

STEVE CHALKE'S LOST MESSAGE: Part 1

The Lost Message of Jesus by Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, and its significance for today.
P. Thackway

This book has featured in the evangelical world for a while now. Hardly a Christian magazine, newspaper, organisation, online discussion forum, preacher or individual Christian has not had something to say about it – for, against, or on the fence. The fact that we take it up in our magazine is hardly from a desire not to be left out. Rather, I want us to look at this book in the wider context of evangelicalism today, and highlight some of the things it is saying to us.

Its main author, Steve Chalke, 48, has an impressive evangelical record. He was ordained a Baptist Minister in 1981, having studied at Spurgeon's College in London, and then served as a minister for four years. In 1985 he set up the Oasis Trust (OT), an organisation that now has 300 staff, students and volunteers. It pioneers mission, healthcare, education and housing initiatives in the UK and abroad. Additionally, OT works closely with Youth for Christ, the Salvation Army, and Youthwork Magazine. It is also the founding partner of Faithworks, which aims to help individuals and churches get fully involved in their communities for the Gospel.

Added to these, there is Oasis Media, Parentalk, exalt.co.uk, his own television series for ITV and BBC as well as a regular show on Radio 4. Steve Chalke is also the senior minister of Christ Church and Upton, Waterloo, London. He is also a keynote speaker at the Spring Harvest/Word Alive conferences and a prominent member of the Evangelical Alliance. Currently, his OT is planning to open a new faith-based academy school in Enfield, North London. Chalke was awarded an MBE in the 2004 New Year's Honours List for his services to social inclusion.

The book in question is a paperback of 204 pages, published in 2003 by Zondervan, in association with OT and Faithworks. Its joint-author, Alan Mann, is a researcher and writer in contemporary Christianity and culture. His role in the book is more minor, and so his name appears in smaller typeface than Steve Chalke's.

The most notorious aspect of *The Lost Message* is its denial of penal substitutionary atonement:

“The fact is that the cross isn't a form of cosmic child abuse – a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed ... The truth is, the cross is a symbol of love. It is a demonstration of just how far God as Father and Jesus as Son are prepared to go to prove that love” (pages 182,183).

Certainly this is desperately serious, but it is not the only issue the book raises. Let us step back a little and review it as a whole. The book, its perspective, and the reactions of the evangelical world, all have important things to say to us today.

1. The book is propounding nothing new.

The Lost Message of Jesus claims we have left the authentic gospel and replaced it with one that makes Church “a barren and unfulfilling experience, which fails to address, let alone answer, life’s deepest questions and concerns ... when (people) apply the formulated message proclaimed by so many preachers and evangelists to the tough realities of day-to-day life, they become disillusioned” (pages 13,14). There is therefore the need to “rediscover (the) joined-up, seamless message of Jesus” (page 15). According to Chalke, this can be summed up as Jesus saying: “The Kingdom, the in-breaking shalom of God, is available now to everyone through me” (page 16).

This is ground that has been trodden before. A German scholar named Hermann Reimarus (1694-1768), a Deist, is considered the forerunner of this search for “the historical Jesus” and His message. Others followed, but probably the best-known is Albert Schweitzer’s *Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1909). These were decidedly liberal and have largely passed out of fashion, as these things tend to do.

There are, though, contemporary scholars who hold a modified form of the historical quest. One example is the Bishop of Durham, N.T. Wright in his book *Jesus and the Victory of God* (SPCK, 1996). In fact at www.bible.org there is an article entitled “A Survey of Historical Jesus Studies: From Reimarus to Wright.” He is better known for his controversial New Perspective on Paul and the doctrine of justification, but in the Preface of a later book, *Who Was Jesus* (SPCK, 2005), Wright explains,

“My own understanding of Jesus, and hence of Christianity, has been deeply and profoundly affected by my historical study. Whatever else is the case about my beliefs and my scholarship, it is certainly not true that I have ‘found’ a ‘Jesus’ who has merely reinforced the belief-system I had before the process began. The closer I get to Jesus within his historical context, the more I find my previous ideas, and indeed my previous self, radically subverted.”

If this “new perspective” sounds similar to Steve Chalke’s, it is because the latter has been influenced by Wright. In his Acknowledgements page of *The Lost Message*, Chalke says: “Our appreciation also goes to N.T. (Tom) Wright for his time and considerable theological wisdom,” and Wright in turn enthuses: “Steve Chalke’s new book is rooted in good scholarship, but its clear, punchy style makes it accessible to anyone and everyone. Its message is stark and exciting: Jesus of Nazareth was far more challenging in his own day, and remains far more relevant to ours, than the church has dared to believe, let alone preach.” Other references to Wright appear throughout the book (e.g. pages 75,107,116,177).

The book, then, presents in popular style an approach that has come and gone over the centuries, and is being revived today. But it is a world away from the Gospel of Christ, the apostles, church Fathers, Reformers, Puritans and all today who “continue in the faith” (Acts 14:22). As one “Amazon” reviewer aptly put it: “The ‘message of Jesus’ that he is promoting is a departure from the ‘good news about Jesus’ that mainstream Bible-believing Christians

have held to for two thousand years. It reads very much like a popularised 21st century brand of worn-out 19th century liberalism.”

2. The closer we look at the book the worse it gets.

Much has been made of Chalke’s denial of penal substitutionary atonement. This, however, belongs to something wider. The Cross is the heart of the gospel, and men go wrong here because they are already wrong elsewhere. To speak medically, if the one cure for a deadly illness is not given, it is because the patient is not believed to be critically ill.

The argument of the book bears this out. Chalke reinterprets virtually all the major doctrines of the historic faith. The doctrine of God is summed up this way: “...however else God may have revealed himself, and in whatever way he interacts with the world he created, everything is to be tempered, interpreted, understood and seen through the one, primary lens of God’s love” (page 63). This is the typically liberal God of love pitted against other truths revealed about Him in scripture, such as 1 John 1:5 “God is light and in him is no darkness at all.”

According to Martin Downes, for Chalke, “Even texts that speak of God’s holiness should be understood as portraying the love that makes God different rather than his sinless purity and ‘otherness’” (pages 58,59). “But” (says this reviewer) “both Testaments affirm that God is a consuming fire (Deuteronomy 4:24; Hebrews 12:29), and dwells in unapproachable light (1 Timothy 6:16). The sight of God’s holiness filled Isaiah with dread and made him conscious of his guilt (Isaiah 6:1-5)... This confusion of God’s attributes of holiness and love is not just a basic error; it appears to be an intentional misrepresentation to serve his own agenda” (Review on Banner of Truth web site).

The doctrine of sin is also re-jigged to fit the book’s thesis: “While we have spent centuries arguing over the doctrine of *original sin*, pouring over the Bible and huge theological tomes to prove the inherent sinfulness of all humankind, we have missed a startling point: Jesus believed in *original goodness!* ... And it’s this original goodness that Jesus seeks out in us.” To show how fallacious this statement is, we need look no further than our Lord’s words in Matthew 15:19 “For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: these are the things which defile a man.”

Consider also Chalke’s view of the Person of Christ. Throughout the book he is always “Jesus,” and is someone who “struggled” to get people to understand his message” and was “trying” to make them see God’s love constraining him (page 31). “In applying the title ‘Messiah’ to himself,” maintains Chalke, “(he) wasn’t claiming to be divine. He was simply declaring that he was God’s agent for change” (page 75). This comes dangerously close to heresy. The promised Messiah was divine (Isaiah 9:6; Jeremiah 23:5,6; Micah 5:2), and Peter’s confession (Matthew 16:16) and the High Priest’s interrogation confirm this (Matthew 26:63).

Chalke's understanding of Christ's *real* message is deeply flawed. The "revolutionary heart" of it is, "God accepts us as we are, without judgment or condemnation, and gradually, through his love and acceptance, draws us ever closer to understanding and living out his shalom in our lives. In other words, acceptance precedes repentance – not the other way around" (page 99). Chalke can say this in spite of our Lord saying "this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world and men loved darkness rather than light" (John 3:19; cf 3:36) and His message beginning "Repent, ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2). This is clearly "another Jesus (and) another gospel" (2 Corinthians 11:4).

No wonder, then, that when Chalke's "message of Jesus" comes to the cross it is furthest away from the truth. There is no sinless Substitute bearing our sins and God's wrath because God's holiness and justice, human sin, and the Person of Christ have been explained away. Despite crystal-clear penal substitution in the typical sacrifices (Leviticus 4:1—6:7), the prophecies of their fulfilment (Isaiah 53:4–10; Zechariah 13:7), the explicit words of our Lord (Mark 10:45) and the inspired words of His apostles (Romans 3:25; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 1:4; Ephesians 5:2; Hebrews 9:14,28; 1 Peter 3:18; 1 John 2:2; 3:16; 4:10), nonetheless he can say "... when (Jesus) suffered on the cross – he absorbed all the pain, all the suffering caused by the breakdown in our relationship with God and in doing so demonstrated the lengths to which a God who is love will go to restore it" (page 181).

Can there be anything worse than this vacuous denial of the "glorious gospel of the blessed God"? (1 Timothy 1:11). Contrast it with the words of the Puritan William Bridge, which capture the biblical and historic truth: "When the Lord Jesus Christ offered up Himself a sacrifice unto God the Father, and had our sins laid upon Him, He did give more perfect satisfaction unto Divine justice for our sins than if you, and I, and all of us had been damned in hell unto all eternity. For a creditor is more satisfied if his debt be paid him all down at once, than if it be paid by the week." All sincere Christians, whose hearts are exercised about their corruption, vileness and guilt, will say "Amen" to that. What is there for a condemned and hell-deserving sinner in Steve Chalke's "message" of the cross? For a more detailed statement of penal substitution, see the next article by Malcolm Watts.

3. This says a lot about Steve Chalke himself.

From other remarks in the book, it would appear that he once held the orthodox belief but does so no longer. "We have developed a 'them' and 'us' culture with two distinct categories – saints and sinners, ins and outs, saved and unsaved" (page 140) he complains. "Isn't it heart-breaking," he protests, "that the only way we can unlock the Christian life is by making people feel guilty?" (page 174).

Again, coming to the heart of the gospel, and the cry of dereliction (Matthew 27:46): "As Jesus takes on to himself the fullness of the world's sin, his sight becomes unbearable for a pure and holy God. *I used to preach this way myself*" he recalls (page 184, italics mine). However, then comes the revealing interpretation: "In truth, Jesus' cry of abandonment mirrors those of countless millions of people who suffer oppression, enslavement, abuse, disease, poverty, starvation and violence: If God is really love, then where is he? Why has he

abandoned me? Why do I feel so alone? However, while suffering may cause us to believe that God has abandoned us, the reality is that he is always right there with us, in the suffering" (page 185). As two reviewers have aptly put it, "In other words, the cross is no more than Jesus identifying with our suffering, sharing in the pathos of it. It is difficult to see how this helps us anymore than my injecting myself with the HIV virus would improve the lot of a friend who has AIDS" (Andrew Sach & Mike Ovey, *Evangelicals Now*, June 2004).

This, then, is Steve Chalke's "gospel." It is not the message of redeeming love reaching down to save lost sinners – rather, it is merely its identification with the world's suffering. This theme reappears anecdotally on pages 183,184, citing the hanging of a boy in the Nazi camp of Birkenau, reception centre for Auschwitz. In fact, anecdotes feature largely in his interpretation of biblical truth, sometimes turning it completely on its head. On pages 58,59 he cites his Sunday school teacher's orthodox lesson on God's words to Moses, "Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live" (Exodus 33:20). The older Steve Chalke now is "convinced ... that my teacher missed the point." How is this? Visiting a home in Thailand for unwanted children, "I remember leaving the hospital, sitting in a car outside, and praying, 'Lord, please let me die. I can't live anymore with the pain of what I've seen.' I truly felt as if I couldn't go on with the knowledge that such suffering existed in the world." Now he believes that the reason why we cannot see God's face and live is because "all the suffering that has ever taken place has been etched to his face."

Chalke's abandonment of the gospel emerges also in the authors he chooses to quote. Most are liberals or heretics, with only a few coming anywhere near being conservative: C.S. Lewis, David Watson and John Stott. The other authors include Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Albert Schweitzer, Leslie Newbigin (also a friend of Tom Wright) and Desmond Tutu. Of authors whom we would expect to see, the only two are Augustine of Hippo and Jonathan Edwards, and both are criticised for their teaching on sin and sinners, Edwards' *Sinners in the hands of an Angry God* sermon coming in for special scorn (pages 55,56). C.H. Spurgeon is quoted once, but not for anything that would disturb the book's anti-evangelical thesis (page 36). It is ironic to quote Spurgeon, as he in his generation provided more social relief than Chalke ever will, and yet he was motivated by the very gospel that Chalke has rejected.

Tragically, this book says more about its author than about a message we supposedly need to recover. Similar denials of truth have come from Steve Chalke in the past. When asked about the difference between the Roman Catholic Mass and the Communion Service, he is reported as saying that the Mass was just a more colourful form of the Communion Service. More recently, when his OT planned to open one of the faith-based academy schools he said that it would not teach the creationist view of the world: "My personal belief is that ... those who wish to read into Genesis chapter one that God made the world in six days ... are not being honest and scholarly. It won't be taught in the school because I think it's rubbish. It's a bizarre thing to claim the Bible suggests that. Genesis is saying that behind creation is a good God" – another foundation truth explained away.

We have to ask the solemn question: In denying penal substitutionary atonement (and the related doctrines) can Steve Chalke be a Christian at all? It is not for us to judge his heart, but the apostle's warning is clear:

"But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed" Galatians 1:8,9.

And according to John, those who teach unorthodox doctrine about Christ are "antichrists," "not of us," "a liar," "hath not the Father," "are of the world: therefore speak they of the world, and the world heareth them" and we must "receive him into your house, neither bid him God speed," lest we become "partaker of his evil deeds" (1 John 2:18,19,22,23; 4:5; 2 John 10,11).

"Such as are not settled in religion," wrote Thomas Watson, "will, at one time or other, prove wandering stars; they will lose their former steadfastness, and wander from one opinion to another ... These are not pillars in the temple of God, but reeds shaken every way. The apostle calls them 'damnable heresies' (2 Peter 2:1). A man may go to hell as well for heresy as adultery." If this applied in Watson's day, how much more so in ours, when the religion of our Puritan forefathers is at such a discount.

Next time, God willing, I want to look at the varied evangelical reactions to the book and what these are telling us. To conclude for now, the words of David H. Linden, of Action International Ministries, are apposite:

"But God will protect His eternal truth. It is safe. What is being lost is not the gospel, but the person who ceases to believe it. God has made a testimony of His Son. He made His soul an offering for sin. Whoever does not agree with that just does not believe God."