

Ronald J. Sider. *I am Not a Social Activist: Making Jesus the Agenda*. Waterloo: Herald Press, 2008.

This book is a selection of 44 columns written by Ronald Sider for Evangelicals for Social Action's *Prism* magazine, of which he is the publisher. They are undated but appeared between 1993 and 2007. The columns cover a variety of topics, but the repeated message is a call to live in ways that are faithful to Jesus and the Scriptures.

Sider addresses the book's surprising title by saying, "I'm not a social activist. I'm a disciple of Jesus Christ, the Savior and Lord of the universe" (21). For him the greatest question is "How can I live more like Jesus?" (14). Thus his motive for social activism is faithfulness to Christ, and although social change from our actions may come slowly, if at all, we can be confident that "the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our risen Lord" (19). As Myron Augsburger says in his foreword to the book, Sider "holds together evangelism and social responsibility" (11). His evangelicalism promotes not merely a private personal relationship with God but also a transformed society and creation.

Sider passionately urges the church to resist the seduction of surrounding cultures and the forsaking of biblical norms for sexuality, justice, and enemy-loving. He just as passionately urges the church to advocate for the poor, racial justice, women, peace, the civil rights of gays and lesbians, and the environment. Sider eschews the political labels of right and left, and urges Christians to unite in a common political agenda. One step in this direction was the adoption in 2004 of the statement "For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility" by the National Association of Evangelicals in the United States. Another step was taken in 2006 as five families of Christians (Catholic, evangelical, mainline Protestant, Orthodox, and African-American) launched a new ecumenical organization in the US called Christian Churches Together to strengthen their mutual understanding and common public witness.

As with his books on peacemaking, in three essays on this topic Sider asks the vast majority of Christians who espouse a "just war" theology whether war was indeed the "last resort." He gives several examples of nonviolent alternatives having succeeded despite the church's hesitation to

embrace this approach in any substantial way. Jesus taught his followers not to kill, and his final word is resurrection. Sider therefore challenges the church “to live what we preach” (178) by serious training and deployment for nonviolent peacemaking.

On a more personal note, Sider writes tenderly about his family, particularly his devotion to his wife, the dying days of his father, and the birth of his first grandchild. In a world of pain and misery, there are still hundreds of millions of spouses who love each other and parents who love their children just as the Creator of the galaxies loves us. The author sees a conflict between stable families and individual freedoms, and says “we must transcend both conservative patriarchy and individualistic feminism” (55) and “self-centered male irresponsibility” (57). More marriages based on self-sacrifice plus self-fulfillment would be an inspiration to the world.

Sider also reflects on the runaway success of his 1977 book, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*. It began with a sermon idea for a “graduated tithe,” which begins at 10 percent of income, and the percentage tithe grows as one’s income grows. The book eventually sold 400,000 copies in nine languages and became integral to his public identity. Yet, in a chapter entitled “They’re Still Hungry; We’re Still Rich,” he both expresses gratitude for the book’s success and prays personally for “the grace to live faithfully to whatever in the book is biblical and true” (155).

This book is an engaging mix of short essays on a variety of contemporary topics, consistent with Sider’s earlier books on these topics, and suitable for individual browsing or group discussion. While the author claims in the book’s title that he is not a social activist, he has devoted this book and his life to calling the church, and evangelicals in particular, to more social action in order to transform the world in biblical ways.

*Doug Pritchard*, Co-Director, Christian Peacemaker Teams, Toronto, ON