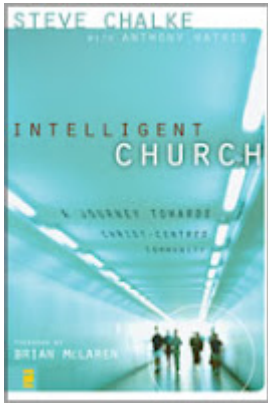


Review: Intelligent Church



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?

