

“Good news to the poor” by Tim Chester

‘MAKE POVERTY HISTORY!’ It’s been the rallying cry through Live 8 and G8, and Bob Geldof assures us that the world leaders who met in Gleneagles this month really have made changes that will improve the plight of the poor. But can we ever make poverty history? And is that what Christians should be aiming for, above everything else? Where does sharing the gospel fit in?

Subtitled “Sharing the gospel through social involvement”, this book by Tim Chester presents a biblical case for how and why Christians should help the poor.



What's it about?

The book aims to look at the issue of social involvement and our responsibility to the poor in the light of the nature, content and priorities of the gospel.

It starts by setting out the biblical case for caring for the poor, which stems from an understanding of God’s character and reign, and especially from an appreciation of God’s kindness and generosity towards our own spiritually-deprived situation, in the person of his Son. But Chester then goes on to set out the case for evangelizing the poor. Proclamation of the gospel must be central because all people have a need much greater than pressing social or environmental concerns. It is better for someone to be converted and to remain poor, than to become healthy and wealthy.

People are no longer in relationship with God. As valid as cultural and social involvement is in its own right, it cannot be seen in isolation from the task of reconciling people to God through the gospel. ... to engage in culture and creativity without evangelism is indulgent. To engage in social action without evangelism is to fail the people we profess to love. (page 55)

Proclamation will be central to Christian involvement with the poor because the greatest need of the poor – along with all people – is to be reconciled with God through the gospel. But the message we proclaim is best understood in the context of loving actions and loving community. (page 176)

On the basis that social involvement and gospel proclamation go together, a large part of the book explores this relationship and examines what social action shaped and inspired by the gospel might look like. Good gospel-shaped social involvement must include the church “being the church”, welcoming the excluded and strengthening the powerless.

Interestingly, Chester also shows that the priorities which come into focus when we consider the poor can be applied as tips for our own evangelism among the wealthy. A chapter on “good news to the rich” shows how we are so easily seduced by the lie of consumerism, thinking that we can find identity and contentment through the things we buy. But the gospel frees us to find true joy and contentment in knowing God and living for him. The challenge then is to make gospel-shaped life decisions, putting first our church and ministry, rather than lifestyle and job.

The book finishes by looking forward to God’s future renewal of this world.

Hope in the New Testament is certain hope that looks beyond history to the coming of a new creation. ... [We should not] be afraid of declaring to the poor and oppressed the coming of a kingdom of justice and plenty. If this is ‘pie in the sky’, then so be it – we must not minimize the extent to which pie in the sky is good news. It is worse to offer people hope for the imminent future that cannot be sustained in the reality of a world marred by sin. ... We must contend with the fact that most of

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the poor will remain in poverty throughout their lives. The hope of the gospel is the only hope we can offer them that will survive the vagaries of history. (page 172)

We cannot eradicate poverty within history. Many of our achievements are reversed and undone. But still we are commanded to care for the poor. We help the poor not because we will move humanity one step closer to a poverty-free utopia. We help the poor because they are people whom we should love. (page 175)

Some really valuable aspects of this book:

1. Useful, short succinct summaries at the end of every chapter. Chester's discussions are sometimes quite wide-ranging – as he unpacks his topics, he also provides commentary on several other approaches and opinions on the issues. So the chapter summaries are crucial for highlighting the key points to take away.
2. Real-life case studies and examples, from across the world, both contemporary and historical.
3. Packed with biblical references. Absolutely essential for a topic as controversial as this one. But Chester diligently takes time not only to quote from the Bible but also to explain the context and wider meaning of the references he uses.

Who's it for?

The book is undoubtedly aimed at Christian readers in the west – the "rich", both those involved in some way with mission and practical aid for the poor, and those who have never considered their responsibility for caring for the poor.

This book is for you if you identify with any of the following:

- you want to be part of the vision for Arborfield and Barkham churches
- you are concerned with the way money is used by our churches
- you give money to any church, charity or organisation
- you have a desire to tell other people about Jesus
- your work has a multinational or a political dimension
- you never know what to think or do when you pass homeless people

What did I think?

The book challenged my preconceptions from the outset! Christians have traditionally clung to one extreme or the other in the "evangelism versus social action" debate. While we all have inclinations one way or the other, we're not often particularly clear about why, and we're unlikely to be sure of the biblical justifications. Reading this book helped me to move from fuzzy feelings to a clearer understanding of how gospel proclamation and caring for the poor fit together.

This is a comprehensive read – at around 180 pages it is hard work at times. But I found it worth persevering for the thought-provoking implications scattered throughout the book.

Reviewed by Lisa Horrocks, July 2005

Notes:

1. "Good News to the Poor" by Tim Chester is published by Inter-varsity Press (www.ivpbooks.com), priced approx £9.99
2. What is **social involvement**? By social involvement, Tim Chester means both a concern for those within the Christian community, *and* the Christian community caring for the needs of its neighbours in wider society. Activities could range from providing for a person's immediate needs to challenging policies, structure and culture of society through social reform. But he

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focuses on the issue of poverty, not just as economic deprivation, but in terms of social marginalisation and powerlessness too.

3. Piers Bickersteth preached on "**Mercy and Mission**" in February 2005. You can download the two sermons (mp3 format) from the *Church at the White House* media links page at www.abch.org.uk/whitehouse/media.htm