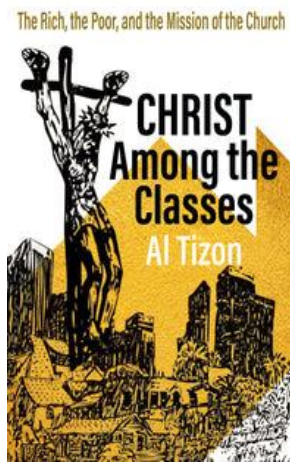


BOOK REVIEW

Christ Among the Classes: The Rich, the Poor and the Mission of the Church

by *Al Tizon*

Reviewed by *Cynthia Moody*



New York. Orbis Books. 2023. \$35.00.

This heartfelt and existentially challenging book gives a clear and compelling call for Christians to lead justice-oriented lives, in which followers of Jesus are led by the Holy Spirit to pursue selflessness and service to the poor over the temptation to accumulate material wealth and comforts. Tizon reminds us that our worth is not defined by our socio-economic status. In fact, he points out, we may suffer from “influenza,” a condition that de Graaf et al. (2014) argue is caused by capitalistic society.

What is our calling? Jesus, Tizon reminds us, lived among the poor and said they were blessed. In fact, Jesus instructed the disciples to leave everything and follow him. He told the rich young ruler to go sell all he had and give to the poor. He applauded Zacchaeus, who repented of his selfish gain.

Who is poor? While focusing on people who are economically poor, Tizon reminds us that people may also be physically, personally, socio-politically, psycho-emotionally, morally, and spiritually poor. Yet, of those who are economically affected by classism, Tizon writes, “a collective prejudice [is] formed into a system of inequality based on socioeconomic stratification ...

undergirded by embedded cultural narratives concerning the poor, and then instituted by powers that be at the expense of the poor” (xxii).

Tizon addresses not only personal poverty, but also the organizational and institutional elements involved in classism, which is closely linked with the institutional foundations of racism that date back to historic colonization movements (80). In other words, poor people cannot simply pull themselves out of poverty when its roots are structural in nature. Colonization led to structural barriers that undergird classism. Therefore, according to Tizon, we are still in need of reforming societal structures today. Indeed, it is up to those of us who have wealth to awaken to compassion and to work diligently toward sharing our time, talent, and treasure such that we advance Jesus’ agenda over our own. We are to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. As Tizon argues, “When we are side-by-side in solidarity with the poor, we are side-by-side with Jesus” (119). He quotes Micah 6:8, and offers the caveat that “Classism poisons the soul and creates a society that runs horribly contrary to the kingdom of God...the church needs to identify, confront, repudiate, and dismantle classism to be faithful to its mission in the world” (161).

One of the major attributes of this book lies in the six “life altering movements” the author proposes we seriously reflect on: From awakening to compassion; self-gain to generosity; accumulation to simplicity; proprietary rights to hospitality; savior complex to friendship; and safety to solidarity. Tizon provides short self-assessments in the Appendix for each of these six areas. These help readers pinpoint concrete steps that can be taken over time to move more in the direction of generosity and ultimately solidarity with the poor among us. Tizon also shares details of his own personal journey toward solidarity with the poor, as well as others’ stories including those of Dorothy Day, Gustavo Gutierrez, John Perkins, Gerard Thomas Straub, Nikki Toyama-Szeto, Raineer Chu, and Princess Kasune Zulu. Each of these stories inspires the reader to think beyond self, and envision what might be if we each were to make other choices. Tizon’s message challenges us

toward “conscientization,” asking, “are we not stewards” (89)?

Reminders of structural impediments created by classist societies beg for more than personal tithing alone. Tizon suggests there is a need for organizational tithing. Perhaps this could be considered as a form of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Other faith-based literature has pointed us in the direction of CSR, and even toward socially responsible investing. Amy Domini speaks to social investors’ commitment to community development, and the positive impact corporate behavior can have on disadvantaged communities. Domini reminds us that shareholders can “raise issues in a formal, structured way through the annual meeting of the corporation” (Domini 2001, 88).

Tizon’s reminders harken back to those who have gone before, reminding us to find ways to remove structural barriers in society that keep us from achieving true solidarity with the poor. Bringing the world’s economically poor into full communion and citizenship with the world’s economically rich will depend not only on our personal commitments to change, but also on organizational commitments to change. Decolonization means making structural progress toward solidarity with poor.

Tizon gives Christian development practitioners impetus to reflect personally and to envision new possibilities brought about by working toward decolonization through overcoming the inherent racism and classism that have invaded our modern psyches. What did Jesus teach? Tizon argues that it is all about love in action. As he says, “We must be careful to use our education to advance Jesus’s agenda among the poor and oppressed and to steer clear of advancing ourselves up the social ladder of prestige, power and wealth” (38). Tizon’s book points us all, and perhaps especially those working in development, toward a spiritual pathway of real and lasting change.

References

- Domini, Amy. 2001. *Socially Responsible Investing: Making a Difference and Making Money*. Dearborn Trade, a Kaplan Professional Company.
- de Graaf, John, David Wann, Thomas H. Naylor, and Annie Leonard Affluenza. 2014. *How Overconsumption Is Killing Us—and How to Fight Back*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

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