who are not sincere seekers. It had nothing to do with being "seekers," but "followers." Jesus was teaching the cost of discipleship. And Chan writes: The fact is, He [Jesus] just wasn't interested in those who fake it. It wasn't about 'faking anything,' it was recognizing the cost of being a follower! If Jesus "just wasn't interested in those who fake it," then God's love for us isn't that 'crazy' after all...because we all – and Chan, too (see p29) – 'fake it' lots of times. Hands up, all who are completely genuine!

Chan then turns to the parable of the soils. After reciting the four types of soil, and how the seed of the Word takes root (or not) and bears fruit (or not), he makes this statement: "My caution to you is this: Do not assume you are good soil." (Italics his) He suggests that most American churchgoers are the third kind of soil – thorny. You may be tempted to say "Amen!" as he writes, "A relationship with God simply cannot grow when money, sins, activities, favorite sports teams [sic], addictions, or commitments are piled on top of it." He scores again in the next paragraph, noting that "too much of the good life" and "things" can "keep us from living healthy, fruitful lives for God." Later on the same page (67), he writes: "Has your relationship with God actually changed the way you live? Do you see evidence of God's kingdom in your life? Or are you choking it out slowly by spending too much time, energy, money, and thought on the things of the world?" These are valid and important questions for American Christians to ask themselves.

He then asks, Are you satisfied being "godly enough" to get yourself to heaven...? (67) The implication of this question is all wrong, since being "godly enough" has nothing to do with 'getting to heaven' – believing in Jesus is what matters. We must assume he wants Christians to 'go deeper' with the Lord, but this is unclear.

Pages 68-81 are an extended diatribe against 'lukewarm people' (note, not "lukewarm Christians"). The feeling one gets when reading this section is that Chan is telling readers to look at their lives and see whether or not they are just 'faking it,' that is, whether or not you are really saved. After citing the church at Laodicea (Revelation 3.15-18), a "lukewarm" church, Chan writes, "Many people read this passage and assume Jesus is speaking to saved people. Why?" Implication: They weren't saved! Chan then invites us to judge them as being unsaved because they are lukewarm. Result? Anyone living a lukewarm life behavior will conclude, "I'm not living a good enough life, so I'm probably not saved!" This is utterly destructive.

“Lukewarm people” according to Chan (on these pages) are those who:

- go to church regularly, because “they believe “good Christians” do, so they go” (68).
- give money to charity and the church as long as it doesn’t impinge on their standard of living (69).
- desire to fit in both inside and outside the church (69)
- care more about what people think of their actions than what God thinks of their hearts and lives (69).
- don’t genuinely hate sin and aren’t truly sorry for it (70)
- are moved by stories who do radical things for Christ, but they do not act themselves (71)
- rarely share their faith with neighbors, coworkers, or friends (71)
- don’t want to make people feel uncomfortable by talking about private issues like religion (71)
- gauge morality or ‘goodness’ by comparing themselves to the secular world (72)
- say they love Jesus, but only a part. They don’t allow Jesus to control their lives (72)
- do not love God with all their heart, soul, and strength (73)
- try to love God that much, but say it isn’t possible for the average person (73)
- don’t love others as much as themselves (73)
- love those who love them back more than those who don’t or can’t (73)
- don’t love those who intentionally slight them (73)
- serve God and others, but there are limits to how far they will go (74)
- do not give money, time, and energy unlimitedly to God and others (74)
- think about life on earth more than eternity in heaven (75)
- their daily life is focused on to-do lists, the week’s schedule, and next month’s vacation (75)
- rarely consider trying to give as much as possible to the poor (75)
- feel “called” to minister to the rich, but not to the poor (75)
- want to do the “bare minimum” spiritually (76)
- ask “How much do I have to give” instead of “How much can I give?” (76)
- ask “How much time should I spend praying and reading the Bible?” instead of (saying) “I wish I didn’t have to go to work, so I could sit here and read longer!” (76)
- are continually concerned with ‘playing it safe’ instead of “risking for God” (77)
- feel secure because they attend church, made a profession of faith at age twelve, were baptized, come from a Christian family, vote Republican, or live in America (78)
- do not live by faith (78)
- don’t have to trust God – they have a savings account (78)
- don’t need God to help them – they have a retirement plan (78)
- don’t depend on God on a daily basis (78)
- probably drink and swear less than the average unbeliever (79)
- equate partially sanitized lives with holiness (79)
- give Jesus less than everything (81)

On p80, Chan writes, “This profile of the lukewarm is not...intended to be used as ammunition to judge your fellow believers’ salvation.” But it is too late; he’s already brought this into question! He quotes 2 Corinthians 13.5 (“examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves”), and writes, “We are all messed-up human beings, and no one is totally immune to the behaviors described in the previous examples [of lukewarm people]. However, there is a difference between a life that is characterized by these sorts of mentalities and habits and a life that is in the process of being radically transformed (*italics mine*).” We are left to ponder: If my life is characterized by what Chan calls lukewarm behavior, am I saved? If I only share my faith with my neighbors or coworkers a couple of times this year, is that enough? How do I know if I am ‘in the process of being radically transformed’? How can I know I am saved? You can’t.

This chapter, with generalizations, references to “getting to heaven,” and questioning the salvation of lukewarm Laodiceans, cannot but have a destructive impact on the assurance of salvation of anyone who reads it.

Chapter 5: Serving Leftovers to a Holy God

Suddenly, and abruptly, the truth comes out. After a chapter warning his readers against being lukewarm, and writing, “This profile of the lukewarm is not...intended to be used as ammunition to judge your fellow believers’ salvation” (80), Chan does exactly that. He writes: As I see it, a lukewarm Christian is an oxymoron; there’s no such thing. To put it plainly, churchgoers who are “lukewarm” are not Christians. We will not see them in heaven (84). The chutzpa in this statement is appalling. We are not to judge a person’s salvation, but Chan will! Let’s put it bluntly: If any of the “Lukewarm” list above describes you, you’re going to hell forever.

This one statement undermines the entire book. Early on, Chan wrote (p22), “The core problem isn’t the fact that we’re lukewarm, halfhearted, or stagnant Christians. . .” How does he use the word “Christian”? How does this jive with the statement that those who are “lukewarm” are not Christians? It doesn’t.

What of Chan’s admission that some mornings he doesn’t feel love for God, and just forgets about Him (29)? Perhaps that’s only temporary, so he’s going to heaven? And maybe if I’m not “rejoicing always” or “being anxious for nothing” (41), hopefully I’ll ‘snap out of it’ and go to heaven? To be blunt, if the things Chan says “lukewarm people” do (68-81) results in them going to hell, then Chan, and all of his readers, will be there. Jesus said, “Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5.48). That’s a command, from the lips of Jesus. If we fall short of that, will we go to hell?

At this point – even considering that some of the preceding material sounded good and challenging, this book can be salvaged. This is a classic ‘bait and switch’ approach. Talk to your readers, call them Christians, call them to listen to what you’re saying, tell them you’re not judging whether they’re saved or not...then tell them that if they don’t do what you say, they’re going to hell. This is heresy. It is heinous.

Chan does not backpedal. He writes (*italics his*): “And our question quickly becomes even more unthinkable: Can I go to heaven without truly and faithfully loving Jesus? I don’t see anywhere in Scripture how the answer to that question could be yes.” The question may be unthinkable to Chan, who evidently sees himself as ‘truly and faithfully loving Jesus.’ (The best of us is a “beginner” in the ‘school of loving Jesus’!) But it is devastating for people who are battling in the real world! A girl who is sexually abused as a child, living with insecurity and depression, battling confusing emotions and unsatisfied desires, wondering what ‘love’ looks like...what chance does she have to measure up to Chan’s requirements for going to heaven? A guy who grew up without a dad, in the confusion of sexual development fell into homosexuality, who came to faith in Jesus, but struggles with his sexual identity and questions about what ‘love’ really is...what assurance will he ever have wondering if he “truly and faithfully loves Jesus”? This ‘ivory palaces’ kind of talk destroys security and assurance of millions who are at a difficult place on their spiritual journey.

Chan’s assertion that no one who falls short of ‘truly and faithfully loving Jesus’ will go to heaven is not taught in Scripture. In the New Testament, eternal life/justification is always faith alone in Christ alone. How can Chan’s statement jive with John 3.16? Whoever believes in Him, shall not perish, but have everlasting life! Or with Acts 16.31? Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved!

Chan extracts his view from Jesus’ letter to the church at Laodicea in Rev.3. In doing so, he misses the point completely. Jesus was not condemning those early church-goers to hell. He was calling them to fellowship! Without examining the text at all, Chan ‘pronounces’ his view as true. He says he re-read the Gospels as if he’d never read them before, and concludes: The thought of a person calling himself a “Christian” without being a devoted follower of Christ is absurd (85). But of course, no ‘chapter and verse’ teach this.

His “proof texts” are the parable of the soils (he wrongly concludes that only the fruit-bearing soil/person is going to heaven), John 14.15 (“If you love Me, you will obey what I command” – all about fellowship, nothing about going to heaven), James 2.19 (“Even the demons believe...” – wrong context; The Epistle of James is not about going to heaven or hell), and 1 John 2.3-4 (one who obeys “knows God” – talking about fellowship, not justification). [For a discussion of all these, and many other misunderstood and misused passages pertaining to justification and the Christian life, see Charles C. Bing, *Grace, Salvation, and Discipleship: How to Understand Some Difficult Bible Passages* (Grace Theology Press, 2015).]

Reflecting a common practice in cults that use the Bible to support their teachings, Chan moves from one verse to another, never dealing with context or interpretive questions, just ‘sound-bites’ followed by his conclusion. Matthew 16.24-25. Luke 14.33. His proof-texts have nothing to do with being justified or going to heaven; they are addressed to believers, calling them to follow, to obey, to sacrifice, to take up our cross, to love Christ. Without exegetical foundation, Chan announces that anyone who doesn’t do all these things is going to hell.

To borrow the description of Chuck Swindoll, Chan is a “grace killer” (see Charles Swindoll, *The Grace Awakening* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990), 3ff, 19). His teaching echoes the Judaizers in Galatia (Paul pronounced an “anathema” on them in Gal 1.8-9). Chan’s call for

readers to pray and re-read the Gospels, to see them “as God intends,” is akin to Mormons telling people to read Moroni 10.4 in The Book of Mormon, where it says to pray and ask God if Mormonism is true, and ask with a sincere heart, and God will show it to you. Chan knows most readers won’t know where to start, or what to look for, and he can claim the ‘high ground’ of biblical truth without ever once dealing seriously with the text itself.

Chan’s statement on p87 defies belief: I do not want true believers to doubt their salvation as they read this book (87). Too late! Chan has declared that any who fail to totally love the Lord and obey His commands will not be in heaven. If what Chan says is true, we will all doubt our salvation, and that for the rest of our lives.

The rest of this chapter is Chan trying to soften his harsh declaration, and explain how this is really good news. To wit: “Each of us has lukewarm elements and practices in our life” (87). But wait: You said there was no such thing as a lukewarm Christian! “The Scriptures demonstrate clearly that there is room for our failure and sin in our pursuit of God” (87). Wait a minute, my failure and sin is part of my ‘pursuit of God’? “I’m not saying that when you mess up, it means you were never really a genuine Christian in the first place.” Then what ARE you saying – because “failure and sin” and “messaging up” is not the same as “truly and faithfully loving Jesus”!

Chan is so contorted at this point, in the second paragraph on p88, he writes this:

The distinction is perfection (which none will attain on this earth) and a posture of obedience and surrender, where a person perpetually moves toward Christ. To call someone a Christian simply because he does some Christian-y things is giving false comfort to the unsaved. But to declare anyone who sins “unsaved” is to deny the reality and truth of God’s grace.

Let’s put that under the microscope. To be a Christian, you don’t have to be perfect (no one on earth can do that), but you must have “a posture of obedience and surrender,” and be a person who “perpetually moves toward Christ.” Is that true of us when we have “lukewarm elements and practices in our life”? What if we are experiencing “failure and sin”? What if we’re “messaging up”? At this point it is impossible for a person to know they are a Christian! We have entered a quagmire of endless ‘navel-gazing’ and relativistic self-analysis and comparison with other Christians...and in the end, the best we’ll get is a faint hope we’ll pull through.

Why are we talking at all about determining whether or not we’re saved on the basis of works? Isn’t the New Testament clear that Jesus died for our sins, and we are saved by believing in Him? Of course it is.

Chan again cites the Laodiceans as a church that, while once “healthy and legitimate” (his words), now their “hearts apparently didn’t belong to God” (p88). On this flimsy basis, without any statement from Scripture, Chan pronounces them all unsaved. Couldn’t they have been experiencing “lukewarm elements and practices” (they were!), which Chan says every Christian has in their life? What if they were experiencing “failure and sin” in their pursuit of God? Chan says there is “room for” that in a Christian’s life – why not the Laodiceans? What if

they were just “messing up”? Chan says that doesn’t mean we aren’t saved. So how does he know the Laodiceans are going to hell? He doesn’t.

Bottom line: Chan is arbitrary, trying to create a litmus test for justification, and creating confusion instead. This is cultic – a man determining who will be in heaven – and it is totally unbiblical.

The rest of this chapter, with sub-headings “Poor Rich People” and “Offering Leftovers,” would have much good to say if written to believers, challenging them to live out their faith. Instead, it’s no more than an ever-increasing list of things a person must do in order to get to heaven. Americans are chided for the amount of money they make, as if that in itself is evil. Jesus’ call for the rich man to sell what he had, give to the poor, and have treasure in heaven (Luke 18) and Zacchaeus giving half his money to the poor and paying back four times what he had defrauded people out of (Lk 19) are provided as biblical support. The message is clear: If we don’t give sacrificially to God, we’re not saved.

Recognizing perhaps that he is teaching straight-up justification-by-works, Chan on p95 tries to dig himself out. He writes: “Perhaps it sounds as though I believe that you have to work your way to Jesus. I don’t. I fully believe that we are saved by grace, through faith, by the gift of God, and that true faith manifests itself through our actions. . . The lives of many people who call themselves ‘Christians’ in America lack manifestations of a vital and active faith.” Did you catch it? In one paragraph, Chan declares that you are saved by grace through faith, by a gift of God, then takes it all back by adding, “true faith manifests itself through our actions.” Let’s summarize: By faith you receive the free gift of God, but the only way you know if you have “true faith” is by examining your good works. If you lack the works of a “vital and active faith,” you’re just calling yourself a Christian – you aren’t really saved. Bottom line: You get to heaven by your works.

Chapter 6: When You’re In Love

Like so often in this book, if Chan were explicitly talking to Christians about how they are living their lives, this could be an excellent chapter. But with the threat of heaven or hell hanging over every exhortation, the joy is gone. A couple of pages into this chapter, Chan seems to recognize his problem. In a section entitled “Don’t Try so Hard,” he writes: “My fear in writing the previous chapter is that it only evokes in you fear and guilt. Personal experience has taught me that actions driven by fear and guilt are not an antidote to lukewarm, selfish, comfortable living. I hope you realize instead that the answer is love.”

His attempt to help readers get over what he wrote in the previous chapter is ultimately doomed to failure. The ‘elephant in the room’ is Chan’s assertion that a person who doesn’t do everything the Bible tells them to do is going to spend eternity in hell. The question anyone will want answered is this: Does God really love me? Is His love for me dependent on my obedience to Him? It sure doesn’t feel like ‘love’ if God says, ‘Do what I command, or I’ll send you to hell.’ Norm Geisler used to say, “God is not a cosmic rapist! He doesn’t force His love!” This is something Chan has yet to learn. His ‘do everything the Bible commands or go to hell’ idea is not love, it is rape. And rape does not excite love in return!

On p107, Chan twice touches on passages that deal with eternal rewards, but totally misses the context. If his comments in the rest of this chapter were directed toward believers whose love has grown cold, they would be a reassuring call of a loving Lord. Sadly, with ‘Damocles’ sword’ of eternal damnation hanging over our heads, this opportunity is never fully realized.

Chapter 7: Your Best Life...Later

It’s impossible to read anything Chan now writes, even when, as in this chapter, it sounds like he is exhorting Christians to pursue God’s ‘best life’ for them, without the previous chapters casting an awful shadow. Is Chan telling me what I must do to go to heaven? If I don’t do what he says, am I going to hell?

For example, on p113 he asks, “Do you recognize the foolishness of seeking fulfillment outside of Him? Do you understand that it’s impossible to please God in any way other than wholehearted surrender? Do you grasp the beauty and deep joy of walking in genuine intimacy with God...?” My answer is a resounding “Yes!” I desire all these things in my life. But Chan has ‘pulled the rug out from under us’ once, and I wonder: Is he urging us to seek fulfillment, to please God, and to have genuine intimacy with God...or warning us that if we fail to achieve these things, we are lost eternally?

Frankly, we can have no certainty what Chan is saying in this chapter. It’s positively schizophrenic! He cites the lives of the men and women in Hebrews 11 as examples, and highlights their many failings, then says, “These people were far from perfect, yet they had faith in a God who was able to come through in seemingly dire situations” (114). Wait – these people were thieves, murderers, unfaithful, immoral, wimps – but that’s OK, because God came through for them...but if I’m “lukewarm,” I’m going to hell?

After his “that’s OK, nobody’s perfect” section, he turns around and starts heaping the guilt again: “Are you ready and willing to make yourself nothing? To take the very nature of a servant? To be obedient unto death? If your honest answer to those questions is yes, how are those intentions manifested in your life?” (p117) Wait: Is this the litmus test for salvation? What about that ‘we’re all far from perfect’ stuff? This may appeal to our desire to be holy, but it makes no logical sense. Either we have to make ourselves nothing, be servants like Christ was, and be ready to die for Him – and show it by the way we live our life...or we can do things like those heroes of faith in Hebrews 11. Which is it?

The glaring omission in this discussion, and everywhere in the book, is the simple declaration of the NT that by believing in Jesus we receive the free gift of eternal life, and this is apart from works.

Reflecting on this chapter, we cannot help but think: There is so much good in this, if Chan could just get over the hump of questioning the salvation (or outright condemning) of anyone who doesn’t do this! He tells a story of a man who heard Chan preach on giving to those in need, and gave his house to the church in response. Chan writes, “He told me that he will have a better house in heaven, and that it doesn’t really matter where he lives during this

lifetime” (p122). Question: Did that guy think because he sold his house and gave the money to the church that he was going to heaven, or that he was going to be rewarded in heaven? From what Chan has written, the former seems likely. Scripture says that it is “not by works of righteousness that we have done, but according to His mercy” (Titus 3.5) that we are saved.

A challenge to anyone reading this book is to state clearly from Chan’s comments exactly what is required for a person to go to heaven – to know that they are saved. It simply is impossible.

Chapter 8: Profile of the Obsessed

A crescendo from the middle of the previous chapter focusing on money continues here, particularly how much more Americans have than most people in the world. Chan’s basic message that Christians should give more to the Lord – not just money, but of their time, talent, and treasure – is excellent. His continual blurring between being a Christian, or living the Christian life, however, is not.

For example, on p135, Chan refers to those who questioned his decision to sell his house and move into a smaller house so he could give more to missions as “people who call themselves Christians.” Does this mean that since they didn’t agree with Chan, they just ‘call themselves Christians’ (they aren’t really saved)? That’s the implication Chan gives. Isn’t there room for disagreement in how a person should live their life?

How refreshing this chapter would be if we would just read it as it should be understood: That every Christian should be progressively obsessed with Jesus. If we were, we would give freely and openly, love those who hate us (132), wouldn’t be consumed with [our] personal safety and comfort above all else (133). We would connect ourselves with the poor in some way or another (135), would seek to make [ourselves] less known and Christ more known (136), would love His people (137), and would think about heaven frequently (142). These are all good reminders for Christians as we grow in our relationship with God. It’s sad that in Chan’s world, they are litmus tests for eternal life.

Chapter 9: Who Really Lives That Way?

Good chapter, some great stories, of Christians who have lived sacrificially for the sake of others. All of us could add more; the only problem with any collection of anecdotes would be the same as Chan’s – that they omit countless examples. In Chan’s list, the most glaring omission is any recognition of Christians who go to work every day, raise their children to love the Lord, and are involved in the ministry of their local church. Chan focuses on a few who did remarkable things, often in response to unique circumstances. We should focus more on passages like 1 Thess. 4.11-12: “...make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you, so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need.” Nothing dramatic there – just quiet, contented, fulfilled, godly living.

Chapter 10: The Crux of the Matter

After the theological and practical minefield in the middle of this book, this chapter is refreshing. Indeed, it needs to be extracted from the rest of the book – particularly those parts that undermine salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, and make it dependent on what we do – and read on its own! (The only exceptions might be the references to “true Christianity” (*italics mine*) and the “so-called Christian” on p166 – both adjectives which are unnecessary and imply a ‘false’ Christianity based on a lack of good works.) Chan calls on individual Christians to live out their faith as the Spirit leads them, and not just to talk about it, but to do it.

He ends this chapter with a collection of Scripture quotations all pointing to the Judgment Seat (Bema) of Christ. This is a wonderful reminder to every believer that what we do for Christ in this life, up to and even including dying for Him, will be rewarded by our Lord in heaven.

A Conversation with Francis Chan

On pages 182-83, Chan responds to a concern about his statement that someone who is “lukewarm” is not a Christian, and will not be in heaven. He repeats his position: “The lukewarm still need to be saved.” He again bases this on Revelation 3, totally misreading and misapplying the letter to the Laodicean church.

He then flips 180-degrees the other direction in the next sentence: “Salvation has nothing to do with my performance.” This is positively schizophrenic. If you don’t live your life a certain way, you are unsaved. But salvation has nothing to do with how you live your life. This is oxymoronic, and makes no sense.

Chan’s basis for this incongruity is, as always, to say that works ‘show’ that a person is ‘truly’ saved. He says, “If I’m truly saved, then my actions are going to show. All through the New Testament a person’s faith is shown through his actions. New Testament teachings are clear that someone who loves God and doesn’t obey God is a liar, and the truth is not in Him.” Chan manages to both misquote and misapply Scripture here. His words combine incomplete thoughts drawn from 1 John 1.6, 8; 2.4; and 4.20. None says what he says. All are written to believers, exhorting them to abide in Christ. The warnings are never to loss of salvation (or the Calvinistic idea that ‘you were never saved in the first place’), but to a loss of fellowship. The Christian who says he loves God but doesn’t do what God commands shows he does not love God. Good works do not show that a person is saved (justified) in 1 John, but rather that a Christian is in fellowship with God.

Chan continues: “It’s not popular to question someone’s actions and salvation, and Scripture tells us to test ourselves and see if we’re really in the faith. . . . If someone has the Holy Spirit in them, there will be fruit, and there will not be a lukewarm life.” Again, Chan displays a poor awareness of Scripture. 2 Cor. 13.5, at the end of a letter from Paul to Christians in Corinth, is not a dropped-in end-of-letter statement questioning whether or not they are saved! It was a

call for those Christians to examine themselves to see if they were faithfully living their Christian lives.

What is sad is that today, just the opposite of what Chan says is true: It IS popular today for writers like Chan to question the actions and salvation of other people! In fact, it's an epidemic in the church in America, and it is undermining the faith and spiritual vitality of millions. Instead of examining themselves to see if they are living as Christ would have them live, and abiding in Christ, they are consumed with trying to 'prove' to themselves and others that they are really saved. What the Holy Spirit wants to produce in every Christian's life has been made a requirement for having that life – and until that mistake is corrected, the security and assurance and joy which God offers believers will be compromised.