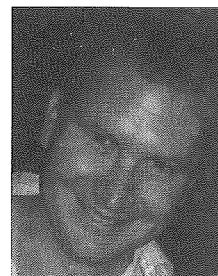


Total Church • A radical reshaping around gospel and community



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The adage to never judge a book by its cover is very true in the case of *Total Church*. While from the outside it might look a little like a 1974 DIY manual, on the inside it is a very 21st century call to Christians to live out the reality of the gospel. Authors Tim Chester and Steve Timmis write not only from their experience of church (The Crowded House—a network of mainly home congregations in northern England) but also from a strong biblical and evangelical standpoint. The work is a warming collaboration of principle and practice. The book is divided into two sections: the first on the principle of gospel and community; the second (and significantly longer) on the practice of gospel and community. The heart of their thesis is this: that Christian practice must be both gospel centered and community centered. Practically, this gospel centeredness is shown in a focus on the word and on mission. The distinction they draw between gospel and community, while important, felt a little forced. For example, after an excellent overview of salvation history to show how God creates and rules by his word, they then turn to address 'community centeredness' as a separate issue. And yet they are clear that this community is created by, and ruled over, by the word. The intention, however, is sound—we cannot be either 'word' Christians or 'community' Christians—to be Christian is to be both.

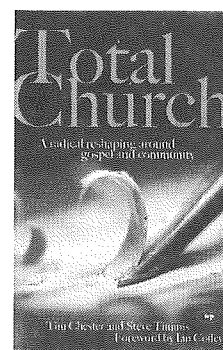
The second part of the book—gospel and community in practice—addresses eleven areas of ministry (such as evangelism, social involvement, world mission, discipleship and training, spirituality, and others) that are impacted by this focus on gospel and community. Some chapters are stronger than others (the chapter on apologetics is alone worth the price of the book), but all retain a focus on showing how the principles espoused in the first part gain traction in the real world of ministry. It's here where the book seems to show its purpose most clearly—seeking to call Christians away from an either/or view of issues and towards a more holistic understanding of the Christian life. For example, it is not either evangelism or social involvement, but both at the same time. And both must be word centered and grounded in a community of believers. In the same vein, the authors promote a view of the Christian life which impacts all of our

lives—not just 10–11:30am on a Sunday with a Wednesday evening Bible Study for the 'keen ones'. This view grounds our Christian lives not only in our relationship with God through Christ, but also in our relationships with others who have been gathered to God by his word.

Total Church has some wonderful strengths. The degree of biblical interaction and theological thought permeates not only the first part on 'principle' but the whole book. Practice is never divorced from theology, and this theology is never dry because it is grounded in the overarching plan of God's saving work in Christ. This salvation history approach also pushes the reader away from 'me' to 'we'. There is an explicit focus on the book that community is at the heart of what God is doing in the world—a welcome reminder in a very me-centered and individualistic world. It's refreshing to read a book which is quite happy to address disputed theological issues clearly and simply. Modern views on spirituality are identified and assessed in light of Scripture (they don't fare very well!); the often over-exaggerated division between word and spirit is fairly and helpfully dealt with; and Francis of Assisi's 'preach the gospel always, if necessary using words' soundbite is examined, and found wanting in light of the gospel. Very helpfully *Total Church* gives a picture of church, grounded in Scripture, which is seen not as a means to an end, but as an end in and of itself. Addressing the *Missio Dei* (the mission of God) the authors trace historically the development of the term, and how it has strayed from its original use. They call the church community to see itself not as pointing to something else that God is doing in the world, but as the heart of what God is doing in the world, as the word of God draws people into community with himself and his people.

Total Church is not without its concerns. It would be easy to walk away from this book discouraged with your own church, or worse, to feel that because your local church doesn't have the sort of community described that it somehow falls short of being a 'real' church. The authors seek in places to alleviate such feelings, but they themselves perpetuate the idea—to the point of stating that a large church in which one of their friends experienced no community was, according to any New Testament definition,

The Revd Dave Clancey



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not a church but a preaching centre. This is only one of a number of barbs made at 'large' well-known 'evangelical' churches, and it's difficult to shake the feeling that the authors have a particular desire to criticize those who seek to do faithful, biblical ministry in a way different to themselves.

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"Total Church finishes with a call to love God. Strategies, plans, structures and the like count for nothing if Christians do not first love God. To this no Christian can utter anything other than a hearty 'Amen'. The authors seek to show how they live out this love for God and for neighbour in a way which is faithful to Scripture, and if the book gives us nothing else (and it certainly does give us more, much more), their desire to do this warms the heart and spurs us on to do the same in the contexts and churches we find ourselves."

The great emphasis on community runs the risk of overlooking the individual, and the importance on individual response to Christ, repentance and faith. This emphasis also made me wonder how an introvert would fare in this kind of church. Practically, the type of community described lends itself to urban and suburban areas—the application of some of the principles to rural communities would require some thought and adaptation. And in a couple of places the authors pursued lines of thought in a dogmatic fashion where a more nuanced view would have been helpful (such as clergy days off and the place of seeking professional counselling and physiological help).

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