

Changing Metaphors

In a previous post I noted: “I would identify my burden as ecclesial and generational – I want to see young people (Gen X and younger) worshipping God in a healthy Anglican church.”

My metaphor for explaining that in the past has been nautical. My burden would be expressed as wanting to see a church that is akin to this...



...become something more like this:



But in the end that's unhelpful. “Fixing up the ecclesiastical boat” is all about refurbishing the system, the machine, the institution. It's about procedures and policies. Leadership becomes about directing and motivating the deckhands on which bit to fix, paint or polish. And you end up, as someone said to me recently, re-arranging the deckchairs on the Titanic.

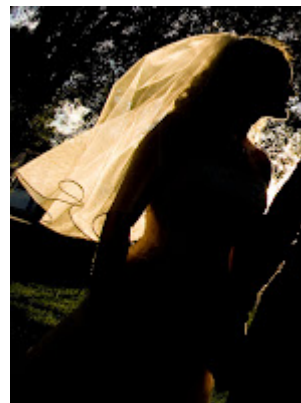
The problem is not the institution, the “boat.” Institution can go wherever you want to drive it. Institution simply reflects the (beating or otherwise) heart and health of the organic thing that inhabits it.

I'd rather go towards Ezekiel 16 and to other biblical imagery – the church as the Bride of Christ.

It means we have to talk about the real issues – rebellion, idolatry, lack of belief, hard-heartedness, and unfaithfulness – rather than the excuses of broken systems. It means we have to put forward and invest in gospel, calls to repentance, mentoring for growth and also discipline and holding to account. It's about leading spiritually rather than clinically, through sharing in sufferings rather than precision of committee meetings. It's about demonstrating remorse, and repentance for the sin and unfaithfulness of the church and being honest about how true our worship is.

It's not about "Have we followed correct procedure?" but "Have we followed the King?"

So my metaphor is now:

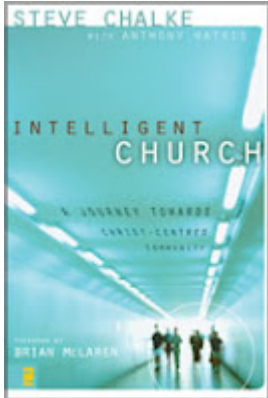


And, cheesy photos aside, my prayer continues to be something of an echo of Exodus 32:12 perhaps:

*Why should the world point at us and spurn your name?
Don't let us die, what would the nations say about you?
Forgive us, Lord, and make us your own.*



Review: Intelligent Church



This is the second time I have reviewed one of Steve Chalke's books. I didn't particularly enjoy reading *Intelligent Church* – at least as not as much as I thought I would. It is too light to provide a robust framework for building church. It is too “motherhoody” to provide that practical potpourri that can be found elsewhere.

In the introduction he says he will be considering the relationship between “theology, missiology and ecclesiology” in some different marks of “authentic Christian spirituality” (page 14). While he achieves that aim, I am left disquieted, as if I have spent the time hearing only the voice of Steve Chalke and not of Jesus.

This is not to say that the content is all bad – although perhaps a little bit “same old, same old.”

Chalke is obviously passionate about the gospel and about transforming the world. Here is something of his vision for what church should and could be in the (Western) world: Encompassed by eleven adjectives describing the church – Intelligent, Inclusive, Messy, Honest, Purposeful, Generous, Vulnerable, Political, Diverse, Dependent, Transforming.

I don't have time or space to precis them all, however highlights included for me:

- a balanced critique of institution in the chapter marked “Intelligent Church.” It is as if we, the harvesters, have “locked ourselves in the farmhouse” (page 25).

“A saved world would certainly result in a saved

church. The reverse is not necessarily true. If we huddle in our trenches (however well equipped they may be) making occasional forays farther afield to win converts in order to bolster our numbers, we are condemned to watch as the church, and the world along with it, perishes.” (page 25)

- a recognition of the inherent messiness of true mission – a recognition that collides with my own present experience.

“Any church that truly welcomes anyone and everyone – whatever their problems and issues – is bound to appear (and indeed be) both chaotic and disorderly at times. What’s wrong with being neat and tidy? The only problem is that it indicates that the church has scared the messed-up people away.” (page 55)

- an acceptance of the limits of church planning (or perhaps, the nature of church planning, recognised or not!):

“The greatest lesson Pele ever learnt in football was simply this: winning is all about restarting from a position you never expected to be in.” (page 87)

But I must also offer a critique.

While I admire (and agree with to a large extent) his vision of church as “inclusive” and “generous” I don’t think he’s quite hit the “both-and” that lies in the typical false dichotomy of personal evangelism and social justice.

Quite rightly, Chalke wishes the church to take on a transforming role in society, to be the “twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week” accessible, inclusive “hub of the community.” And he calls for the church to tackle not just the problems of rescuing people from the mire, but to work towards

the changing of structures that create that mire, or fail to protect people from it in the first place (consider his section marked “The Political Church” on pages 126-127).

But if we mix that with his tendency towards the (impossible) aspiration of having a church that has “clear goals, objectives, targets and outcomes” (page 79). And if we add in a propensity in his inclusive and generous kerygma away from concepts such as a “call to holiness” or the exhortation of Christ to “Go and sin no more.” What do we have?

Not so much an ill-centred gospel but one that is so loosely draped around the central figure that one could pull back this veil of mission to find a Barack Obama or some abstract form of Christian socialism being able to bear its weight.

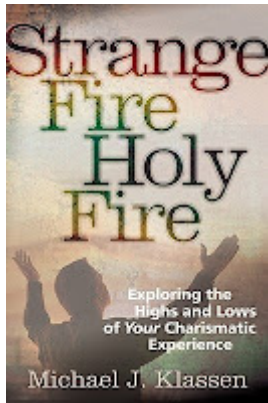
There is a hint of social triumphalism in his handling of the Kingdom of God. Just as Jesus stands on his manifesto at Nazareth in Luke 4, so we are to “proclaim God’s favour through our generosity” (page 92). But where do we walk with Jesus to the cross? Where is it that, empty of ourselves, we simply fall upon his gift of faith and repentance to minister not in our own strength, but in his?

We are currently studying the Galilean part of Luke as a sermon series at Connections, but we have just been through 1 Corinthians. “Release for the captives” (Luke 4) and “nothing but Christ crucified” (1 Cor 2:2) must go together and point to the same thing.

Chalke talks well about the we need to be “vulnerable” and he points to Christ’s self-emptying and kenotic understanding from Philippians 2 (page 110). If so, and maybe it’s just me, why then do I leave this book sensing that I have been filled with myself, or with the ideals of some other person, and not with Christ alone?



Review: Strange Fire, Holy Fire



I often find books that I really appreciate reading. Very rarely I read a book that I wish I had written – or one that communicates the thing that “one day I’ll write a book” about. Michael Klassen’s *Strange Fire, Holy Fire* is one of those.

My Christian background has two roots – Pentecostal/Charismatic in my teens and early twenties, and a strong reformed theological foundation after that. Oftentimes these two camps are at loggerheads and that saddens me. I have learned much from both and I have seen how a strong church and a strong spirituality is one which brings Word and Spirit together.

I believe this is similar to Klassen’s framework. Like him I am both a *critic* and an *apologist* (page 12) of the charismatic movement. He does this well. This is why the book is called “Strange Fire, Holy Fire” – there is much in the charismatic movement that is strange, but there is also much that is holy. Sometimes things are both!

Klassen defines the nuances and variations within the Charismatic Movement – a useful quick insight for those who lump all “happy clappies” together and so often miss the point. He then goes through some of the key charismatic theological and cultural distinctives. Many of his conclusions I share – I was saving them up for my own book, “one day”!

With regard to tongues, for instance, he critiques the way in which tongues are made the “litmus test” (page 28) and how they are often used as a disunifying factor rather than a building-up resource (page 29). Yet he delights in the gift much like I do:

“Tongues was, and is, a very helpful gift that has enabled me to pray about situations when I didn’t know what to pray. It has served as a weapon in spiritual warfare and has given me insight into God’s ways. And it has definitely cultivated a deeper, more intimate walk with Christ.” (page 29)

His take on theological study, and in particular, his delight in the study of church history, matches my own thoughts:

“... as we study church history, we discover that many of the challenges and false teachings we face today have appeared sporadically since the first Pentecostal movement (in Acts 2). Why repeat their mistakes and struggles when we can avoid them?” (page 53)

His consideration of charismatic “hype” and emotive manipulation is a critique I share (for instance in my analysis of the Todd Bentley phenomenon). He paints John Wimber as a positive example:

“Then a person nearby started weeping. Then another. Then another person dropped to the ground, slain in the Spirit. By the time the meeting ended, most of the people at the front were either weeping or lying on their backs under the power of the Holy Spirit. Wimber, however, hardly said a word, and hadn’t laid a hand on anybody.

“God doesn’t need someone to whip the crowd into a frenzy in order to pour out his Spirit.” (page 57)

And he makes the point that is close to the heart of my own kerygma that “power comes through weakness (really!)” (page

59).

Klassen is honest about the seduction of power and the drives in leadership that can make it defensive or self-focussed. Here is another echo of my own experience:

“Our heavenly Father appointed Jesus – not the pastor – to be the head of the body. News flash! God never intended the life of the church to revolve around the pastor. Nor should it revolve around the body. The intended focus of the church is Jesus, its head.” (page 68)

I share his broad view on the gift of prophecy – drawing a similar line on that gift’s application and excess, it’s misuse by the overly-charismatic and its unfair dismissal by the cessationist-leaning who expect 100% accuracy from prophetic words with no provision of training or support for their prophets (page 85).

His critique of the prosperity movement (compared to deism on page 138 and superstition on page 147) is adequate. He defends experience, but does not overplay it, as an input to spiritual growth and theological understanding (page 184). And he recognises spiritual warfare in a manner that I appreciate and understand from my own personal experience:

“On a personal level, agree to step into Christian leadership and immediately you’ll sense an invisible target on your back... Anyone who denies the reality of the demonic hasn’t read the Gospels closely enough.” (page 213)

I am with him as he shows how spiritual warfare is waged by focussing on Jesus, not the enemy. Jesus is the armour of Ephesians 6 (page 221).

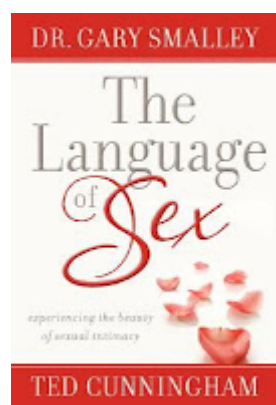
While it is well-balanced, this isn’t a rigorous book. It has theological holes and the odd mis-placed anecdote or illustration. The various exegeses are adequate but not in-

depth. There is still room for me to write my own book which would have a more theological flavour ☐

But I share most if not all his conclusions. I will be lending this book to some of my more “out there” friends on both sides of the spectrum so that they can understand that there is life – much life – in the centre, bridging this particular divide, worshipping our Lord in Spirit and in Truth.



Review: The Language of Sex



One of the increasingly frequent tasks I have in a growing church is the need to lead engaged couples through preparation for marriage. I find it useful to be on the look out for better resources and fresh input and insight – and find the benefit to Gill’s and my own relationship a blessed side-effect.

When it comes to books the stock-standard resource we use has been Gary Chapman’s *Five Love Languages*. I will now be adding Smalley & Cunningham’s *The Language of Sex* to the pile of “recommended’s” and have some on hand to give away when appropriate.

There’s a whole bunch of Christian pop-pysch “improve your sex life” books going around at the moment. Most of them can’t seem to get away from some sort of giggle-factor adolescent “married Christians are allowed to be naughty” type shallowness. I find Leman’s *Sheet Music* to be a bit like this and of little value. They often read like a breathless over-eagerness to catch up with the sex of the ’90’s presuming (and

wrongly so, most twentysomething Christians don't need to be told, yet again, of the non-proscription of oral sex) that Christians are still repressed in the '50's. And for those who are genuinely struggling there is often a tantalising picture of marital sexual freedom painted with little help provided or light shed to actually help them get there.

Smalley and Cunningham's book is different. It takes an appropriately long time to get to issues such as technique and sexual education – and even then only covers them relatively briefly. In their own words, they explain:

"You'll notice that this chapter about creativity [in sex] is not near the front of the book. That's on purpose. The foundation of honor, security and intimacy is the bedrock on which to build creativity. One reason affairs get started is because individuals are looking for "greener grass." Greener grass deceives you into believing that you must go outside the marriage to experience greater heights of sexual intimacy, without all the responsibility. That's simply not true." (page 147)

Their key framework is their "formula":

Honour → Security → Intimacy → Sex

"... honor creates security. Security creates intimacy. And intimacy sets the stage for great sex. The truth is that you cannot have great sex without honor and an open spirit." (page 16)

And so they spend the bulk of the time effectively and usefully teaching the readers to build honour, security and intimacy into their marriage before they get to the "sex ed" detail. The path to sexual fulfillment is through investing in the other person and in relationship – and that's where they concentrate their teaching.

Much of it is common sense. But it is usefully constructed and presented common sense. It makes the book a useful tool for helping get past the presenting issue to the *actual* issue. It is advice that, while not exhaustive, is followable and practical and solidly cognisant of the realities of Christian growth and the difficulties and stumbles that often come on the road of maturation.

Some of those who are significantly struggling or facing overwhelming abuse-recovery or addictive behaviour issues will quickly reach the end of what this book has to offer. Yet, even then, I could see the material providing a “way in” to understand and so be an effective stepping stone on the path to finding necessary help.

I found this book to be biblical, gentle, and real. Recommended.

