

STEVE CHALKE'S LOST MESSAGE: 2

The Lost Message of Jesus by Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, and its significance for today.
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In the last *Quarterly* we reviewed the book with the above title. Our extended critique showed that *The Lost Message* taught nothing new but was the liberal social gospel in a fresh guise. Also, that it was worse because Chalke denied more than substitutionary atonement: he jettisoned almost every related doctrine as well. And that this said more about Steve Chalke than Christ's message *it is not lost, but we fear the book's author is.*

Had it not been for its caricature of penal substitution, the book would have been just another popular paperback. However, its notoriety was sealed when it disdained this doctrine, and even blamed it for putting people off Christianity: "Somehow the liberating message of Jesus has been lost. Many have understood the gospel as 'God's got a big stick and he's on your case.' But what kind of message is that for the single parent struggling to bring up her child with inadequate resources?" (page 42). And, quoting John 3:16,

"...how then, have we come to believe that at the cross this God of love suddenly decides to vent his anger and wrath on his own Son? 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. Understandably, both people inside and outside of the Church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith" (page 182).

Chalke alleges that our supposed failings are because we have historically propounded a penal substitution gospel! The implication is clear: recover the "lost message" (the gospel according to Chalke) and we return to real Christianity and a Church that is vibrant, relevant, and listened to again.

Evangelicalism could not possibly ignore this impudent attack. First taken aback, individuals, churches and organisations have now reacted. Moreover, what they have said and done have proved revealing. In this concluding article, I want to examine some of these responses and discover what they are saying to us about the current evangelical scene in the UK.

1. Individual reactions to *The Lost Message* exhibit an alarming drift from the gospel.

We would expect many good Christians to rise in holy indignation against this repudiation of vital doctrine. That they have done so is a cause for thankfulness. Many good critiques of the book have come forth although not as many detailed theological rebuttals as we would have liked. All the same, a shaken Steve Chalke complains, "I have been branded 'a heretic', 'a false teacher', accused of 'abandoning the faith' and of 'peddling a modern and inadequate gospel'. Others have called for my book to be banned and have even withdrawn their support for my work. Why? Well, at the centre of it all, in the words of one of my critics, I have 'the wrong view of the cross'" (Article *Redeeming the Cross* on oasis trust web site).

However, much more significant and worrying are the numbers of people who evidently agree with Steve Chalke. On the same web site (www.oasistrust.org), positive and even enthusiastic endorsements of *The Lost Message* appear. For instance,

“Just read the book by Steve – the lost message of Jesus – excellent, excellent book.”

“I am a pastor of a new church outside of New York City. We are an artscentred church trying to tell folks about Jesus in a new kind of way ... your book ... has been a real encouragement to me and an affirmation of much of what I have felt and thought for quite some time. Thanks for putting it all in words! I Trust NT Wright’s [endorsement] whose writing has been influential in my life...”

“Couldn’t put it down until the last page ... so many things explained that I couldn’t make sense of ... have questions which will come later. God bless the authors and the message...”

“Please thank Steve for a great and courageous book ... It is a necessary challenge to today’s church ... This understanding of the cross is much better than thinking of Jesus as paying some debt to an alienated God, who needs to be talked into loving us.”

“It saddens me that such a simple thing as a restatement of the good news of the kingdom can cause such polarisation ... It is my prayer that the debate which has begun will result in the reawakening of the UK church to the great richness and vitality of the faith which it sometimes appears to have forgotten.”

“I cannot begin to tell you how helpful I found this book I thought it was brilliant. What an impact on our country if our Clergy and their Congregations could all read it! It is written in an easy to understand style and yet it makes the Gospel accounts of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ come alive in a refreshing and dynamic way.”

This is a tiny sampling of the approval Chalke clearly enjoys. Before these, the book carried glowing endorsements inside it and on the front and back covers. That it should attract such fulsome words from Biblebelieving Christians is deplorable. It reveals how little doctrinal discernment exists among those whose label “evangelical” affirms them lovers of the gospel. We are entitled to expect that this denial of biblical and historic truth would be *universally* condemned: “in doctrine shewing uncorruptness” ... “Hold fast the form of sound words” “that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints” (Titus 2:7; 2 Timothy 1:13; Jude verse 3). The fact that in so many quarters it is welcomed opens an alarming window upon the modern evangelical scene.

2. The book has found much of organised evangelicalism wanting.

Steve Chalke is a prominent member of the Evangelical Alliance (EA). Founded in 1846, this group represents more than one million evangelical Christians in the UK, and is made up of member churches, organisations and individuals. The furore over Chalke’s views caused its General Director, Joel Edwards, to convene a public meeting in October last year. Held in London, around 700 people attended this debate. On Chalke’s side was Stuart Murray

Williams (Anabaptist Network). Defending penal substitution were Simon Gathercole (Aberdeen University) and Anna Robbins (London School of Theology, formerly London Bible College). Chalke's supporters were there, as were his detractors. Following the presentations, about fifty-eight questions were asked and answered.

The outcome, however, was not definitive. What seemed to matter more was the ambiguity in the EA's Basis of Faith regarding penal substitution. Joel Edwards, in closing the debate, confirmed that the Basis of Faith *inferred* penal substitution. However, the relevant wording is not explicit:

"The universal sinfulness and guilt of fallen man, making him subject to God's wrath and condemnation.

The substitutionary sacrifice of the incarnate Son of God as the sole all-sufficient ground of redemption from the guilt and power of sin, and from its eternal consequences."

This has allowed unorthodox views like Chalke's, for he accepts substitutionary atonement but not *penal* substitutionary atonement. Early this year, however, the EA published a revised Basis of Faith to "define(s) the Alliance's core convictions ... and (it) says a good deal more about God's love and justice as well. It is expressed in clear and precise terms suited to the Alliance's ministry and mission in the 21st Century."

Although not stated, EA also intended this to clarify its position on penal substitution, post Steve Chalke. It was a fine opportunity to tighten up reference to the atonement accordingly. However, the relevant wording now reads:

"The atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross: dying in our place, paying the price of sin and defeating evil, so reconciling us with God."

If this expresses penal substitution then Steve Chalke must be pleased. Perhaps they think that the phrase "paying the price of sin" does so in all but name. Nevertheless, omitting the actual words will leave it as open to interpretation as before, for "price" does not carry the same meaning as "penalty." Yet the Chairman of the EA's Council, Derek Tidball, commended the new text: "It is a real improvement. It elegantly expresses the essentials of Evangelical faith, and defines clearly what underpins the Alliance's ministry and mission."

This, of course, is a neat concession to Steve Chalke's opponents (apparently tightening up commitment to truth) and to Chalke himself (keeping him and his supporters on board). It is a typical case of the pragmatism that besets evangelicalism these days. Instead of a principled stand for biblical truth, a political solution has been found, someone actually coining the term: "Chalkegate." Like most political solutions, however, this one has not pleased everybody and the controversy rumbles on.

3. It is clear from this that unity matters more than truth.

In December 2004, following the inconclusive debate, Joel Edwards and Steve Chalke issued a joint statement:

"We affirm our love for each other in Christ, and in recognising the very real diversity within the evangelical family ... We ... would invite the whole evangelical family to walk with us in making 'every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace' (Ephesians 4:3)."

Then in the January 2005 issue of *Christianity* magazine, Edwards issued a heartfelt appeal for unity among evangelicals. In this "open letter to both sides of the debate" he paid glowing tribute to Steve Chalke while graciously rejecting his view of the atonement. But he was "equally concerned about those on 'the other side' of the argument." He named organisations and publications who are "conservative" or "reformed" evangelicals, and then urged them to be as loving as they are orthodox,

"If 'conservative' evangelicals built stronger relationships with those with whom they disagreed rather than treating them as doctrinal pariahs, we would all be vastly enriched. But this debate has left me with some very worrying questions. Why the urgent demand for Chalke's exclusion? Where does this motivation come from? Is it from love of the Scriptures, or a need for retribution?"

It is these statements, however, that leave *us* with "very worrying questions." Clearly, charity toward Steve Chalke is being confused with faithful dealing with a false teacher. Scripture commands us to reprove such men, and separate from them, unless and until they are brought to repentance (Romans 16:17,18; 2 Thessalonians 3:6; 2 Timothy 2:25,26; 4:24). Only then charity (which "rejoiceth in the truth") is honourably shown, and biblical truth faithfully maintained. To express solidarity with such men, while also wanting the same with those who *do* contend for the faith, is wanting it both ways. Joel Edwards cannot seem to see it: "This controversy has provoked renewed allegations that the Evangelical Alliance is more concerned with unity than truth. It is a strange idea."

Yet unity between brethren can only be through fidelity to biblical truth (Acts 2:42; 2 John verse 1,2; 3 John verses 3,4; Jude verse 3). Edwards quotes Ephesians 4:3 "the unity of the Spirit" but he forgets that He is "the Spirit of truth" (John 16:13 cf 1 John 4:6). The stark fact is, judged by scripture alone, Chalke and those who stand with him are errorists, and therefore are "the enemies of the cross of Christ" (Philippians 3:18). The EA are trying to do the impossible in placating him and insisting upon unity with those who hold to penal substitution. Spurgeon's words over a century ago ring true now:

"Our solemn conviction is that things are much worse in many churches than they seem to be, and are rapidly tending downward ... A new religion has been initiated, which is no more Christianity than chalk is cheese; and this religion, being destitute of moral honesty, palms itself off as the old faith with slight improvements, and on this plea usurps pulpits which were erected for gospel preaching. The Atonement is scouted ... and yet these enemies of

our faith expect us to call them brethren, and maintain a confederacy with them!" (*The Sword and the Trowel*, August, 1887. "Another Word Concerning the Downgrade").

Such papering over the cracks can never work, and EA probably knows it. Jonathan Stephen perceptively writes: "The inclusivist approach of the Evangelical Alliance ... meant ... that it is ill-placed to redraw the boundaries along biblical lines. It is simply too late to do so now without massive disruption. Any serious attempt in this direction is likely to split the constituency into fragments. That is the unspoken fear of the Evangelical Alliance leadership."

4. In all of this there is a lack of zeal for the truth of God.

The impression we get is that Steve Chalke's position is potentially a valid one, even if not ideally the biblical one nothing worse than that! This relativistic approach to the atonement betrays itself in the language used: "the penal substitutionary model of the atonement" ... "penal substitution has shaped, and continues to inform, Evangelical understanding of the atonement" ... "the penal substitutionary view" ... "its significant place in the range of atonement theories to which Evangelicals have characteristically subscribed."

The fact that EA arranged a *debate* on the controversy implies the doctrine of the atonement is debatable. But would not Christlike, apostolic zeal for this truth have galvanised them to hold a meeting to *refute* Chalke's heresy, and reaffirm the doctrine with impassioned clarity? This is not just differences over baptism, church government, etc. This is the heart of the gospel of God. Penal substitution *is* the atonement (as Malcolm Watts' article last time so clearly showed) *is* the gospel; if it is not, we are without a gospel at all. As Spurgeon once declared: "Of all the thousands of deceptive substitutes, a substitute for salvation is the worst."

Last year's debate proving a debacle, they made another attempt to resolve the issue. EA and London School of Theology convened a threeday theological symposium on the atonement, on 68 July this year. Nearly 200 people attended and heard seminars on the subject, for and against. Against were Chalke and Murray Williams again the latter spoke on "Penal Substitution and the Myth of Redemptive Violence." Supporting them was Dr. Joel B. Green, whose book *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* is a spirited attack on penal substitution. Other noted speakers argued *for* the doctrine. These papers,

"were generally of high quality, arguing persuasively for or against penal substitution as the central or at least a necessary understanding of atonement ... Other papers examined the theological, ethical and missional issues involved in our interpretation of atonement" (Anabaptist Network website).

Nothing more decisive came of the conference than of the debate last year. Instead Professor I. Howard Marshall's paper attempted a definition of the atonement around which those for and against penal substitution could unite. This attempted the impossible and succeeded! Yet, the EA felt the venture was "fruitful and enjoyable" and expressed itself

“uniquely placed to facilitate this debate”! Here, surely, is an evangelicalism that has lost its way.

Church history shows that truth questioned in one generation becomes truth not contended for in another and then truth abandoned in the next. If Chalke’s “Lost message” gospel becomes the norm, we shall see an end of the gospel itself because, as Mike Plant has discerned,

“This teaching will divert us from gospel work. Historically any church group denying penal substitutionary atonement ends up committed to Social Work and not the proclamation of the gospel. Such teaching takes urgency from the gospel because there is no ‘coming wrath.’ However it also robs God’s love of its richness and glory because the wonder of God’s love is precisely in that it is lavished upon unworthy sinners whose nature and punishment the eternal Son of God has chosen to bear” (*Congregational Concern* magazine, Summer 2005, page 3).

Another reviewer of *The Lost Message* sounds the same warning: “How sad then that this ... attacks (and in some places mocks) the very heart of the Christian message ... That a respected and popular church leader should come out and write this book is little short of criminal. It is perhaps worth remembering that the greatest threat to the church comes from within its visible community.”

5. This crisis within evangelicalism has one main cause.

We are witnessing a sea change in our day. Who would have thought, forty years ago, that the saving message of Jesus Christ would be offensively derided in a book published by Zondervan and its author still given sanctuary within evangelicalism? This, however, is only a symptom. The underlying condition concerns its view of Scripture. A report on the symposium mentioned earlier included this significant comment:

“The most vociferous proponents of penal substitution at the symposium wanted exegetical issues to be at the forefront” (Anabaptist Network, Symposium Report).

In other words, they were simply demanding that what *scripture teaches* about penal substitution be regulative and final. This is right, for the authority of scripture is as much at the heart of evangelicalism as the atonement is. Yet, clearly for a vast number today, this is not sufficient to settle this matter. The confusion and disarray we have highlighted exist because people who, while quoting scripture, do not make scripture the last word.

That Steve Chalke can deny the Bible’s clear teaching on penal substitution should not surprise us. He does not accept its authority on creation either. Last time we reported this: “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. 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.” Neither does he accept the authority of the Fourth Commandment in Exodus

20:811, because he takes part in the London Marathon, which is run on Sunday, to raise money for his Oasis Trust.

Because scripture is no longer the arbiter in such matters, Steve Chalke is still welcomed on major evangelical platforms. In "An Invitation too Far," Stephen Clark deplores the fact that *The Cardiff Institute for Contemporary Christianity* (a member of EA) invited Chalke to speak at a Question Time. In CICC's words: "There is no reason not to welcome him as a brother in Christ to Cardiff for this event" (*The Evangelical Magazine*, March/April 2005).

Spring Harvest has done the same. "What I find particularly shocking is the way in which this false teacher was yet again so warmly endorsed and received this past Easter at Spring Harvest. What is the future of an 'evangelicalism' that places doctrine so low on its list of priorities? And what is the future of those who imagine all is well with their souls simply because few question their right to wear the 'evangelical' label?" (Jonathan Stephen in *Evangelicals Now*, June 2005). Spring Harvest is a member of EA and Steve Chalke is a member of Spring Harvest.

And the *Word Alive* week of Spring Harvest did the same: "The Lost Message of Jesus? An alarming, painful, dangerous book. More alarming is the fact that although the Word Alive leadership were made aware of its contents, it was not withdrawn from sale, nor was any statement made, and the author himself stood up to give the main Big Top address the following evening" (Andrew Sach and Mike Ovey in *EN*, June 2004).

This is the new evangelicalism of today, with its professed adherence to scripture, yet refusal to bow to the *authority* of scripture. When the crunch comes it supports and endorses enemies of the very gospel it says it proclaims. This is because its priorities lie elsewhere: with its prominent personalities, its numbers and influence, its modern worship, its huge meetings, its social involvement, its so-called scholarship and its "unity."

Ironically, it is only disobedience to scripture that divides and eventually destroys. The crisis for new evangelicalism may well get worse. A huge break up and fragmentation is probably on the way because other "Steve Chalkes" will emerge to vex its leadership and open more cracks.

Nevertheless, all this speaks to us. It warns us and calls us to remain faithful to the authority of scripture and its rugged teaching on the nature of Christ's death. That it is penal, substitutionary atonement is the glory of the cross and the confidence of our redeemed souls. This is the hub to which everything else in the Bible is joined, like spokes in a wheel. This is the centre around which all true fellowship exists. May the Lord enable us in these backslidden days unitedly to "tremble at the word" and "glory in the cross," and say with Isaac Watts,

*Let everlasting glories crown
Thy head, my Saviour and my Lord;
Thy hands have brought salvation down,
And writ the blessing in Thy word.*

*Should all the forms that men devise
Assault my faith with treacherous art,
I'd call them vanity and lies,
And bind thy gospel to my heart.*