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BOOK REVIEW

Ronald J. Sider. *I Am Not A Social Activist: Making Jesus the Agenda*. Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2008. 211 pp. Pbk. CDN\$16.99.

There is today, within the church and the broader culture, a movement toward greater concern for issues of poverty and social justice. This is seen in mass movements like the “Make Poverty History” campaign, the church sponsored “Micah Challenge” and the social consciousness of celebrities like U2’s Bono, and actress Angelina Jolie. While the emergence of this renewed social consciousness is refreshing, Ron Sider has been a dedicated social activist with a passion for justice since the late 1960’s. What further distinguishes Sider is that, as an evangelical Christian, he was far ahead of his time as an advocate on social issues. His book *I Am Not a Social Activist* addresses what may be *the* crucial question for our current evangelical milieu: how do evangelicals approach the issue of social activism in a theologically responsible and constructive way?

The book is a selected collection of columns that Sider wrote between 1993 and 2007 for *Prism* magazine, a publication of the organization Evangelicals for Social Action. Sider founded this organization and continues to serve with it as a committed voice for the marginalized and as a mobilizer for evangelicals to get engaged with social issues. This slim volume covers a number of topics germane to that mission, including spirituality, Christology, a theology of social action, and the place of evangelism in social justice ministry.

Sider is clear about where his ultimate allegiance stands when he explains the title by stating, “I am not a social activist, I am a disciple of Jesus Christ” (21). Sider goes on to emphasize his

belief that a Christ-centered faith coupled with evangelistic passion is central to any appropriate approach to Christian social action. This challenges perceptions that social action is the realm of liberal or mainline churches and not a priority for evangelicals. Sider has always been a firmly committed evangelical and in the first section of the book he makes a clear plea for a Jesus-centered spirituality that will underpin the dual responsibilities of evangelism and care for the needy, both of which are part of what the church is called to do.

The book is a combination of philosophical reflection on the foundations of Christian social action and practical advice on how churches and individuals can become more involved in justice issues. One chapter, entitled “Eight Keys to Holistic Ministry,” offers highly applicable insights on how a holistic ministry can be constructed. Other chapters reflect Sider’s desire to see evangelicals develop a philosophy of social action. He also has a section on politics and offers some views on how Christians can (and should) engage in the political process.

Sider writes with a winsome and gracious style, however some of the book includes edgier sections that give a scathing critique of contemporary evangelicalism. In his chapter, “Are Evangelical Leaders on the Way to Hell?” Sider wonders if today’s evangelical leaders come anywhere near spending the same amount of time as Jesus did on preaching about concern for the poor and needy. Later in the book he expresses his opinion that mainstream evangelicalism is “largely conformed to the world” (119) in its lack of concern for the poor, the environment, and gender and racial equality. This combination of philosophical rumination, practical insight, and prophetic questioning give the book a highly readable, thought-provoking quality.

Perhaps what commends the book most is the fact that Sider captures a growing spirit within contemporary evangelicalism toward social justice. As a long-time practitioner, Sider speaks not as someone who is just caught up in an emerging trend, but as one who was there long before most of us came around. Thus, his musings, captured in this current volume, are the voice of experience reflecting on years in the trenches and offering guiding thoughts to those who want to join the mission. He is an

elder statesman in what is becoming a broader evangelical movement that is no longer just concerned about one or two key social issues (often abortion and gay rights), but also wants to address issues of poverty, equality, and the care of creation.

If there is a weakness to the book, it is one that Sider himself confesses. He writes in the preface that a collection of essays such as the one he is offering is by nature limited in its ability to develop an argument, respond to alternate viewpoints, and suggest in-depth strategies for application of the author's ideas. Indeed, while this book is a good introduction to Sider's thought, and a helpful primer for thinking about Christian social engagement, it lacks the kind of in-depth analysis and careful argument that elevates a book to something beyond simply good reading. *I Am not a Social Activist* offers many interesting thoughts and some compelling challenges; however, it is not a systematic consideration of the emerging social action movement within evangelical Christianity or a blueprint for ongoing development of that movement. It is offered as a compilation of thoughts from one of the movement's veteran leaders, and as such it has its place as a helpful contribution to the conversation.

Something further to be aware of is the highly American nature of the book. While Sider is a Canadian by birth, his work and life have been located in the U.S. and he writes from that perspective. This is not bad, however readers from other countries will note that some of the cultural and political norms discussed in the book may be far different in their context.

The rediscovery of a social conscience is an encouraging development in evangelicalism today. Ron Sider is one of those clear-minded, balanced evangelicals who combines evangelistic passion and social concern with theological reflection and pastoral pragmatism. This adds up to a voice worth listening to, and *I Am Not a Social Activist*, as an introduction to Sider's work, may leave you wanting to pursue the issues further by reading another of Sider's more detailed volumes.

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