

Book Review from Rev Jim Cox: Steve Chalke The Lost Message of Paul

Oddly enough, there are some similarities between this book and that of Sam Wells. Steve Chalke is cut from a very different cloth to Sam Wells: his background is the Baptist Evangelical tradition, but his passion for social change is exemplified in his outstanding work setting up the Oasis trust. He also managed to upset his core support with his views on human sexuality, so I thought I'd give this one a go.

Chalke is a prodigious writer. The focus of this book is more specifically theological than practical, but he examines an idea referred to briefly by Wells in his introduction. Wells said that if the purpose of the church was not to convince God that we should be saved, what is it for? Chalke's book expands on this and reflects on current trends in the mighty theological concept of salvation: how are we saved?

He restates the need to see St Paul as primarily a Jewish writer dealing in Jewish ideas. Jews, he says, don't need to try to appease God, they know they are already 'saved' by being born Jewish. Simple-as. He sees Paul as the one who dared to kick down the ring-fence and say, 'As for Jews, so for Gentiles'. Salvation is a free gift of God: Grace.

He analyses the debate between Luther and the Roman Catholic church, centring on the idea simplified as 'salvation by faith not works'. Luther criticised the church for implying we get to heaven because of our works of devotion; Chalke criticises Luther for replacing works with faith - we can only access salvation if we respond correctly in faith. How is this Grace: free gift? So Chalke looks again at the seminal verses, like this one from Romans 4:16.

"Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham."

and Galatians 2:16

"know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified."

And he ponders the the translation of "pistis christou" which he maintains only makes sense of all the facts about Grace if we render it "the faith of Christ" not "faith in Christ". We are saved because of Christ's faithfulness freely given - not by our orthodox response to God.

So what Jesus did in his ministry and after the resurrection through his Spirit, is to absorb and defeat evil. There is no sense in which, for Chalke, Jesus in any way takes our place on the cross or is the victim of God's wrath: ideas that he - and most people outside the sealed environment of the church - finds abhorrent to any sense of natural justice. He notes that neither Jews nor the Eastern Orthodox Church has any concept of the Fall: a state of such alienation from God that something so horrific as the cross is necessary. We fall and are gathered up time and again. Any 'punishment' is only for our correction and never a permanent or eternal state.

The message from St Paul, he concludes, is 'Don't erect fences of exclusivity. To anyone. We are all falling and all saved. So live as if that's true!' A conclusion shared by Wells in his encouragement for us to enjoy God and the life of faith.

Elsewhere, in a criticism of Chalke, I read a leading Bishop saying he couldn't bring himself to go as far and believe in 'universal salvation'. To which Chalke is reported as saying, "Don't worry, Bishop. God does".

