

EXCERPT



Radiant Church
Restoring the Credibility of Our Witness

February 16, 2021 | \$17, 208 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-4762-4

In an era where the church has lost much of its credibility, pastor Tara Beth Leach casts a vision for Christians to rediscover a robust, attractive witness and form the radiant communities God intends. Challenging idolatrous false images of God and calling out toxic patterns, she shows how we can recover a winsome picture of a kingdom of abundance and goodness.

Illuminating a Weary World

In 2016 I accepted the new role as senior pastor of First Church of the Nazarene of Pasadena, affectionately known as “PazNaz.” PazNaz is a large and historic church in Southern California with a rich history in Pasadena as well as the Nazarene denomination.

I began to discover that hidden behind the curtains of evangelicalism’s golden crowns of success was a malnourished vision for flourishing in the kingdom. Not only was it malnourished but when lived out there were problems and disappointments, and sometimes it produced fruit that was the antithesis to the vision laid out in Scripture. Perhaps “success” wasn’t what we thought it was.

Furthermore, what we have discovered in many of evangelicalism’s successful megachurches is that behind closed doors of rising attendance, building, and cash the situation isn’t what it seems. Take, for example, Willow Creek, Harvest Bible Chapel, and the Southern Baptist Convention. The curtains were pulled back and the light shined in the darkness. We all saw moral failures happening behind closed doors in some of America’s largest churches.

It turns out we had been using the wrong metric all along. Suddenly, we all had to come to terms with the reality that what was once anointed as a success wasn’t successful after all. These old metrics only told some of the story.

Imagine going into a doctor with chest pains and the doctor pulling out a stethoscope. After listening for a moment, the doctor says, “Your heart is beating rhythmically. I think you’re in great shape!” I imagine that you would explain to the doctor that more sophisticated measuring tools are needed. The stethoscope shows only part of the picture.

We are acting like this doctor by measuring the health of the church numerically. Of course, measuring numerically is far easier than measuring faithfulness or love or kindness or hospitality or integrity. Measuring numerically is low-hanging fruit. At the same time, what if our measuring system has been covering up symptoms for *decades*, and only recently are we coming to terms with the severity of the crisis?

You see, it isn’t just about Willow Creek, Harvest Bible Chapel, and the Southern Baptist Convention. It isn’t only about evangelicals’ propensity for partisan politics. We could find many symptoms: #ChurchToo, segregation, polarization, hypernationalism within local-church worship, and a history of systemic racism. These didn’t happen overnight; rather, they are symptomatic of a crisis that has been brewing for decades.

The erosion of the witness in the church began to crumble years ago, and today we are trying to make sense of it all. Through all of this there have been ongoing conversations on the post-Christian context. There is a notable shift happening in churches and communities all around America. PazNaz has been around for decades, which means many of its members have been around for long enough to talk about what they call “the good old days.” To them, the “good old days” are the days when “most people went to church.” Now, most people don’t go to church.

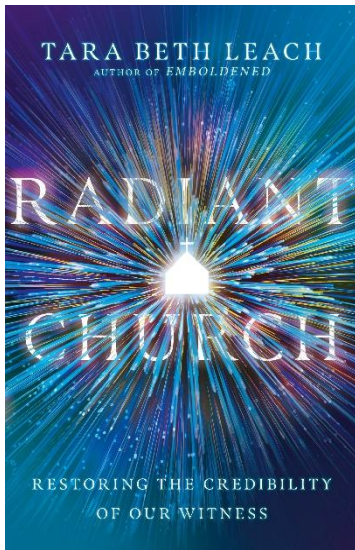


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"As a pastor, Tara Beth Leach is a prophetic voice for God. In Radiant Church she deploys that voice, to call the church back to the heart of God. Tara Beth reminds us of who we are, how God sees us, and how we can be a more loving, thoughtful, a more gracious people in the world. She reminds us that the church is a radiant beauty." **Sean Palmer**, author of *Forty Days on Being a Three*, teaching pastor at Ecclesia Houston

Many look for somewhere or someone to point the finger at, and the finger is often pointed outward instead of inward. Blame the millennials, blame the erosion of Christian morals in America, blame the liberals, blame immoral presidents, blame the decay of culture.

Perhaps we are pointing in the wrong direction. Maybe we ought to honestly and humbly look in the mirror and turn the finger back toward ourselves. Maybe it isn't the post-Christian culture, and instead we have a post-Christian *church*. Maybe it's time for us to look in the mirror, examine our hearts, and ask the Lord to show us where we've fallen short, confess, lament, and repent.

Let's Get Uncomfortable

I can remember back when I was a young student studying to be in ministry; whenever someone would critique the church, I got uncomfortable. *Don't talk about my family like that, I'd think. Don't talk about the very people that birthed me, nurtured me, fed me, and formed me.* But these days I can see the ways that systems of evil have entrapped us, and I yearn for the church to break free from the systems that entangle us and experience the free, full, flourishing life that Jesus came to teach, live, die, and ascend to the throne for. We were meant for so much more than this. But before we experience freedom, we need to first be uncomfortable. It's time to name some things, lament some things, repent of some things, and step into new wineskins.

No longer can we ignore our symptoms or turn a blind eye. It's time we courageously poke at the things that may sting a little. Actually, you may get angry, and I'll be honest, that makes me a bit nervous. I once heard someone say that good rabbis makes their listeners mad. If a doctor pokes and prods and I suddenly yell, "Ouch!" then the doc has exposed a painful symptom. I'm not a rabbi, and I'm certainly not a doctor, but I do see concerning symptoms these days. I'd rather poke than turn a blind eye.

But after some of the poking, I want you to know how much I think Jesus believes in us. I actually think it's a gift that our symptoms are being exposed. Perhaps the curtains are being pulled back so that the Spirit might do a new thing in our midst. Perhaps this wilderness will bring us to our knees so we might experience new humility, new dependence, and new freedom. Lisa Sharon Harper says it best about evangelicals, "What if the process of repentance—restitution and repair—is the way of God, the narrow road to the health of our world? And what if repentance is the way to the restoration of the image of God in a people twisted by hubris?"

Who Am I Critiquing?

I am a child of white evangelicalism, and I am speaking primarily to both pastors and lay leaders of the white evangelical church. While I know that not all evangelicals are *white* and certainly have diversity, I am speaking to a generation of believers who have historically worshiped in white evangelical churches. It is my hope that we as pastors and leaders can name and acknowledge the places where we have become entrapped by "the powers not of this world."

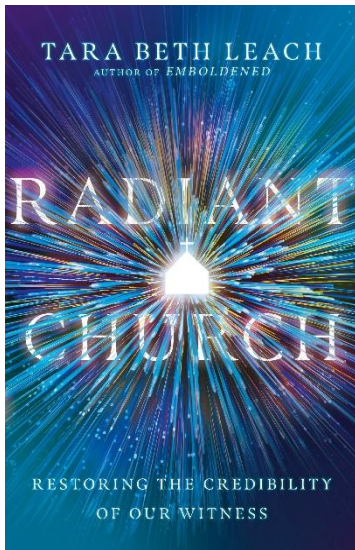


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The apostle Paul names this for us, “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph 6:12).

There is indeed a struggle happening within the white evangelical church; there are places where we are under the grips of dark powers of this world. It’s time we move away from dismissiveness and denial, and face reality. I hope that we don’t just name our problems, but I pray this brings us to our knees. I pray we lament, confess, and repent. I pray we lean into the creative and missional imagination of the triune God. Lisa Sharon Harper poses an important and uncomfortable question for us, “What if the call to white evangelicals is to stop trying to be God, to control everything and everyone and to join the rest of humanity—the beloved dust? . . . Will lament lead to surrender?”

Are you squirming yet? I am.

Perhaps you find yourself a bit uncomfortable like I was years ago. I get that. The church is my family. And week in and week out I get to worship with, journey with, and live in a mutually edifying relationship with a local church in Pasadena. The church is the radiant bride of Christ, and I too get defensive when others trample on the bride’s garment. But the way I see it, the bride’s garment is tangled up and entrapped in ways that are holding us back from the free, full, and flourishing life we were meant to live.

I pray you hear my words like a mother or aunt who deeply loves her family and wants to see her family live into its full potential—that is, the radiant church in all its beauty. I believe the *whole church* is called to total radiance, and while I may be critiquing what is primarily white evangelicalism, I am calling the whole church to radiance. May we come alongside our brothers and sisters of color and partner to be radiant people.

Who Is Radiant?

The writer of Hebrews says this about Jesus, “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven” (Heb 1:3). Jesus is in the radiant image of the glory of our majestic God. No one is fully radiant but God, and we see this embodied in the person of the radiant king Jesus. We are the bride of the King, called to bear witness to this radiant gospel and this radiant kingdom where Jesus rules. In Christ, we are brilliantly radiant. Throughout history, Jesus’ radiant bride has shined with luster and brilliance, but at times it has waned. As a pastor I lament when our light is pale, and I rejoice when we shine with brilliance. There is nothing more that I long for than a radiant church that blazes in the darkness. My hope is that throughout these pages I’ll be able to name the places our light is diminished, and paint a vision for a church that illuminates in a weary world.

—Adapted from the introduction, “A Dim Light”



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Q & A



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Tara Beth Leach is a pastor at Christ Church of Oak Brook in the western suburbs of Chicago. She previously served as senior pastor of First Church of the Nazarene of Pasadena ("PazNaz") in Southern California and has pastored in Illinois and New York. She is a graduate of Olivet Nazarene University and Northern Theological Seminary. She is a regular writer for Missio Alliance and writes and speaks widely about women in ministry and church leadership. She is the author of *Emboldened*, *Radiant Church*, and *Forty Days on Being a Six*.

The Church Movement as a Whole Must Be Born Again

In what way has your heart been heavy about the witness of the North American church?

Tara Beth Leach: My heart has been burdened for the diminished witness for the bride of Christ in North America. She has rooted herself in narratives of this world rather than God's story. As a result, our light isn't as bright as Jesus says it can be, and we are a far cry from the radiance of the earliest church. I wrote this book in hopes of holding up a mirror to the church so that she can confess the reality, grieve the reality, and have hope for a better and more radiant reality.

What are your hopes for this book?

Tara: I am a "prisoner of hope." I believe in the God of resurrection, and I believe in us. I pray that when this book is read, imaginations will be sparked and expanded to be the radiant bride that Jesus believes we can be.

In reading this book, what can readers learn about themselves and the church?

Tara: We as the people of God in Christ are rooted in narratives that produce a diminished witness. Radiant people have allegiance to King Jesus alone, and when our allegiance is divided, our witness is diminished. We can no longer point the finger away from the church. Instead, we must look inwardly and bravely enter into the wilderness. A radiant church has men and women together at the table. We don't just need individual born again Christians. Our movement as a whole must be born again.



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