BOOKS I HAVE READ: CHURCH IN HARD PLACES

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And so churches need to think though the long term ramifications of their ministry to the poor. We must think about what we are going to do with somebody who comes to faith through a mercy ministry. What is the discipleship strategy?

Category: Reviews

> *When we stopped handing out tracts, knocking on doors, and singing carols in the streets, I was accused by a vocal few of killing evangelism. Yet when I encouraged these same believers to engage with locals, find out what questions they were asking, get involved with their lives, and share their faith naturally, I was treated like some sort of leper.*

Church in Hard PlacesÂ by Mez McConnell and Mike McKinley is short, easy to read and extremely worthwhile. It has a light touch, is funny at times, includes lots of stories, but is deadly serious. As I said a couple of days ago, it may well be the best book I read all year (and it's only February).

Overall, it is a normal format paperback, of 200 pages, with a short subject index, a scripture index and a few footnotes. It will set you back around five or six quid if you get it from Amazon.

As the subtitle (How the Local Church Brings Life to the Poor and Needy) suggests, this is a book about church planting amongst poor communities in the Western World, with the two authors building on their own experiences to share general principles and practical examples of what can be done.

The book has two central themes; poor people need the Gospel and poor people need the church. this might sound obvious, but as the book illustrates, there is a good deal of Christian activity which does not share the Good News of Jesus and which is divorced from the life of the church.

It should be a no brainer that the Gospel is important; eternal salvation is a big deal, but there is more to it than that. Calling people to face up to the sin and rebellion in their lives and to get right with God is to treat them with dignity as human beings and not simply as victims of forces beyond their control. Likewise the church provides a community in which people can grow and through mutual accountability can learn both to deal with the issues in their lives and to reach out to others.

The truth of these principles is illustrated with a number of hard hitting and heart wrenching stories.

From this basis, the book goes on to look at a variety of issues including the role of preaching, the problem of parachurch organisations, the place of church discipline and the nature of poverty. There is a lot of good stuff and I am tempted to simply pull quotes and post them on the blog for the next few weeks.

A few general thoughts:

- The authors make it very clear that they are not opposed to social action or mercy ministries. However, they make it clear that this sort of activity needs carried out in the context of an active proclamation of the Gospel.Â Supporting people in their poverty without addressing the underlying need for salvation may well do no more than facilitate a self-destructive lifestyle. People need to be challenged to change.

- It is abundantly clear through the book that personal integrity, a close walk with Jesus and a lot of prayer are the foundations for church planting. Good techniques and creative contextualisation are no substitute for personal holiness.
- Though the book deals with church planting in Scotland and the US, there are principles here that apply to mission work in any part of the world.

Though the touch is light, this is a direct book. It doesn't mess about and it doesn't make many allowances for English middle-class sensibilities and it's all the better for that. I suspect it might annoy or upset a few people - but those people probably need to be annoyed or upset anyway (or shaken up, at least). Theologically, the book is written from a Reformed perspective, but I wouldn't hesitate to recommend it to people from other traditions.

It is a relatively short book which covers a lot of ground. This inevitably means that there are some issues which aren't covered as thoroughly as you might like, but that's something you have to live with. If it was ten times longer and covered every theme in great detail with extensive footnotes, no one would bother to read it. There are suggestions for reading if you want to follow up on a particular issue.

Who should read it? Church leaders in the UK (especially those in larger cities) should think about getting hold of it, as should cross-cultural missionaries working among impoverished communities around the world. Those who are involved in food banks and other forms of social outreach would gain a lot from reading it; though they might find it rather challenging and confrontational.

> *When the Lord blesses our efforts and we see evangelistic fruit from our efforts, we have to be ready to disciple new converts and help them to engage and minister fully in the life of the congregation. But if we have started a mercy ministry with no plan beyond the crisis-intervention stage, we will never get beyond the very first stages of discipleship with a needy person. And so churches need to think though the long term ramifications of their ministry to the poor. We must think about what we are going to do with somebody who comes to faith through a mercy ministry. What is the discipleship strategy? Who will care for them? Who will hold them accountable? How will we move them forward in their walk with Jesus? How will we prepare them for whatever works of service God has called them to once he has saved them? How will we identify and train the former drug dealers and homeless people and sexual predators that the Lord is calling into full time ministry?*

This is a challenging book, but if we take this Christianity thing seriously, we need to be prepared to face up to the issues that it raises.

I was provided with a review copy of this book by one of the authors. That being said, I have not allowed this to influence my review. If I thought the book stunk, I'd have said so, but I didn't!