Although it was published in 2003, Steve Chalke and Alan Mann's *The Lost Message of Jesus* continues to provoke controversy, particularly in British evangelical circles, due to the authors' comments regarding the penal substitution view of the atonement. Many in the debate refer to these comments, but few seem to have interacted with the entire book. Therefore, a closer look at the book as a whole seems helpful.

On the cover of my copy of the book there is a picture of a corked glass bottle containing a scrap of paper. The implication seems to be that Jesus' teaching which was lost for many years, has now been discovered and is revealed within the book. That this claim is being made is confirmed in the first few pages. 'Our task is to reclaim the true but lost message of Jesus' (15). According to Chalke and Mann, the core of Jesus' message was this: 'The Kingdom, the in-breaking shalom of God, is available now to everyone through me' (16), (italics in the original). The authors wish to reclaim this message for the world, which has largely ignored it, and for the church, which has largely obscured and misunderstood it.

In my judgement there is much of value in the book. The 'message in the bottle' certainly contains material that has been underemphasised by many within the church. In particular, I find the central position given to Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God is valuable. The writings of the NT constantly emphasise God's climactic action in Jesus' death and resurrection, and then draw out the ethical implications of these events. Too many churches have lost this way of thinking and living. The excitement and the tension of living in the 'time in between the times', between the resurrection and the last day, has been replaced by an emphasis on abstract and timeless theological propositions. *The Lost Message of Jesus* has called us back to a more biblical way of thinking in
this area. Another helpful point is the book’s emphasis on the importance of presenting the beauty and desirability of life in the Kingdom to those who do not believe (118f).

Even when one does not agree with the conclusions that Chalke and Mann reach, it cannot be doubted that they have tried to reflect rigorously and consistently on the words of Jesus. For example, though their case for non-violence at a national level is not argued convincingly (125–37), it is clearly an attempt to apply the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:38–48 to important and controversial questions.

Despite these strengths, however, there is a deep irony at the heart of the book: *The Lost Message of Jesus* has omitted a crucial component of the message of Jesus. The bottle has been opened, but the message not read in its entirety. What has been lost in *The Lost Message of Jesus*, and what pervades the true message of Jesus and the authors of our NT, is the proclamation that God will one day set the world to rights by judging it, and that this coming divine judgement should affect the way humans live now.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus begins his public ministry with the call: ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’ (4:17). Comparison with John the Baptist’s identical call (3:2, 10–12) makes it clear that Jesus’ words are a call to repent in the face of coming divine judgement. Even a cursory reading of the Gospels reveals how frequently Jesus speaks of hell and the coming judgement of God (e.g. Matthew 7:26–27; 11:20–24; 13:40–43; 23:29–36; 25:31–46; Mark 9:38–50; Luke 13:1–5; John 5:14, 28–29). It is astonishing, then, that this major theme of Jesus’ preaching is overlooked by Chalke and Mann. In the NT, God’s righteous anger at sin is a reason for repentance (Matt. 4:17) and for sober, joyful worship (Rom. 9:22–23; 11:33–36). In *The Lost Message of Jesus*, it is virtually ignored.

Virtually – but not totally – ignored. On page 62, Chalke and Mann rightly affirm that, ‘although God is love, this doesn’t exclude the possibility of him eventually acting in judgement’, and suggest that God’s anger ‘is a legitimate, indeed intrinsic, expression of [his] love’. This affirmation is refreshing in a book that tends to draw false dichotomies. (Just a few pages later the authors imply that God is either strong, stern, tough, and demanding, or that he is generous, gracious, forgiving and loving. If the pejorative language were dropped, perhaps we could affirm both sides of that false dichotomy). However, while the authors’ recognition of God’s anger and judgement upon sin is welcome, it is the
only such recognition in the book. Throughout The Lost Message of Jesus, Chalke and Mann seem very uncomfortable with the idea that God is angered by sin and judges it. Rather than affirming the reality of hell, they appear to distance themselves from it in several places, for example, they disassociate themselves from those who ‘still believe’ that the Christian God is ‘a God of power, law, judgement, hell-fire and damnation’ (56).

On pages 14–15, Chalke and Mann describe the many disparate messages that are bombarding contemporary Christians, and include the following example: ‘We are taught that God is love, but no-one explains how this teaching coheres with the reality of those whom we know, love and respect but who don’t know Christ and so, as the preacher tells us, are bound for eternal torment in hell.’ Now, this is a crucial issue to address! But the authors do not address it. Rather, they affirm that God is love and then they virtually ignore the existence of divine judgement and hell throughout the rest of the book. This seems to be because they have created an implicit false dichotomy (notwithstanding their remarks on pages 62–63): either God is loving or he is angered by sin and judges it. This false dichotomy manifests itself most clearly, as will be seen below, in the authors’ understanding of the atonement.

What is lost when God’s justice, wrath, and judgement are so underemphasised? What are the consequences of affirming these divine attributes briefly and half-heartedly, but mostly omitting them from one’s recovery of Jesus’ ‘lost message’? In my opinion, Chalke and Mann’s discomfort with God’s wrath and judgement is largely responsible for three significant problems within the book:

- Its interpretation of the OT
- Its view of evangelism and
- Its misunderstanding of the cross and the nature of the atonement.

Each of these warrants examination.

I The Lost Message’s interpretation of the OT

On page 49 Chalke and Mann assert that God’s ‘unwillingness to distance himself from the people of Israel and their actions meant that at times he was implicated in the excessive acts of war that we see in some of the
books of the Old Testament’. That is, God was always involved with Israel in order to demonstrate his love, but Israel (it is implied) sometimes used God to ‘justify cruel acts of revenge’. This is the authors’ explanation for why certain verses and stories in the OT make God seem like a ‘vengeful despot’.

This is an extremely problematic assertion, because it is often the inspired writers of the canonical documents who assert that God is responsible for the total destruction of certain peoples. For example, the catalogue of southern Palestinian cities taken and completely destroyed by Israel in Joshua 10:29–43 ends with the claim that Joshua ‘left no survivor, but he utterly destroyed all who breathed, just as the Lord, the God of Israel, had commanded …’ Joshua captured all these kings and their lands at one time, because the Lord, the God of Israel, fought for Israel’ (my emphasis). In Joshua’s farewell address at the end of the book, he says to Israel, ‘And you have seen all that the Lord your God has done to all these nations because of you, for the Lord your God is he who has been fighting for you’ (23:3). God’s action in driving out the other nations is not seen by the author of Joshua as a necessary bit of dirty work in which God is unhappily ‘implicated’. Rather, it is the basis upon which Israel is called to love and serve him (23:8–11).

In 1 Samuel 15, the Lord rejects Saul as king not because he utterly destroys Amalek, but because he is disobedient in not utterly destroying Amalek. The Lord’s purpose is to ‘punish’ Amalek by destroying it (15:2), but Saul disobey’s. The distaste of Chalke and Mann for God’s judgement and anger leads them to deny what the authors of Scripture plainly affirm.

A similar distaste leads Chalke and Mann to a rather bizarre interpretation of Exodus 33:20, which reads, ‘You cannot see my face, for no man can see me and live!’ They argue against the common view that Moses cannot see God because of his sinfulness and God’s holiness. Instead, they suggest that it is because God suffers more than anyone and is therefore ‘hiding the immeasurable suffering caused by that love. No-one could bear to see a face wrung with such infinite pain and live’ (59). No evidence from the context of Exodus 33 is given in support of this view. Instead, the conclusion is arrived at by citing the personal experience of one of the authors and the work of philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff. Again, however, the evidence of the OT itself points in a different direction. Exodus 19:21 is a close parallel to Exodus 33:20. Here, the Lord suggests that if the people ‘gaze’ upon him, they will die. The emphasis in
Exodus 19 is on purity restrictions and the need for the people and the priests to consecrate themselves (19:10–15, 22–25; cf. 20:18–21). This suggests that God’s holiness and purity are the reasons men and women cannot look upon him and live. This is confirmed elsewhere in the OT by Isaiah’s reaction upon seeing God (Is. 6:1–7).

II The Lost Message’s view of evangelism

Clear views of God’s power, justice and wrath have often unleashed powerful impulses for evangelism in the course of church history. Jonathan Edwards’ sermon Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God is a good example of this. It was preached in 1741 and it played a significant role in New England’s Great Awakening (the sermon is quoted disparagingly on pages 55–56). It is not surprising that a book that downplays God’s wrath at sin will adopt a different approach to evangelism.

Chalke and Mann leave little doubt that they disapprove of approaches to evangelism that make clear God’s wrath at sin and call people to repent of such sin. These approaches are caricatured as: telling people off (97), frightening people into following Jesus (97), ‘sin management’ techniques (97), ‘nagging and yelling at people’ (97), pushing, forcing, bludgeoning, beating, coercing, cajoling, manhandling, and bullying people (97), ‘condemnation and judgement’ (98), ‘rubbing in the guilt’ (116) and ‘nagging’ (117).

One particularly revealing section of the book is the part that tells the story of John Diamond, the London Times journalist, who wrote columns during a four-year battle with throat cancer until his death in 2001. The authors describe the responses of various Christians to Diamond’s columns. Many wrote to him and told him that if he would repent and ask God for forgiveness he could be saved. Some sent him tracts and booklets with the ‘step-by-step procedure’ for being saved. Some suggested that his cancer was the result of his ‘godless and immoral lifestyle’. Chalke and Mann relate the response of a friend who heard about the letters these Christians had sent: ‘How could people be so insensitive? … all that these “representatives of Jesus” could do was condemn [Diamond]’. The friend wrote to Diamond sharing his own experience of suffering and suggested that he would like to chat with Diamond in order to gain help on his own journey. The authors conclude that the friend’s letter, ‘no doubt did far more than the judgemental and condemnatory tone of most of the
correspondence [Diamond] had received from Christians until this point’ (151).

What is amazing about this story and the authors’ assessment of it is that the responses of the various Christians are lumped together. The Christians who suggested that Diamond could be saved through repentance and asking forgiveness are not distinguished from those who suggested that his cancer was a judgement for a godless lifestyle. All alike are labelled as ‘insensitive’ and ‘condemning’ and ‘judgemental’.

Chalke and Mann seem to suggest evangelism is a calling to something ‘rather than’ a calling away from something (118–19). But why not both? Does not Jesus call his hearers away from a sinful, godless life and into a new life? Does repentance have nothing to do with giving up sinful ways (118)? What is problematic here is not the authors’ emphasis on sounding a positive note in evangelism. Jesus clearly modelled openness and inclusion in his interactions with sinners. Rather, the problem is in the caricature of evangelistic efforts that carefully and sensitively present the plight of human beings under God’s judgement.

It is not wrong to make people feel guilty if they really are guilty. If someone who does not trust in Christ is in fact a ‘child of wrath’ (Eph. 2:3) and ‘dead in transgressions’ (Eph. 2:5), then it is not unloving to tell them so. It is precisely the loving thing to do. A doctor who tells the patient with stomach cancer that he has a stomach-ache is not loving. It is better to tell the truth and seek treatment for the patient.

What is so troubling about The Lost Message of Jesus is its discomfort with the NT passages (cited above) that speak of divine judgement, as evidenced by its omission of all such passages. One cannot help feeling that part of Jesus’ message is being suppressed. Such suppression inevitably will lead to a kind of one-sided evangelism (rightly calling people to something, but not warning them away from something) that differs significantly from Jesus’ own example.

III The Lost Message’s misunderstanding of the cross and the nature of the atonement

The recent controversies swirling around The Lost Message of Jesus in British evangelical circles have focused mainly on the provocative comments made on pages 182–83. Here, Chalke and Mann suggest 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 reason this cannot
be what happens on the cross is that:

such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement “God is love”. If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus’ own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil.

What has generally been lacking in response to these assertions is a recognition that they are in fact part of a larger problem. Chalke and Mann deny that God punishes Jesus on the cross because (as has been seen above) they are uncomfortable with the thought that God punishes anyone. Is it a coincidence that a book rejecting penal substitution has only a couple passing references to God’s judgement of sin and no clear teaching on hell? Probably not. I suspect that there is a closer link between one’s view of penal substitution and one’s view of God’s judgement than has often been recognised. It is not surprising that those uncomfortable with the latter will often be uncomfortable with the former. In the case of this book, the former is denied and the latter is virtually ignored.

As noted above, one of the fundamental problems here is the implicit false dichotomy created between God’s love on the one hand and his anger at, and judgement of sin on the other. The Bible holds God’s love and his justice together. This is something that Chalke and Mann appear to want to do on pages 62–63, but their attempt collapses in practice. God’s love is upheld. God’s judgement of sin is denied (in the case of the cross) or ignored (in the case of hell and final judgement).

Chalke’s and Mann’s denial that God is punishing Jesus on the cross is accompanied by a significantly different understanding of the cross. They suggest that: ‘Just as a lightning-conductor soaks up powerful and destructive bolts of electricity, so Jesus, as he hung on that cross, soaked up all the forces of hate, rejection, pain and alienation all around him’ (179). Chalke and Mann tell the story of a woman named Carol whose husband was unfaithful to her. Just before the divorce settlement was finalised, Carol wrote to her husband and explained that she would be willing to forget and forgive all the pain and suffering he had caused if he would return to the marriage. This, according to Chalke and Mann, is the model for Jesus’ suffering 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’ (181).

One basic problem with this understanding of the cross is that it does not explain the need for Jesus to die on the cross. Carol didn’t need to die in order to ‘absorb’ the pain and suffering caused by her husband. Similarly, Jesus wouldn’t have needed to die if his purpose on the cross was simply to ‘absorb’ sin. The Biblical version of events presents a different story – one that explains the need for Jesus’ death. Jesus died as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). He died to propitiate the wrath of God ‘in his blood’ (Rom. 3:25). Jesus died because sin needed punishing if God was to be both ‘just and justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus’ (Rom. 3:26). The idea of a penal substitution accounts for Jesus’ death, but the ‘absorption’ theory of the authors fails to do so (the Christus Victor view suffers from the same problem).

In conclusion, I would suggest that the title of The Lost Message of Jesus unfortunately describes the contents of the book, for the book has lost something that Jesus’ message contained. Chalke and Mann have read only part of the note in the bottle, and without the other half, the message they have found is not as ‘joined-up’ and ‘seamless’ as they suggest. In fact, it is sometimes incoherent and confusing. It leads to mis-readings of OT texts, unhelpful approaches to evangelism, and a mistaken denial of the penal substitution view of the atonement. Despite a number of positive contributions, the book therefore remains significantly flawed.

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