

Mez McConnell, Mike McKinley

**CHURCH IN HARD PLACES: How the Local Church Brings Life to the Poor and Needy**

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*Church in Hard Places* was written by two pastors: a Scot named Mez McConnell and an American named Mike McKinley. Both authors write from their rich experiences of serving among the poor. McConnell, the prominent voice in the book, grew up in one of the Scottish “housing schemes” for the poor. After his conversion, he served as an assistant pastor in Great Britain, and then as a church planter in one of the poorest towns in Brazil. Currently he pastors *Niddrie Community Church* in one of the poorest schemes in Scotland. McKinley is the pastor of Sterling Park Baptist Church in Virginia, USA.

The book is divided into three parts: “The Gospel in Hard Places,” “The Church in Hard Places” and “The Work in Hard Places.” In the “Introduction,” we meet the authors who explain what they mean by “hard places” and also why and for whom they have written this book. They are aware of the fact that every area is a “hard” place for church witness in some sense. For example, it can be extremely hard to proclaim the gospel in the richer parts of the USA and Europe because people are generally “distracted by (their) materialism” (19). Hence, the authors explain that by “hard places” they mean those that are “economically and socially downtrodden” (20).

The first part of the book is divided into three chapters. In the first chapter, McConnell and McKinley clearly state that they did not write a book about poverty, but about “starting, leading, and participating in churches that reach people on the margins of respectable society” (25). Meanwhile, it can be hard to even categorize “poverty” since it is a notion that is relative to time and place. Poverty in Central America is much “poorer” than the poverty we find in the USA. Nevertheless, somehow “we know intuitively that these American homeless are poor” (26).

Our thinking about poverty is further complicated by the fact that we tend to think about it primarily as a lack of “access to resources,” while poor people usually relate it to “experiences like powerlessness, hopelessness, loss of meaning, and shame” (27). This means that often people do not need only food and shelter, but “an entirely new way of life.” However, what poor people need the most is precisely what the church is uniquely able to offer: the gospel of Jesus Christ (28)! The gospel of Jesus Christ will spread among the poor precisely through the local church, that is, through its members prepared by its leaders for works of service

(33). This is why it is important for pastors and church planters not to seek only those “places where they are most likely to find success (defined as an established church with financial independence) rather than places that are most in need of gospel witness” (34).

The second chapter answers the question: “What Gospel Do They Need?” Many today turn the gospel into good news that is “all about them and their sense of self-worth” (37). Our authors have succinctly explained the gospel under four headings: “1. *God* ... 2. *Man* ... 3. *Christ* ... 4. *Response*” (37-40). Christians who serve in “hard places” have to know the biblical message of the gospel themselves and be aware that the people they serve will likely have antithetical views about God, humans, Christ and response when they hear those and other churchy words used. Still, they need to know how to connect the message of the gospel “to the life and struggles of needy, broken people” (41). It is very important to proclaim the right gospel because people’s salvation and eternity depend on it (53), as does the glory of God (56).

The third chapter comes to grips with the common misconception that doctrine is not important. Although they agree that it is much better to spend more time with one’s neighbor talking about Jesus than “bickering on the Internet about infralapsarianism,” nevertheless doctrine is important because salvation, sanctification, leadership and gospel proclamation necessitate doctrine, each in its own way. Likewise, both the Bible and experience teach that it is not true that poor and uneducated people do not have the “necessary tools to learn doctrine;” such opinions are “paternalistic and condescending” (65).

The second part of the book talks about the mission of the church in poor places. The fourth chapter is devoted to the problem of parachurch organizations, especially when they are not fulfilling their mission of assisting the church (Greek: *para* = alongside; so in theory a parachurch organization should stand *alongside* the church) in fulfilling its own mission. Despite good intentions, parachurch organizations can become self-sufficient and self-serving.

Despite the fact that the church can often be idle in fulfilling its mission of reaching out to the poor, the local church is the answer and God’s “primary evangelism strategy” (87). The church is important in God’s eyes (88), and it is the place where believers can grow while submitting to its spiritual leadership. This implies both spiritual accountability and church discipline.

Chapter six turns its attention to evangelism. It is unfortunate that in poor communities, “very little evangelism that is tied to a healthy local church is taking place.” Prospective pastors are not encouraged to move in and plant churches in those communities, and often those who convert in them are very quick to move out of them (95).

Evangelism is defined as “*teaching the gospel with the aim to persuade*” (97).

Defined in this way, we can understand why proper evangelism requires so much time and effort (103), and why it rests upon God's sovereign election (100). As a pastor, I found two practical hints in this chapter very interesting. First, McConnell wrote that it is his church's policy "to never start something that our community already offers. It makes more sense for Christians to join existing groups to be a witness rather than expecting unbelievers to come to our groups." Second, when a church decides that it does want to host an event, he recommends to use those events for friendship and fellowship, not (primarily) for evangelism. This is because "we want people to feel at home among us and not like they will get hijacked every time they come into the place" (104).

Chapter seven expresses the need for faithful preaching of the word of God which is a double-edged sword! Churches "never attempt ministry among the poor because they feel like it is a fight they are not equipped to win," but "if we have the Word of God applied by the Spirit of God, we have all the resources we need to minister in any community" (110). This is not to say that preaching is all a church does.

Chapter eight is another interesting chapter as it is about membership and discipline. Various biblical passages and "the broad storyline of the Bible" (118) show that it clearly teaches and presupposes that churches should know who their members are. Membership in a church not only protects the church from spiritual decadence and bad testimony, but in poor communities, it also prevents the so-called second-class syndrome because it signifies that believers belong to a church as fully functional parts of the body of Christ (125). Likewise, when church members "see the seriousness of claiming to follow Jesus ... (and) submit to godly leadership and accountability" (129), unbelievers are then able to see them as "a group of supernaturally changed and changing people" (128).

The last part of the book encourages those who would work with the poor to prepare for this ministry. Chapter nine advises them to prepare themselves and to be conscious of the harsh realities of this ministry. They also need to examine their motivation and seek the blessing and support of both their family and elders. Since we are in spiritual warfare, prayer is "the absolute key *before, during, and after* any ministry" (143)!

Leaders should also prepare an infrastructure that will endure long-term ministry in a community. This entails teaching and the empowerment of godly leadership and teams who will have in mind that this is "*a long-term commitment.*"

In chapter eleven, the authors caution workers to be ready to change their way of thinking. This is especially so with regards to future elders or ministry leaders in the church. It is wrong to write off somebody just because of his or her poverty, lack of education or background in criminal activities or substance abuse. On the

contrary, it is important to give responsibility and discipleship to new believers very soon after their conversion. Failures are opportunities (164), moreover “failure is the breeding ground for humility” (165). Lastly, it is always important to be aware of and to adjust to the cultural makeup of the community.

McConnell and McKinley were somewhat reluctant to write the last chapter entitled “Prepare for Mercy Ministry?” It deals with the question of whether and to what extent mercy ministries should be a part of the overall ministry of a local church. They reason that mercy ministries should not be the main thing the church is doing since its main ministry is to proclaim the gospel and to instruct people to obey the gospel by doing the work of serving (174). Nevertheless, mercy ministries may be of help to the church if leaders are conscious of potential problems and abuses.

Their suggestion that mercy ministries should be done “in the context of relationships and accountability” (179) is very wise and biblical. In practice, this means that church elders and members would help the poor “personally and privately” and thus “in the context of relationships” (181).

In the “Conclusion,” we are advised to count both the cost and the reward of ministry among the poor. This is a wisdom issue since, on the one hand, Christians are called to sacrifice, while on the other hand, they need to remember that God does not need them (187), that not every sacrifice is strategically justified (191), but also that sacrifice and ministry lead to final joy (193). Other Christians and church leaders are there to prayerfully help us as we personally think through these issues (192).

My personal impressions of the book are mostly very good. I would say that this book gets better with every chapter and that those practical chapters in the last part of the book were the best. Though relatively short and introductory in nature, there is more practical wisdom in them than I would expect from such a short book.

Even though I really liked the first part of the book that speaks of the gospel, I would offer one objection. Namely, the authors have placed a much greater emphasis on repentance than on faith. As a matter of fact, when they wrote about the “response” to the gospel (48-51), much was said about repentance, turning away from sin and commitment to Christ, yet there was no mention of faith in Christ, of trust in his mercy and love. Repentance is, indeed, a very important aspect of our response to God’s work of salvation in Christ, but it is consequential to faith or, at least, the other side of the “repent and believe” coin.

I heartily recommend this book to every believer and church. Its second chapter, with some minor modifications, could be used as both a paradigm and a reading assignment for an evangelism course. Believers in general can profit from reading the book, as it may help them understand how they can participate in the

mission of the church. Of course, *Church in Hard Places* will be especially helpful to (present or future) church planters, as well as to pastors and elders, whether their church is “in a hard place” notwithstanding. The Lord Jesus said, “For the poor you always have with you” (John 12:8). This means that the theme of this book will stay current until his return.