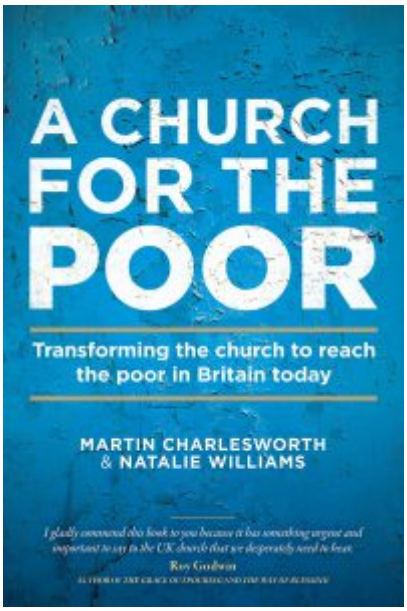
Review: A Church for the Poor



This book is about much more than reaching the poor. It is a handbook on mission. Missional illiteracy is high amongst our church leaders. Our structures are strictures on the strength of the gospel. This book, unassumingly, is something of a call to repentance. "Leaders… this book is for you" (p184).

Authors, Martin Charlesworth and Natalie Williams, come from different backgrounds but bring the same passion. They are involved in the *Jubilee+* movement, which I now have an inkling to investigate further. Their foundation is clear: "the coming of God's kingdom involve[s] dealing directly with urgent human needs and social issues – as an outworking of our personal salvation and as a key part of discipleship" (p23).

Their key strength is that they present more than an economic approach to poverty; they explore the spiritual and cultural aspects as well. This is confronting; as church we can deal with economic matters through professionalism and program provision, but spiritual and cultural matters have us collide with ourselves, our weaknesses, and our hardness of heart.

> *The proliferation of church-based foodbanks, debt advice services, job clubs, educational projects, supported housing schemes, elderly support projects and much more are testimony to the energy and vision of churches in the face of increasing social needs of all types.* ***However, the poor and deprived are still sometimes helped at a relational 'arms length'.*** *The church has more to offer those in need than just*

> *social action projects.* ***People are more than 'clients' – outcomes are more than statistics.*** *People need friendship and community.* ***People need to be valued****. Many need someone to walk alongside them as they try to find ways of rebuilding their lives." (pp40-41, emphasis mine).*
>
> ***When the middle class culture is unchallenged the most likely outworking of the church's approach to poverty is to confine its activity to social action projects alone.*** *(Page 137, emphasis mine).*

The authors explore the deeper aspects of poverty – "aspirational poverty – the loss of hope" (p41), "relational poverty – the loss of community" (p43), and "spiritual poverty – the loss of meaning" (p45). Hope, community and meaning is the stuff of the gospel, but there is no false dichotomy between spiritual and temporal matters here. Clearly, real economic poverty causes things like hopelessness and this can be observed: There has been a generational shift from "millenial optimism" (p31) to post GFC austerity (p31) and the new class of "JAM's" ("Just About Managing", p33). The authors' concern is not just to present and analyse statistic, or to pontificate about the latest programs, but to delve into *cultural shifts and values*.

Here they demonstrate one of those basic aspects of mission that shouldn't need to be said, but must: the church at mission does not begin with what it can do, but with *cultural understanding.* "Response to immediate need is one thing, but it can't be sustained and built upon without careful reflection about underlying issues raised by the context" (p34). **We are about cultural change** (what else does *"making disciples of all nations"* mean?) **which begins in us**, and our response to the poor is a touchstone, and often a point of conviction as to how obedient we are being.

> *We cannot use our donations to overseas projects as an excuse*

> *to walk by on the other side of the road and ignore the rough sleeper on our high street. Jesus doesn't leave that option open to us: in telling the parable of the Good Samaritan, he makes it abundantly plain that we're to help the person in front of us. (p35)*

Another basic aspect of mission is that we need to *go* (what else does *"go and make disciples…"* mean?) rather than rely on attractional methods alone. This is the principle of emulating the *incarnational* attitude of Christ, willing to empty ourselves in order to enter into the world which needs the gospel.

> *When people don't come to us – as the working class aren't coming to our churches – we need to find ways to reach out. But we cannot do it with an attitude of superiority. We simply must not approach wanting to draw working class and poorer people into our churches as something we 'do to them'. If we're to see churches that truly reflect all classes and economic situations, we need to be prepared to move into neighbourhoods that have bad reputations, to place our children in schools that may not achieve the best results, to shop where shopkeepers get to know their customers, to listen to people who we may feel we cannot relate to at all. (Page 95)*

Another basic aspect of mission is that the medium is the message, and the medium is *us.* In technical terms, missiology brings ecclesiology and eschatology to life. This is why the tendency for churches to split into homogenous units based on age or background is fundamentally anti-gospel. The gospel doesn't divide and avoid, it unifies and proclaims.

> *Wherever there is division, the church is to demonstrate reconciliation. So we need churches where the working class and the middle class sit together, speak with one another, share food and faith and find community that transcends*

> *postcodes and income levels and educational achievements (Page 96).*
>
> *A mature church has a number of flourishing sub-cultures whose members feel both a security in their own sub-culture and an ownership of the main church culture, which, of course, takes them somewhat out of tehir sub-cultural comfort zone. (Page 120)*

But this mission is not possible until the fundamental posture of the church is addressed, until we consider our attitude, our humility, our willingness to die to self. Charlesworth and Williams provide a constructive provocation that brings us to that place.

This provocation has its roots in their exegesis of how God calls his people to serve the poor in both Old and New Testaments and then in their exploration of church history. In reflection we are left asking questions like: Are we *over, under, or next to* the poor? Our answer is an indicator of our humility before God, our ability to self-reflect and discern the Spirit's leading. It's an indicator of whether our mission builds up ourselves or truly advances the kingdom of God. Our response to the poor reflects the size of our mission heart, and how much we embrace the necessary attitudes of discernment, contrition, and courage so that we are willing to be "jolted out of our own understanding" of what we consider to be culturally normal (p76).

> ***We need to ensure that we are not speaking about inclusivity without putting it into practice.*** *It is one thing to say that we believe all people are equal before God, but another to create a level playing field where people from all backgrounds have the same opportunities. (Page 73, emphasis mine)*
>
> *We need to break down these barriers so that our churches can increasingly reflect the kingdom of God. But in order to do*

> *that,* ***we need to reflect on some of the attitudes in our hearts that might prevent our churches from more accurately reflecting our society,*** *and welcoming people from all demographics,* ***without expecting them to transition from on social group to another****. (Page 78, emphasis mine)*

In this light, their chapter on "British Culture: Materialism, Individualism, Cynicism" (Page 79) is an excellent mirror. It should be compulsory reading for all those who are considering church leadership; know your blind spots, be aware of your own culture, and discern the distinction between the essence of the gospel and how we have applied it for our own comfort.

> *There is no place in the church for the kind of individualism we see in our society,* ***but we need to be intentional about rooting it out.*** *Cultural concerns with personal space and boundaries may have influenced us in ways that we are not even aware of. (Page 87, emphasis mine)*

> ***Only by going against the grain of British Culture in these areas, can we build churches that really are homes for those who are poor or in need.*** *(Page 90, emphasis mine)*

> *If we are to build churches for all, we need to break out of mindsets that may have been formed by our own background and class or by the media and political narratives that surround us…* ***We need to have a sober assessment of ourselves, asking God to highlight any biases we have and any commitment to middle class values that is unhelpful to reaching others who may not share them.*** *I am trying to learn to let my first question, when I feel uncomfortable or judgmental or fearful around someone , be 'what is going on in my heart?' before I start to ask questions about the person in front of me. (Page 97, emphasis mine)*

> *Are we growing in kindness? Are we looking for opportunities to be generous? Are we more concerned about looking like 'good Christians' or actually becoming like Jesus?…* ***Changing***

> ***the culture of our churches might also mean taking a cold, sober look at the prejudices of our hearts.*** *(Page 128, emphasis mine)*

Personally, I was confronted with my own growing cynicism. For me, it is a cynicism with regards to the middle class church itself. Moving in the opposite spirit is hard, but no matter who we are giving ourselves to, "we have to guard our hearts so that the disappointment we rightly feel doesn't turn into a cynicism that wrongly hardens us to others." (Page 89).

Charlesworth and Williams are intensely practical. The entire second half of the book is about applying the spirit of the first.

I was particularly glad that they raise the issue of the "gentrification of leadership" (p104). A key foundation for church maturity is the ability to have "native" leaders that rise up from within. Practically speaking, then, we must deal with our tendency to attach leadership to cultural markers such as tertiary-level training that is (sometimes merely) academic in nature. Our system of severing ordinands from their context not only diminishes vocation and disempowers church communities, it can be an imposition of culture. Rather, real, on-the-ground discipleship is needed, "enabling leaders among the poor to emerge and begin to function in leadership roles within the church" (p146).

Their valuing of prophetic leadership (p111) is also of practical importance. A case in point: I read this book having recently come across Bp. Philip North's prophetic word, "Hope for the Poor" at this year's *New Wine United* conference. Similarly, Mike Pilavachi spoke at the *Naturally Supernatural Summer Conference* drawing on the call for justice in Amos. Gill and I are finding ourselves moved and impassioned by these issues and we look to people such as these for leadership as "prophetic advocates" (p152). Wise churches and

wise leaders need to take steps to hear the prophetic, especially when it is uncomfortable. After all, cultural change never happens when leaders are comfortable, “in my experience the real problem has been the lack of commitment by the church leader(s) to care for the poor” (p160).

The role of the diaconate in this prophetic leadership is an interesting examination (p162). The diaconal role, when accepted and embraced, adds capacity to the pastoral role. A deacon is “someone called, equipped and able to work in social action while being appropriately linked to church pastors and the main life of the church.” Gill and I are both ordained deacons, and as I currently wrestle with the fact and substance of my ordination, this is a fascinating thought. The exercise of diaconal ministry can avoid the church splitting into groups of lobbyist/activists who have competed for resources, and can lead *corporate* discernment where the body moves together. Food for thought.

Their hope into delving into practicalities such as these various pitfalls and possibilities is to give encouragement: it can be done! They act as consultants to those who have questions to ask.

I would go further. It can be done, it *must* be done. As the saying goes, it’s not that the Church of God has a mission in the world, it’s that the God of Mission has a Church in the world. Charlesworth and Williams bring us to God’s heart for the poor and so give us a touchstone for our faithfulness. Here we have the very basic principles of mission, the fundamental necessary attitudes to be a faithful church. It’s not rocket science, it requires no preparatory steps. We shouldn’t just learn from what they have to say, we should simply get over ourselves and get on with it.