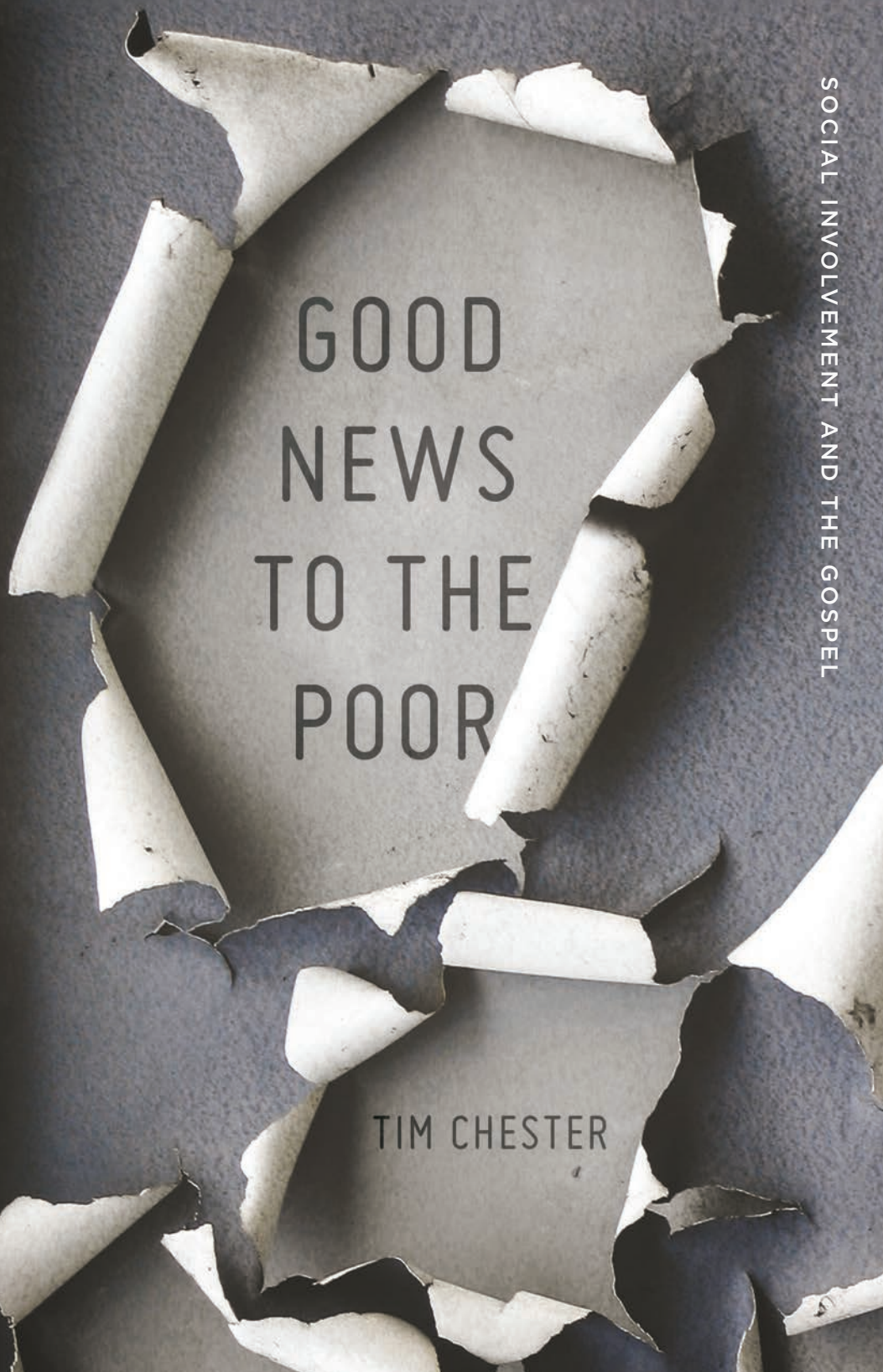
GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR
TIM CHESTER
SOCIAL INVOLVEMENT AND THE GOSPEL

"*Good News to the Poor* is good news for readers thinking through the relationship of evangelism to social action. Tim Chester rightly emphasizes the centrality of the gospel as he compares dependency-creating welfare with dignity-embracing development."

Marvin Olasky, Editor in Chief, World News Group

"The Christian church has at its best been known for its exemplary love and sacrificial service to 'the least of these': the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized. Tim Chester shows that gospel proclamation and tangible acts of love, service, and mercy toward our neighbors should not be pitted against each other—God's grace motivates action, and words and deeds go together."

Justin Holcomb, Director of Resurgence; Pastor, Mars Hill Church, Seattle, Washington

"Tim Chester provides a timely reminder that Christianity at its best is actually a well-balanced combination of social action and gospel proclamation. This book does an excellent job removing the perceived wall between these two camps. Chester challenges the Christian church to work for justice and peace in the process of calling individuals to conversion. This book is a much-needed call for a renewed understanding of the Christian calling."

Ben Peays, Executive Director, The Gospel Coalition

"What's the relationship between the gospel and social action for the believer? I've been asked that question many times over the years, and it is one we must answer well. If we do not get the relationship between the gospel and social action right, we will likely end up undermining both of them. This is why Tim Chester's *Good News to the Poor* is an essential book for Christians. He argues persuasively and winsomely that gospel proclamation and social action are inseparable."

Dan Cruver, Director, Together for Adoption; author, *Reclaiming Adoption: Missional Living through the Rediscovery of Abba Father*

"This important, well-written book is a must-read for those looking for a way to integrate word-and-deed to advance God's purposes in our needy world."

Tom Sine, author, *Living on Purpose: Finding God's Best for Your Life*

"A vital challenge to gospel people to follow in the footsteps of William Carey. Consistent, mission-minded evangelicals have always refused to choose between a commitment to gospel proclamation and an active concern for the poor. Tim Chester digs deep into the Bible to show us why both are vital and what it means to be Christ's people in a world of need."

Keith Walker, Director, Serving in Mission, UK/Northern Europe

Good News to the Poor: Social Involvement and the Gospel

Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

Originally published by Inter-Varsity Press, Nottingham, England. Copyright 2004 by Tim Chester. North American edition publishing by permission of Inter-Varsity.

Cover design and image: Brandon Hill

First printing 2013

Printed in the United States of America

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-3703-5
PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-3704-2
Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-3705-9
ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-3706-6

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Chester, Tim.
Good news to the poor : social involvement and the gospel / Tim Chester.
pages cm
Originally published: Nottingham, England : Inter-Varsity Press, c2004.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-4335-3703-5
1. Church work with the poor. 2. Evangelistic work. 3. Missions. 4. Social gospel. 5. Church group work. I. Title.
BV639.P6C44 2013
261.8—dc23 2013002367

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Introduction

Let me introduce Albert. Albert calls himself a postevangelical. He says there are many good things about the evangelical church in which he grew up, but he himself has grown out of evangelicalism's narrowness. Like his postmodern friends, he is wary of truth claims, and instead he wants to emphasize symbols and images. This makes him much more comfortable with social involvement than with evangelism. Evangelism makes him uneasy because, as he puts it, "we are all on a faith journey" and he thinks that evangelism among the poor is simply manipulative. His catchphrase is "don't force your truth on others." Instead we should walk with the poor, care for them, and help them on their faith journey while expecting them to enrich our own faith journeys.

Then there is Brian. Brian happily calls himself a conservative evangelical. As far as he is concerned, the main task of the church is preaching the gospel. He is regularly involved in open-air preaching and door-to-door visitation. He sees any form of social involvement as a return to the social gospel, a movement at the beginning of the twentieth century that believed the kingdom of God could come in history through Christian social action. He complains about trendy new Christian organizations doing social work and diverting money from traditional missionary agencies. As far as he is concerned, and he is not slow to tell you this, "social action is heresy." In fact, however, he has taken action on abortion because he sees these as undermining the Christian foundations of the nation.

Meet Catherine. Catherine is unashamedly an evangelical. She believes strongly in the authority of the Bible and is enthusiastic about evangelism—she is heavily involved in the seekers' course in her church. But when people say that the church should focus on preaching, her hackles rise. She points out that the Bible has a lot to say about the poor and the need to care for both physical and spiritual needs. She thinks it is unhelpful to say that one thing is more important than another. "Physical and spiritual together" is her motto. She has spent many hours arguing it out with people like Brian in her church. Every time the church discusses reaching its community or spending its missionary funds, the argument starts up again.

Finally, let me introduce Douglas. Douglas is the minister of an evangelical church that is popular with students from the nearby university. He is committed to an expository ministry because he believes the Word is central to Christian mission and Christian experience. Douglas sees students affected by the relativism of their peers and the postmodernism of their lecturers. He sees them lacking the confidence to share the gospel with their friends and opting for social involvement as a socially acceptable alternative. He fears that people like Albert are leading evangelicals back into liberalism. He acknowledges the validity of Christian social involvement, and he is happy for his church to have Social Action Sunday each year devoted to the needs of the world's poor. But he wants to reassert the centrality of the Word and the priority of Word-centered ministry.

All these examples are based on real people. But, as they say, their names have been changed to protect their identities. Their positions characterize—and perhaps caricature—the ongoing debate about social involvement and its place in mission. Is social involvement something we do as well as evangelism? Is it another way of doing evangelism? Or perhaps it is a distraction from the real job of proclaiming the gospel? This book explores these issues. My aim is 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. I hope this gospel focus might move us beyond another restatement of the case of social involvement or another look at how social involvement and evangelism fit together.

I have introduced the four characters above not only to present the issues but also to make an important preliminary observation. Catherine has always discussed these issues with people like Brian. She has spent her life trying to persuade the Brians of this world that social involvement is legitimate. Douglas, on the other hand, has people like Albert in mind when he thinks about these issues. He has real concerns about the effect that Albert's ideas are having on young Christians. When Catherine and Douglas come together, they appear poles apart. When they talk to each other, Catherine thinks she is still arguing with Brian, and Douglas thinks he is arguing with Albert. The debate gets heated, and there appears to be no agreement. But I want to suggest that Catherine and Douglas may be much closer to each other than they realize. Chapters 1 and 2 look at the strength of Catherine's position, while chapter 3 looks at the strength of Douglas's position. Chapter 4 explores how their positions might fit together.

Sometimes people draw distinctions between social concern, social involvement, socio-political action, community development, and so on. Certainly there are different forms of social involvement. They range from simply providing a person's immediate needs to challenging the economic and political structures of a society. These distinctions are significant, but I do not want to load too much weight onto particular words. I will use the various terms in a fairly fluid and interchangeable way, making distinctions explicit only when they are significant. By social involvement, I mean both a concern for those within the Christian community and the Christian community caring for the needs of its neighbors in the wider society and offering a place of belonging. It can also include changing the policies, structures, and culture of society through social reform. But social reform will always be limited prior to the return of Christ. Above all, the church witnesses to the coming reign of God. Although many of the arguments in this

book apply to wider social issues as well as involvement in the arts and culture, I have focused on issues of poverty. I see poverty, however, not simply as economic deprivation but in terms of social marginalization and powerlessness.

The book aims to present a biblical case for evangelical social action. But I also want to offer a critique of some of the theology and practice of social action within evangelicalism. I will criticize the arguments of some proponents of Christian social action. This does not mean I am opposed to social action itself. Rather I want to construct an approach to social action that is shaped by the gospel—a genuinely *evangelical* social action in the truest meaning of the word *evangelical*. Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra say, "It [has] often (sadly) been the case that evangelicals who are outspoken campaigners against social evils tend to be marginalized by conservative churches, and so inevitably drift towards the more "radical" end of the theological spectrum."[1] I want 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.

[1]Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Message of Mission* (Nottingham, UK: Inter-Varsity, 2003), 255.

6

Good News to the Poor

Jesus describes the gospel as "good news" for the poor (Luke 7:22). He says that he came "to proclaim good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18). This chapter explores what it means to say that the gospel is good news *to the poor* in particular. In doing so we will see the social and political dimension to the gospel.

1) A Message of Liberation

The gospel is good news to the poor because the reign of God is a reign of justice and peace in which the last will be first and the first will be last. The gospel directs our attention to the wonderful future that God has promised us in Christ. But that is especially good news for those who do not experience this life as one of blessing. Indeed, time and again Luke speaks of a reversal at the end of time, and he speaks of it in social and political categories. Mary sings: "He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty" (Luke 1:52–53). It is no surprise to find that so many of the Negro spirituals express this longing for the new future that God promises.

Five centuries before the coming of Jesus, God had judged the Jewish nation by allowing them to be defeated by the Babylonians

and to be taken away into exile. Seventy years later, under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah, some of the Jews had returned to the land. But the exile was not really over. They were not free in their land. The land was still under the control of other nations (Neh. 9:36–37). Moreover, the underlying problems of the exile had not been dealt with: the problems of people's sin and God's judgment. The Jews of Jesus's day viewed Roman occupation in this way: they had been conquered and enslaved by the nations, and the Promised Land had been defiled by Gentile occupation. They were looking for God to intervene to liberate his people and end the exile.

In 167 BC the Syrian ruler Antiochus Epiphanes desecrated the temple in Jerusalem and dedicated it to the worship of himself. He provoked a rebellion led by Judas Maccabaeus. On December 15, 164 BC, three years after its desecration, Judas Maccabaeus cleansed and restored the temple. A new festival—the festival of Hanukkah—was added to commemorate this act of liberation. God had intervened to vindicate his people and his honor. And this act deeply shaped the identity of the Jews for the next two hundred years. With God's help they had thrown out an occupying army that had desecrated the land and the temple.

So when in 63 BC the Romans conquered Judea, there was a series of violent revolts and revolutions. At first the Romans ruled through the descendants of Judas Maccabaeus (the liberators became the collaborators) and then through Herod the Great and his sons. In Jesus's day the Sadducees were the religious elite while the Herodians represented the political elite. They opted for compromise, for political submission to the Roman Empire from which they therefore benefited. In 4 BC, as Herod the Great lay dying, some Jews pulled down the ornamental eagle he had placed over the temple gate. One of Herod the Great's final acts was to punish them severely. Then, in the power vacuum created by his death, there followed a series of rebellions, including one in which two thousand rebels were crucified. In 6 AD Judas the Galilean led a revolt against Rome. Although the rebellion was crushed, the aspirations of the movement continued. Those sympathetic

to it were called "zealots." One of Jesus's disciples was Simon the Zealot (Luke 6:15).

Throughout the next seventy years there were regular revolts and riots. We know about one of the minor ones because its leader, Barabbas, was released by Pontius Pilate at Passover instead of Jesus (Mark 15:7). Two of the sons of Judas the Galilean were crucified in AD 46 for rebellion. In the AD 50s there was a group called the Sicarii, "the dagger-men," known for their practice of knifing people they considered to be collaborators with the Roman rulers. Around this time an Egyptian Jew assembled several thousand people on the Mount of Olives, claiming that the walls of Jerusalem would fall as the walls of Jericho had done and that they would march in to take the city back from the Romans. In fact, his followers were massacred. "Revolution of one sort or another was in the air, and often present on the ground . . . throughout the period of Roman rule. Whenever it was suppressed in one place it sprang up in another."[1] There were economic and political pressures behind these rebellions, but they were also theological acts done with the expectation that God would intervene to liberate his people.

Not everyone thought that the answer was violent rebellion. The Pharisees believed that if you could not cleanse the land, then you could at least cleanse yourself. So they advocated ritual purity. The Pharisees worked with the establishment as a kind of pressure group, calling it to be true to the traditions of the nation. But their concern with personal ritual purity became a kind of symbolic act of resistance to Roman defilement. The land may not be clean, but you could be clean within the land. Their hope was that by purifying the people they might prepare the way for God's intervention.

Then there were the Essenes. The Essenes were made famous by the discovery in 1947 of the Dead Sea Scrolls that were written by them. They separated themselves from society into separate communities, including the community at Qumran where the

[1] N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), 176.

Dead Sea Scrolls were found. They believed the nation of Israel was corrupt—particularly its rulers who colluded with the Gentiles who defiled the land—but the rest of the nation was also blind. They were waiting for God to act, to send his anointed king and priest to lead a great war against the Sons of Darkness. The Gentiles and the faithless Jews would be expelled and the Sons of Light would reign for a thousand years. True worship would be restored in a new temple. In the meantime, God had begun to act by calling the Essene community into existence. They were God's faithful people in waiting, waiting for the day of his coming justice.

This is the context in which Jesus operated, a context of occupation, revolution, and political ferment. And it is in this context that Jesus says he is bringing the exile to an end. What he says is explosive. The longed-for liberation is happening. Through Jesus, God is intervening in history in faithfulness to his covenant promises.

This emphasis is clear in the opening chapters of Matthew's Gospel. Matthew opens his Gospel by recounting the genealogy of Jesus. He structures it into three groups of fourteen to highlight Jesus's link to Abraham, David, and the exile. Jesus is the one who will fulfil the promises to Abraham and who will reign on the throne of King David, but he is also the one who brings an end to the Babylonian exile. In 2:18 Matthew quotes from Jeremiah 31:15, a prophecy concerning the end of exile. Likewise in 3:1–3 Matthew quotes from Isaiah 40:1–3 where Isaiah promises "comfort" to the exiles. Israel had first entered the land through the River Jordan, quite literally passing through it. So the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan (Matt. 3:13) was symbolic of reentering the land. In 4:12–16 Matthew again applies a prophecy about the end of exile (Isa. 9:1–2) to the ministry of Jesus.

In the Old Testament the end of the exile that Israel longed for was often described in terms of the exodus. The exodus was God's great act of liberation in Israel's history, freeing the people from slavery and oppression in Egypt. Now they looked for a new exodus. And Matthew presents the liberation of Jesus as a new

exodus. Jesus comes out of Egypt (2:13–15). Israel is first called God's son when Moses goes to Pharaoh to demand that he let the people go free. Now the voice from heaven says of Jesus, "This is my beloved Son" (Matt. 3:17). Jesus is tempted in the wilderness for forty days just as Israel was tempted in the wilderness for forty years (4:1–2). Israel failed the test, but Jesus is the faithful one. The book of Deuteronomy was the word Moses spoke to the people on the verge of the Promised Land, and now Jesus counters Satan with words from Deuteronomy (4:3–11).

This theme continues into the Sermon on the Mount. This is the background to the so-called Beatitudes. The blessings promised in the Beatitudes arise because God's people will once again live in the land of blessing, the land flowing with milk and honey. They will be restored to life under the reign of God (Matt. 5:3). They will receive the comfort promised to the exiles in Isaiah 40:1–3 (Matt. 5:4). Matthew 5:5 is a reference to Psalm 37:11, which says, "The meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace." It is a promise of inheriting the land, so, in this context, of returning from exile, except that Jesus now has the whole earth in mind as the home of God's people. To thirst for righteousness is to long for God's saving intervention in history, and to be satisfied is to enjoy the land of milk and honey again. "Sons of God" is what Israel was called when Moses demanded that Pharaoh set them free; the final plague falls on Egypt's firstborn because Egypt would not liberate God's "firstborn" (see Ex. 4:22–23). So to be called "sons of God" is to be the liberated ones. The Beatitudes are not spiritual aphorisms, nor guides to a happy life, nor moral precepts; they are announcements of liberation. They are announcing a return to the land of blessing—except that the land has become the whole earth.

Who is it that will enjoy this liberation? Who will enjoy the blessings of the Promised Land? Not the politically powerful (the Sadducees and the Herodians), for blessed are the meek (Matt. 5:5). Not the violent revolutionaries (the Zealots), for blessed are the merciful and the peacemakers (vv. 7, 9; see also vv. 39, 41, 44).

Not the religiously pure (the Pharisees), for "blessed are the poor in spirit and the pure *in heart*" (vv. 3, 8). Not those who separate themselves (the Essenes), for the blessed ones are a city on a hill and a light that cannot be hidden (vv. 14–15). No, the ones who enjoy liberation are the poor in spirit, the broken people. People sometimes say that to proclaim liberation ignores the fact that the poor are sinners too. But Jesus suggests an opposite problem. Broken people know they are broken. What they struggle to grasp is that God welcomes people like them. The bigger problem is with the "sorted out" people; they are the ones who struggle to recognize the depth of their sin and the poverty of their spirit.

Reading the Sermon on the Mount in the light of its context highlights the radical power of the message of Jesus. It reveals its social and political cutting edge. But does it also make it remote to our concerns? People today do not long for a return from Babylonian exile. We are not under Roman occupation. What is the contemporary relevance of Jesus's message of liberation?

The answer is that people today still long for liberation. They long for liberation from the knock of the loan shark, from dependency on drugs, from the bottle, from cycles of violence, from the threat of a poor harvest, from the fear of corrupt officials. We live in a society of broken people needing liberation and longing for home. This message of liberation speaks directly to our situation.

The exile in Babylon was a picture of humanity's exile from God. In the first half of Ezekiel the prophet warns the first wave of exiles of God's judgment against his people—Jerusalem and the temple will be destroyed. He has two repeated refrains: "Then they will know that I am the LORD" and "I am against you." In chapters 25–32 Ezekiel addresses the surrounding nations, and the message to the nations is the *same message* as the message to Israel with the same refrains. The nations will discover that *Israel's God is their God*. They, too, "will know that I am the LORD" (25:7, 11, 14, 17; 26:6, 23, 24; 29:9, 16, 21; 30:8, 19, 25, 26; 32:15). And the nations will discover that *Israel's fate will be their fate*. The nations are told: "I am against you" (26:3; 28:22; 29:3, 10; 30:22). The exile in Babylon is

a picture of humanity's fate, exiled from the blessing and peace of God's loving reign.

Jesus proclaimed a message of liberation. It is a political message, not in the sense of fomenting revolution now (see Matt. 5:9, 39, 41, 44) but in the sense of witnessing to the hidden revolution that will be revealed at the last day. It is a message of *future* liberation. But the new regime has begun among Christ's community of the broken. The Christian community is the place of liberation.

2) A Message of Grace

The second reason why the gospel is described as good news to the poor is that it is a message of grace. Salvation is dependent solely upon God's grace. It is not dependent upon wealth, status, or power, so the poor are not excluded. With nothing to lose, the poor do not need to go through the eye of a needle to enter the kingdom of God (Luke 18:25). Moreover, by making them children of God, the gospel gives the poor a dignity that the world denies them. Asked what the gospel had done for his people, an indigenous Christian leader from northern Argentina replied that "it had enabled them to look the white person fully in the eye."[2] Time and again the gospel has brought about social and economic changes in communities by giving the poor dignity and direction. And the gospel has done this even when this was not a goal of those who brought the gospel to the community. Bible translation is just one example of this. Translating the Bible into the languages of indigenous cultures has repeatedly given marginalized peoples a renewed sense of the value of their culture and identity.[3]

In the West it seems we are obsessed with celebrities. We have magazines and television programs devoted to them. Often when a major news story is breaking, the front pages of our newspapers are full of the antics of celebrities. Half the time we cannot remember why someone became a celebrity, but that does not seem to mat-

[2] Andrew Kirk, *What Is Mission? Theological Explorations* (London: DLT, 1999), 71.
[3] See Dewi A. Hughes, *Castrating Culture: A Christian Perspective on Ethnic Identity for the Margins* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2001).

ter. In the church it is the same. We love our celebrity converts. Sportsmen, singers, models—if they become Christians, then we buy their books, go to their concerts, trumpet their conversion. Best of all we love to show them off to unbelievers. We put on meetings where they give their testimony. I guess we think that people we know are more likely to believe if they discover that a famous person has become a Christian. A famous name gives credibility to the gospel. It makes Christianity cool. Or at least that is what we think. When we engage with the world, we try to convince people that we are worthy of being listened to because we are respectable. We hide away the freaks, the mentally unstable, the socially inept, the people who smell, the people who stand too close when they talk to you, the poor people, the stupid people. After all, no one is going to listen to them. Instead we put out the well-spoken, well-dressed, well-mannered people and say, "Look, listen to us, we're okay."

But Paul takes a very different line in 1 Corinthians 1:26–31. Paul has been expounding his claim that "the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (v. 18). God, he says, destroys the wisdom of the world by revealing his power in something that worldly wisdom does not recognize (vv. 19–22). It seems as if only powerful signs can impress Jews and as if only clever philosophical ideas can impress the Greeks. But we must not place our confidence in these, says Paul. We must not think that doing miracles or expounding clever arguments will convert the world, because the power of God and the wisdom of God are found in the message of the cross (vv. 23–25). Our message must be, and can only be, Christ crucified. When we preach Christ crucified, the Jews will be offended and the Greeks will laugh at us. But we have no choice, for we have no other message. Only the message of Christ crucified is truly power and truly wisdom.

In verses 26–31 Paul extends his argument. God has made foolish the wisdom of the world in the cross; now he is doing it among his people. Paul invites the Corinthians to look at themselves. They do not represent the wise, influential, and noble people of this

world. There were some in Corinth like this but not many. The church was primarily made up of those who were on the fringe, those in society who did not have much to appeal to. God is choosing these kinds of people to be part of his demonstration of the wisdom of the cross. God chooses the foolish, weak, and lowly to nullify human power and wisdom. He shames wisdom, power, and status because we use these things to proclaim that we do not need God. They all express the rebellion in Eden. But God makes a habit of choosing the foolish, weak, and despised people of the world to demonstrate that salvation is all of his grace. He leaves no room for us to boast in our wisdom or strength. Our boast, our only boast, is in Jesus (vv. 30–31).

In the area in which I live, the affluent, respectable British people are not interested in the gospel. The people who respond to the gospel are the socially marginalized, the displaced, the refugees. It is true today on a global scale. The church in the West is in decline, while the church in the Third World is growing. The balance of power in the Christian world is shifting to Africa and Latin America. Perhaps God is doing this to shame the economic and military power and the academic, rationalistic wisdom of the West. And not only that—perhaps he is doing it to shame the power and wisdom of the Western church.

Jesus expounds these themes of liberation and grace with explosive force in Luke 18.

> And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, "Give me justice against my adversary." For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, "Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'" And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he

> will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"
>
> He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." (vv. 1–14)

This is usually called "the parable of the *persistent* widow." The message seems to be that if we keep on asking God for something, then eventually he will give us what we want. But the point of the parable is that God is *not* like the judge. God does *not* need to be nagged into submission. He is the God who *does* care for widows. "The Lord watches over the sojourners; he upholds the widow and the fatherless, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin" (Ps. 146:9). Indeed Jesus says at the conclusion of the parable that God gives justice "speedily" (Luke 18:8). In fact, in verse 14 a man who has cried out to God for mercy "went down to his house justified." He receives justice before he has even got home. God, we discover, gives justice and vindication even before the end of history. When Luke tells us in verse 1 that the meaning of the parable is that we "should always pray and not give up," he does not mean that we should persist in prayer until we get what we want. Literally it means: "always to pray and not lose heart" (v. 1). This is a parable about not being discouraged, not about losing faith in God. Jesus himself says the parable is about faith (v. 8). Prayer is taken as an example of faith, because in our experience prayer is the supreme expression of faith. Prayer is faith articulated. So it is a parable about *perseverance* rather than *persistence*.

But this parable is not about trusting God in some general sense. It is about trusting God for something in particular. The parable uses the language of justice. The widow's petition is: "Give me justice against my adversary" (v. 3). The judge eventually responds: "Because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice" (v. 5). And Jesus says the meaning is this: "Will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily" (vv. 7–8). The preceding section is about the coming of God's kingdom and the return of the Son of Man (17:20–37). Waiting patiently for Christ's return means not being fooled by those who say Christ has already returned—no one will mistake his coming when it happens (17:22–25). In the meantime the disciples are to pray for the coming of Christ and not lose heart (18:1). The challenge is not to lose faith in the coming of Christ (v. 8). But in this parable the return of Christ is spoken of as justice for God's *chosen ones*.

It is not just the parable of the widow that is about justice. The next parable is also about justice (vv. 9–14). It is addressed "to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous" (v. 9). *Righteousness* and *justice* are the same word in Greek, so this parable is addressed to those who were confident in their own justice. And at the end of the parable, the tax collector goes "down to his house justified" (v. 14). He receives justice. He is vindicated. In Psalm 143 the psalmist says: "Hear my prayer, O Lord; give ear to my pleas for mercy! In your faithfulness answer me, in your righteousness. . . . For your name's sake, O Lord, preserve my life! In your righteousness bring my soul out of trouble! And in your steadfast love you will cut off my enemies, and you will destroy all the adversaries of my soul, for I am your servant" (Ps. 143:1, 11–12). The psalmist cries out to God for justice, for God to act in righteousness. And that means delivering the psalmist from his enemies. To cry to God for justice and to appeal to God's righteousness is to ask God to intervene to rescue his people, to vindicate them, and to judge their enemies. The psalmist calls upon God to intervene in the

dispute between God's people and God's enemies and to vindicate his people. This will be God acting in saving righteousness.

With all of this the Jewish leaders would have been fine. They would have agreed. This is what they expected. Verses 1–8a fit with Jewish expectation. They expected that one day God would intervene in history to liberate them from their enemies. They were looking for the day when God would establish them once again as free people in a free land—as God's people in God's land. The *Zealots* expected God to liberate his people as they fomented revolution. As they rose up in violent revolt, God would act in saving righteousness and establish justice for his faithful ones. The *Pharisees* hoped that by ritual cleansing, by fasting, by repentance for the past, by adherence to the Law, they would show themselves to be God's faithful people waiting for God's liberation. The *Essenes* thought they were the true Israel who had separated themselves from the corruption and compromise going on around them. They and they alone were the true faithful people of God. What the Zealots, the Pharisees, and the Essenes all agreed on is that God would come to establish justice for his faithful people. God would vindicate his faithful people. They disagreed on how it would come about—maybe through violent revolution, maybe through ritual purification, maybe through separation—but they all agreed it would happen and that they, as God's faithful people, would be the beneficiaries.

With this background in mind we can begin to appreciate the explosive quality of Jesus's concluding words to the parable. "I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8). Everything is fine up to this point. The religious leaders are with Jesus all the way. Zealots, Pharisees, and Essenes would all have agreed with the idea of God coming to establish justice for his people. But the final question is like a grenade thrown into the picture. It is like one of those films in which a bomb is thrown and everything goes quiet. All you can hear is the sound of the bomb rolling on the ground and coming to a halt. Then boom. In

this case the explosion takes place in the next parable, the parable of the Pharisees and the tax collector. For the moment, let us watch the bomb rolling across the floor with the metal clinking on the hard floor. What Jesus questions is whether his hearers are in fact God's faithful people. Are these the ones who will receive justice and vindication? Could it be that they are not God's faithful people? When God comes in justice to bring vindication, could it be that he will not come to the Zealots or the Pharisees or the Essenes? He may have to look elsewhere to find his faithful people. For the mark of the elect is not their ethnic identity. Nor is it their religious identity. The mark of the elect is that they cry out to God day and night for mercy: "And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night?" (v. 7). The chosen ones of God seek his mercy. They look *to God* for justice, not to their racial identity, or their good works, or their religion.

In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (vv. 9–14) Jesus redefines the justice of God and who receives it. Jesus tells the story of two men. One is the ideal Israelite: zealous, righteous, religious. But he does not receive justice. And then there is a sinner, one of the despised, a traitor, a collaborator with the Romans. But when he cries out to God for mercy he receives justice—just as Jesus promised in verse 6. He goes home justified (vv. 13–14). God saving his people involves something greater than liberation from Roman occupation: he will free them from the underlying problems of sin, death, and judgment. The faithful people whom God vindicates are not the politically zealous nor the religiously pure but those who cry out to God for mercy.

Taken together these parables teach us:

1) To look to God for liberation and justice. When Christ returns, God will establish his righteousness. He will reign once again over the world in justice. He will save and vindicate his people. He will bring down rulers and lift up the humble. He will fill the hungry with good things but send the rich away empty (Luke 1:51–53). This is good news for the poor.

2) To not lose heart. Liberation and justice are not our experience now. We cry out to God to end suffering, injustice, and the dishonor in which his name is held, but often God does not intervene. And so Jesus tells us not to lose heart, to keep faith until the Son of Man comes (vv. 1, 8). If we stop praying, then we portray God as worse than the unjust judge. The unjust judge gives justice in the end, even though he "neither feared God nor respected man" (v. 2). So if we lose faith in God and give up praying, then we make God out to be worse than the unjust judge who at least granted justice eventually.

3) To look to God for justification. God also gives justice "speedily." The tax collector receives justice before he goes home. Justice is a present experience for those who cry out to God for mercy. God's coming in justice will mean judgment to all people, for none is righteous. But when we turn to God in faith, he justifies us. He declares us to be just and guiltless—even though we are guilty. Psalm 143 not only pictures a court case between God's people and God's nations in which God intervenes to vindicate his people; it also pictures a court case between God and his people. If this case is brought to judgment, then God will be vindicated through our condemnation because "no one living is righteous before you" (Ps. 143:2). But God has brought this case to judgment in the cross. He has condemned his Son so that he can declare us just at the same time as vindicating his justice (see Rom. 3:21–26). Through God's grace we become part of the community of the faithful ones who can look to God's coming vindication with hope and confidence.

Some Christians want to reduce Christianity to a message of personal piety and individual salvation. Others go to the other extreme, reducing Christianity to a message of political liberation or liberal causes. Neither does justice to the good news proclaimed by Jesus.

We can and should proclaim the good news of liberation to the poor. We can and should promise them a kingdom of justice, peace, and blessing. We should express this in terms that connect

with their experience of slavery and oppression. But we cannot and should not promise too much. To proclaim liberation within history is to promise what we cannot deliver. Liberation is a future reality. In the meantime we are not to lose heart. We are to keep faith with God.

3) A Message of Community

But it is not only in the future that the poor experience the good news. Through the gospel, the poor become part of a community of love and care. Justice is a present experience for the people of God.

We have seen how the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount should be read as an announcement of liberation and an end to exile. Jesus continues by saying, "You are the salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13). He is talking to his disciples (v. 1). Salt in the Old Testament was a sign of covenant faithfulness. In the Old Testament salt was to be added to every sacrifice (Lev. 2:13). The reason given is that salt is a sign of the covenant with God. Numbers talks of "a covenant of salt forever before the Lord for you and your offspring with you" (Num. 18:19; see also Ex. 30:35). Salt is a sign that the covenant will last, a sign of covenant faithfulness. Adding salt was a way of saying: "I bind myself to the agreement." It was our equivalent of shaking on it. This was how the contract was signed. Still today some Arabs throw salt to seal an agreement. "Ought you not to know that the Lord God of Israel gave the kingship over Israel forever to David and his sons by a covenant of salt?" (2 Chron. 13:5). Salt was a sign that the covenant would last forever. It was sign of faithfulness and commitment.

So when Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth," he is not saying they were to act as a preservative, upholding the morality of society. Rather, Jesus is saying to his followers: "You are the faithful ones; you are the ones who are part of the covenant." When he talks about salt losing its saltiness, he is talking about the nation of Israel. They have not been faithful to the covenant, so they will not enjoy liberation from exile. They have been and will be "thrown

out"; in other words, they have been exiled. They have been and will be "trampled under people's feet" (Matt. 5:13); in other words, they have been judged by a conquering army.

Remember the context. The place is crawling with Roman soldiers and Roman officials enforcing Roman rule. The country is full of Jews longing for liberation and an end to exile. And Jesus says: you are the salt of the earth, the light of the world, a city on a hill (5:13–16). You are the liberated community. You are the new society. You are the radical alternative. Commenting on Colossians, Vinoth Ramachandra says:

> The proof that God's future is already impinging on the present is found in the little communities . . . where men and women have been set free from their "estrangement and hostility" (Col. 1:21). These are communities of "hope," a foretaste of the reconciliation to come. It is through their gospel living (Col. 1:10) and gospel preaching (Col. 1:27) that the cosmic goal of renewal and transformation will be accomplished.[4]

For now we go on living under the old regimes of this world. But a new regime has begun. A revolution has taken place. The old ways of oppression are coming to an end. A new community with a new government has begun. It operates secretly in the midst of this world. It is a community that offers peace and justice.

In the Lord's Prayer Jesus says: "Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us" (Luke 11:4). God's forgiveness of us in the future is related to our forgiveness of others in the present. It is not that we can earn forgiveness by being forgiving. It is rather that our experience of God's great mercy should makes us merciful people (Matt. 18:21–35; 1 John 3:16–17). The experience of grace transforms us into gracious people. It is not just about interpersonal conflict. It is about how we treat other people. It is about economic generosity. While God forgives our *sins*, we forgive our *debtors*. Luke could have used the

[4] Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Message of Mission* (Nottingham, UK: Inter-Varsity, 2003), 31.

word *sin* in both cases, but he chose to highlight the economic implications of Jesus's words. John Howard Yoder argues that Jesus announced an eschatological jubilee when he proclaimed "the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4:19).[5] In the Old Testament Year of Jubilee, debts were forgiven and slaves were set free as the people celebrated God's grace to them in providing atonement (see Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15). Now the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, has come. In the light of God's forgiveness, a new era of economic and social relations has begun among those forgiven and set free by Christ's death.[6] The followers of Jesus are to live as both recipients of, and participants in, a permanent jubilee.[7]

Jim Wallis describes the Open Door Community as "a community of hospitality and justice for the poor" in Atlanta, Georgia. "On Sunday nights, when Murphy gets out her guitar, everybody sings together in a service that unites those who were never intended, in this world, to worship God together. But they do, and every time I am there I experience a little bit of heaven right in the midst of our still-divided earth. Communities like the Open Door provide us with both a sign and a promise."[8] The Christian community is both a sign and a promise of God's coming liberation. We are the presence of God's liberating kingdom in a broken world. We are the place where liberation can be found, offering a home for exiled people. We are to welcome the broken people to a community of broken people. We are the community among whom liberation is a present reality—the jubilee people who live with new economic and social relationships. We are the light of the world, a city on a hill. The challenge for us is to articulate Jesus's message of liberation in a way that connects with people's experience and offers a place of liberation in the Christian community.

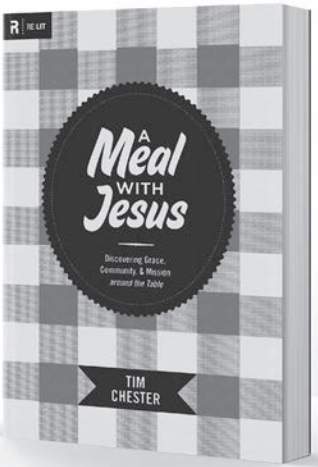
[5] See John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 34–39, 64–77.
[6] Tom Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer* (Oxford, UK: Triangle, 1996), 51–56.
[7] See Tim Chester, *The Message of Prayer* (Nottingham, UK: Inter-Varsity, 2003), 168–70.
[8] Jim Wallis, *The Soul of Politics* (New York: Fount, 1994), 77–78.

Summary

The gospel is good news to the poor because it is:

- a message of liberation—the gospel is the promise of liberation from all those things, personal and social, that enslave us;
- a message of grace—God's promise of forgiveness and liberation does not depend on our status, education, or wealth;
- a message of community—the coming liberation of God is anticipated in the liberating relationships of the Christian community.

Learn about Church and Community from Tim Chester



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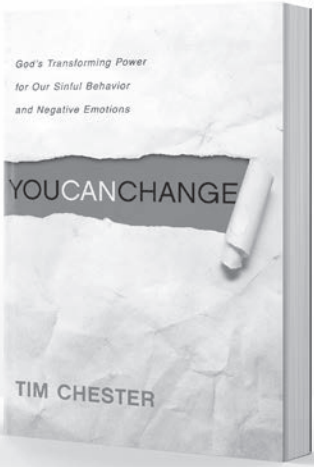

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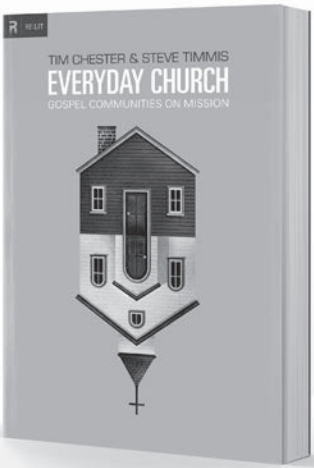

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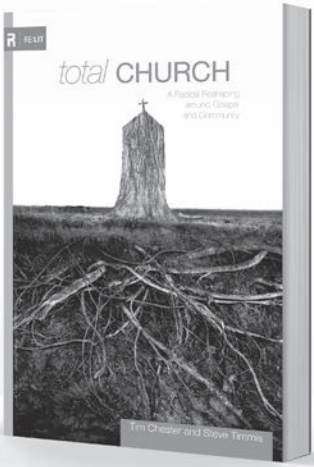

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