



## Book Review of *Good News to the Poor* by Tim Chester

### LMPG Network Resources

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In his book, *Good News to the Poor*, Tim Chester seeks to answer the popular question: *What is the relationship between social involvement and the Gospel?* This question is particularly relevant as the world is shaped by the millennial generation—the generation of causes. It is also relevant as consumerism, politics, and the legacy of Christendom have influenced the church. Above all, it is relevant because of the high calling King Jesus has given His people—to go out and spread His good news in the context of the local church to every tribe, nation, and tongue. This question is not only relevant, but *imperative*, as the local church operates in a hurting world alongside the widow, orphan, sojourner, addict, oppressed, and broken. This is the message of Christ in whom we have believed—that we, broken beyond any earthly cure, were saved and adopted by Jesus. The just heart and unmeasured grace of Jesus has been poured out on us and is chasing after the broken. Immersed in the grace of God, how now do we live in the context of the world around us?

### **History of Social Involvement and the Church**

The church does not exist in a vacuum. This not only applies to the context in which people hear our message and view our actions, but also to our culture in a broader sense. Consumerism, the legacy of Christendom, and politics have deeply influenced the church.

Many individuals in the West have unknowingly committed themselves to a social gospel, the “social gospel of Western consumerism” (114). We shop for churches that can “fit

our needs best,” in which we are surrounded by like-minded, similarly dressed individuals. As mercenaries in the crusades were baptized with their swords over their heads, we are baptized with our wallets out of the water (112). Even consider the famed sin of Sodom—it was not only that the city was known for its debauchery, or even that they caused the plight of the poor. *It was that they were unconcerned with the poor* (Ezek 16:49).

Additionally, after the legalization of Christianity in AD 312 bringing the dawn of Christendom, Christianity held political sway in the West for centuries. As this era is coming to an end—due to a plethora of paradigm shifts concerning human reason and human experience through the Enlightenment and Romantic Eras—the once comfortable church is trying to find its footing. As Jerome said shortly after the conversion of Constantine: the church “grew through persecution...and then, after reaching the Christian emperors...it increased in influence and wealth, but decreased in Christian virtues” (171). The church’s relationship with government was corrupted, but its relationship with the world was also damaged. “The church became aligned with the establishment so that those who were marginalized within society were therefore marginalized from the church” (172). Many in the church today still confuse the rule of God with the rule of the state. We expect the state to stand with the weak, but we hesitate to stand with them ourselves.

But this is not the example of the early church. Under persecution, the church shared all they had with one another and grew quickly—about half a million believers added to their number every generation for several centuries (18). The actions of local churches throughout Acts are testimonies to this. Throughout history, there are also a multitude of testimonies of believers living out a faith that is not private; Chester tells of the actions of William Carey, William Wilberforce, Abraham Kuyper, John Calvin, Thomas Chalmers, Charles Spurgeon, James Montgomery, William Booth, and many others that left long-lasting legacies on their societies both spiritually and physically. We also see the intentional public faith of Jesus—His eating with lepers and prostitutes, His healing and compassion on the plight of the poor. In fact, every action Jesus did was a perfect testimony to Himself and His message.

## The Case for Social Involvement

At the base of the believer's involvement in society are three motivating factors—the character of God, the reign of God, and the grace of God. The way in which we understand poverty directly correlates to our understanding of God's character. Whenever we draw a line between “us” and “them,” Jesus is always on the other side. “In situations of exploitation it is the cause of the oppressed that God upholds” (21). Our God is *consistently* a God who loves the widow, the sojourner, the orphan, the oppressed, and the weak (Amos 5:23-24; Ps 146:9, 68:5; Deut 10:18; Is 1; 58:3-7; 1 John 3:16-17). Our moral obligations as believers are not based on the nature of humanity, “but in the nature and the will of God. Our obligations are to God. He is the one with rights—not us. We have responsibilities toward God for each other” (26). As we gain a right understanding of God's love for the weak and poor, we worship God through our care for the weak and poor around us.

Additionally, as we understand the reign of God and the reign over the world that He has given humanity, we will seek to steward the world well. The original, perfect reign of God before sin was complete freedom from death, poverty, inequality, and injustice. But, in believing we could have more freedom and power apart from the reign of God, we rejected His rule. “Art, science, business, and government all retain their potential to honor the Creator and bless mankind, but all now also contain destructive potentials” (28). The Bible is simply “the story of God reestablishing his liberating reign over the world” (29). As believers come again under the reign of God through Jesus, our entire lives are affected, including our social actions.

Finally, the grace of God motivates us towards social involvement. A clear example of this is through the treatment of the sojourner, vulnerable, and poor by the Israelites under Old Testament Mosaic law. The Israelites were to look back on their deliverance from slavery and treat the poor and vulnerable the way God delivered them (Deut 24:21-22; 15:12-15). In Luke 14:12-14, Jesus illustrates that “God has welcomed us to his banquet despite our poverty and powerlessness. In the same way we should welcome the poor and marginalized” (31). Similar to the white-washed tomblike state of the Pharisees, “our attitude to the poor, it seems, reveals a lot about our understanding of God's grace” (32). John Owen, a puritan theologian, said, “Churches and their members ought to think of caring for the poor as an eminent grace and

excellent duty. For Christ is glorified and the gospel is honored when we care for the poor” (36).

### **The Case for Evangelizing the Poor**

Evangelism, in the same vein, is central and essential in the Bible’s message. Several concepts point us toward this truth: the priority of the future, the need for reconciliation with God through Jesus, and the centrality of proclamation in the Bible. All of the narrative of Scripture is moving towards a new creation. Even though we should rightly see the hurt and brokenness of the world around us, the Bible takes the scales off our eyes and allows us to see a deeper reality—the unparalleled importance of our souls. The famous saying by Francis of Assisi, “Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words,” is *not* enough. Part of the effect of sin in our lives is that we do not naturally seek God. Chester illustrates the necessity of moving beyond people’s felt needs through a story—a community development agency in Honduras was helping a community who believed their greatest need was for education. The development agency knew, however, that the forest which provided the livelihood of the town was slowly being deforested by loggers. When the agency took the community leaders to see the deforestation, they realized their immediate need was not education but to claim their rights to the forest. “Their need for education was a real need. But they had to be shown that they faced a much greater need...Without an ongoing awareness of eternal needs, over time our focus will become temporal needs” (60).

Social involvement is the consequence of evangelism, the bridge to evangelism, and the partner of evangelism—a fruit of our witness of Christ. As the Micah Declaration out of Oxford says, “If we ignore the world we betray the Word of God which sends us out to serve the world. If we ignore the word of God we have nothing to bring to the world” (72). As we live out testimony of Jesus in the world, we *must* realize that unless we are intentionally proclaiming Christ, our actions are “a signpost pointing nowhere” (74). Therefore, evangelism and justice are two separate acts, proclamation being central, but inseparable if we love Jesus. Our proclamation will always be in the context of people’s lives— “the question is whether that context matches the message of the transforming grace of Jesus Christ” (76). If we constantly preach one thing and live another, we should not be surprised if we are rejected or

misunderstood. As we evangelize, our actions point to the grace of Christ—these actions completely inseparable from the message we preach.

### **Critical Evaluation**

Towards the beginning of his book, Chester says that he “wants to urge conservatives not to marginalize those who uphold the cause of the oppressed and to urge social activists not to go down the blind alley of theological liberalism” (14). I believe he accomplishes his goal. In the final chapter, he states,

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 (192).

If someone asked you, “Do you love your mom?” how would you respond? If they asked, “How do you show love to your mom?” you would hopefully show practical ways through which you have loved her. Your love for her and your actions towards her are inextricably connected. In the same way, our love for God and our actions for God are connected. Out of the love of our hearts, our mouth “speaks” and our hands “do.” To be very clear, these actions *in no way* earn our salvation. Instead, they are direct outflows of the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives and our ever-growing love for Jesus because of His grace showered on us. We can love God because of His grace, freeing us to love others in word and deed. We love those who Christ loves—the widow, the orphan, the immigrant—through spiritually meeting their physical and spiritual needs.