

A review of *Hero for Christ* by Christopher Sunami

Modern Christian literature has often been divided into two categories. The first is called inspirational; they can meditate on verses, talk about personality traits, and offer advice. The other category does not possess a specific name, but is written by academics and includes topics such as comparative religion, theology, and history. Typically the two categories have diverged not only in style, but also in political/theological outlook. Inspirational literature tends to be affiliated with the more conservative denominations of Christianity, while the academic books tend to be more progressive. *Hero for Christ* presents itself as a devotional book, and yet conveys a message that emphasises the teachings of Jesus that are often neglected in Christianity today. In a way it is very unique; it borrows from both categories of Christian literature and combines to form an inspiring, thought-provoking, and authentic work.

The format of the book is quite simple. It talks about thirty Christian principles by starting each chapter with a bible quote, a few paragraphs of elaboration, some examples of these principles being exercised by twenty two world changing Christians, and ends with a short prayer. The entire book is brimming with Jesus material, which offers an insight into the author's intentions. The opening quotations always come from the Gospels; the paragraphs of elaboration often include parables or situations with Jesus, and the ending prayers are mostly inspired by passages from the Gospels. Each real world example of the principle in action ends with a quote from the person. The amount of care and research that obviously went into these quotes displays the book's thoughtfulness towards history, and is another way that the book manages to swim upstream against the myriad of other devotional books that are available. Overall, *Hero for Christ* is to be commended for its style and structure. Even those with the shortest of attention spans can pick up this book and read only a few pages, and the content is uncomplicated enough to be understood by younger readers.

The list of twenty two Christians that were used in the book is mostly filled with amazing and inspirational people, but does include a couple of odd choices. I don't imagine the book would be any worse off if Thomas Aquinas, C.S. Lewis, and "Martha and Mary" were excluded. Furthermore, a book like this is really begging for the inclusion of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Francis of Assisi. Still, the giants of Christian social change are here; including Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, and William Wilberforce. It also contained a few surprises that I have never heard of before, including Toyohiko Kagawa, Oscar Romero, Sundar Singh, and Geoffrey Griffin. Hearing about the lives that these people led was a very moving experience. Many of Chris' world changing Christians lived a life among the poor, despite the fact they grew up in comfort. Their ability to minister to the least of their brethren, maximise whatever resources they possessed for the benefit of the poor around them, and see Jesus in the suffering of others was truly remarkable.

In addition to teaching me about new people, I am indebted to the book for granting me a better understanding of Martin Luther King Jr. and Mother Teresa. As you read through the book, stories of

how MLK achieved breakdowns in segregation through non-violent resistance, and influenced the Democratic Presidents Kennedy and Johnson were captivating. The quotes at the end greatly enhanced the experience, and gave a first-person insight into his thought process. Additionally, the stories of Mother Teresa's compassion and determination boggled the mind. The way that the book documented the development of Geoffrey Griffin's school for destitute boys in Kenya was another highlight, as was stories of Sundar Singh and Toyohiko Kagawa's pacifism and radical forgiveness.

The last forty five pages are devoted to profiling the twenty two Christians featured in the book, giving them two pages each. The large illustrations are well done, but by taking up a full page it only leaves space for the briefest of biographical sketches. I couldn't help but feel this space could be used for something more, especially since the information in this section can be easily obtained from a place like wikipedia. Perhaps the illustrations could have been scaled back to allow for more information, or the amount of pages extended, or the space be devoted entirely to one specific aspect (i.e. what was their practical effect on the world?). Nevertheless, it is well-written and also provides an index to where the specific person was discussed elsewhere in the book.

From what I have said so far, it is clear that this book is an excellent *tool*; a gateway into the lives and minds of amazing people who sought to imitate Jesus. It is more than that though. It has a *soul*, and the soul is its vociferous attempt to communicate the teachings of Jesus, many of which this generation of Christianity has ignored. In my opinion, it is this essence to the book that sets it apart from many other devotional tools. The difference in tone is immediately apparent from the introduction. While explaining the urgent need for Christian heroes, Chris mentions the dangers of increased weaponisation, global warming, and poverty.¹ It continues with a summary of the present state of Christendom; hollowed out from the inside by people who more often than not stand in antithesis to the message of Jesus.

Running through the book is a love for peaceful social change and social justice. As we have seen, many of the world changing Christians chosen by Chris embraced Christian pacifism, considered serving the poor their greatest responsibility, and were highly political. The book implores its readers to re-examine any churches defence of the status quo and to take stances on political issues that reflect the moral teachings of Jesus. A brief scan of the chapter headings reveal the agenda of *Hero for Christ*; "Put faith above Religion", "Live your Faith", "Serve the Least", "Be Inclusive", "Do Not Resist Evil Persons", "Love Generously", "Turn the Other Cheek", "Reframe the Conflict", and lastly "Forgive your Enemies." Also refreshing is the fact that while he is criticising mainstream Christianity² it is not Chris' goal to make a sharp polemic or wound the people responsible. Rather, he is trying to encourage readers to put their relationship with God and understanding of Jesus' message of love above and against Christian support for unchristian principles.

I must emphasise that the message of Jesus is something we all equally need to hear. Appropriately, the purpose of this book is not to criticise other Christians, but to make every one of us a better person

¹ Not promiscuity, Arab terrorism, and big Government.

² As well as the introduction, an example can be found in p.36-37

through the example set by Jesus and copied through some of his followers. If Chris intended to have a key chapter, I would have to guess that it is Chapter 11, “Serve the Least.” It begins with what would have to be the most forgotten, yet most remarkable, parable ever spoken by Jesus.³ If Jesus is right that at the Last Judgement the sole criterion on which we will be judged is how we helped the poorest in the world, then it would be surprising if it wasn’t the key chapter of every book. It is so simple, so black and white, for Jesus. The chapter features one of the best stories from Mother Teresa, which I will partly quote:

“Mother Teresa once discovered one of her novice nuns attending to a man in the care of the order. Because of the man’s open wounds stank and oozed pus, the nun tried to clean them from a distance. Taking the man’s care into her own hands, Mother Teresa scolded the nun, telling her to realize that in taking care of the man, she was taking care of Jesus himself.”⁴

I have never heard the essence of that parable expressed so well. The needy and the suffering embody Christ. When we know of someone suffering, we should see Jesus, and treat them accordingly. As Toyohiko Kagawa is quoted in the end of the chapter, “God dwells among the lowliest of men. He sits on the dust heap among the prison convicts. He is with the juvenile delinquents. He stands at the door begging bread. He throngs with beggars at the place of alms. He is among the sick, and with the unemployed in front of the free employment bureau.”⁵ At this point in the book my opinion of it changed from an excellent devotional tool into a mouthpiece for the beautiful and forgotten message of Jesus.

Great examples can be found throughout the book. A refreshing interpretation of Matthew 7:3-5 can be found in Chapter 7. Chapter 8 encouragingly explores the necessity to forgive ourselves to move forward in life. In Chapter 17 Chris links the parable of the farmer who had plenty and the parable of the three servants entrusted with money with environmental responsibility. He succeeds at what many have tried to do; argue that the exploitation of the environment is contrary to the message of Jesus. Chapter 23 uses the example of Peter and his visions of unclean food to explain how open-mindedness is necessary to properly serve God. Chapter 25, devoted to not resisting evil, is exquisite. Chapter 28 focuses on the idea of turning the other cheek, and rather than saying “well, it doesn’t really make sense, but Jesus did say it, so we have to do it” Chris convincingly explains how it most often leads to very positive outcomes. It also excellently profiles how Martin Luther King Jr. used non-violence to further his goals, and in the words of Sun Tzu achieve “supreme excellence” by subduing his enemy without fighting. Finally, within Chapter 30 is a brief yet provocative paragraph on the evil of capital punishment.⁶

³ Matthew 25:31-46

⁴ Christopher Sunami, *Hero for Christ*, p.76

⁵ Toyohiko Kagawa, *A Seed Shall Serve*, quoted in *Hero for Christ* p.80

⁶ “When we execute a murderer, we often believe we are destroying evil. The opposite, however, is true. Although we may be killing the person who housed the evil and gave it form, we are providing another home for that same evil in our own hearts and souls. We murder people on behalf of the state, and in so doing we become evil’s new host” (Sunami, *Hero for Christ*, p.192-193)

One chapter which was slightly confusing was 27, “Refuse your Adversary’s Gifts.” I can certainly see how an adversary’s gift *could* be a negative thing if it used by them as a temptation or a means to put you into their debt. However, it is not adequately explained why an adversary’s gift should be rejected by default, even if it was being used for reconciliation between the two parties. The historical example of Oscar Romero further confuses the matter by saying that he even rejected the gifts of his friends. I’m not certain if Chris is trying to imply that rejecting all gifts is even better than rejecting only your adversary’s. The chapter also makes mention of how Oscar Romero yelled at two ladies who were trying to make his room more comfortable, and how Thomas Aquinas chased a prostitute out of his room with a torch! The latter was especially unsettling, when you consider how the prostitute was fleeing out of a fear of being burnt to death by Aquinas. Nevertheless, it is true that an adversary’s gift can often be used to tempt us to compromise on our ideals. In the end, it is one chapter out of thirty, and only a very minor criticism.

Hero for Christ is well worth your time and concentration. Christopher Sunami wrote well considering how much material he had to fit within 250 pages, and it is clear that his larger and more academic books would be just as captivating. Not only will *Hero for Christ* inspire you in the journey of imitating Jesus, but it will also teach you new things about yourself and the twenty two remarkable Christians it discusses.

By Timothy Neal