

This article is based on extracts from *The Lost Message of Jesus* (2004, Zondervan) by Alan Mann and Faithworks Founding Director, Steve Chalke. In *The Lost Message of Jesus*, Steve and Alan explore how Jesus' teaching on 'Shalom' was all about bringing well-being and flourishing to everyone, at every level of their lives, here on earth as well as in heaven. Together with ACT Chief Executive, Rupert Kaye, they consider the implications for education.

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Fists into high fives

Imagine classrooms, playgrounds, canteens, assembly halls, corridors and staffrooms filled with a peace that passes all understanding. Imagine every member of staff and every student filled with a profound sense of worth, well-being and happiness. Imagine a learning environment free from bullying and unkind words; filled instead with friendship and encouragement. This is our Christian vision for education.

All Christians working in education – from teaching assistants, teachers and headteachers through to lab technicians, lunchtime supervisors and librarians – are called to be peacemakers. In *The Word on The Street* (2004, Zondervan) Rob Lacey paraphrases Matthew 5:9 ('Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons and daughters of God') as: 'Who'll be laughing, deep down? The people who stop fights and start friendships, who turn fists into high fives – they'll be known as God's children.'

Isn't this at the very heart of what we do in pre-school, school, college, university and work-based education? We direct and redirect; we channel and focus; we form and transform. We start where our students and colleagues are – with worries and concerns, interests and enthusiasms, frustration and anger – and we help to guide them towards something much better: a better way of seeing themselves; a better way of relating to others; and a better way of going about their day-to-day business. This is the 'Kingdom Calling' of Christians working in education.

Announcing and demonstrating

In first century Palestine, every Jew expected God's Kingdom to take place in the concrete reality of their daily lives. Whatever their views were about how it would arrive, when it did arrive the Kingdom of God was not simply going to be an inner personal event – some new way of ordering your private religious experience or spirituality. Nor, on the other hand, was it something to be gained once you had drawn your last breath and been 'promoted to Glory'. This Kingdom was not going to be some airy-fairy, pie in the sky when you die, place beyond the clouds.

Even Matthew, when he chooses to refer to it as the 'Kingdom of Heaven', isn't thinking of some otherworldly existence, which would have run against the grain of everything he believed as a faithful Jew. Rather he is referring to the *rule of heaven*, that is, God's Kingship, being brought to bear in the present world. This, of course, is the core request of the most prayed prayer in the

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world – 'Let your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.' Likewise, when Jesus used the phrase 'Kingdom of God', he was talking about an immediate revolution – right there and then – a *here and now reality*, not a future ideal. Put bluntly, Jesus wasn't preaching 'good ideas' – he was announcing and demonstrating life-changing 'good news'!

Spiritual Brownie points

Our thinking in the twenty-first century has become rather dualistic. So much of the 'Gospel' we peddle has become future tense, not present reality. It's more about spending eternity with Jesus than a new agenda for the here and now; it's more about what happens after you die than before you go. We live with the idea that the Gospel's chief aim is to make us fit for heaven, when in reality Jesus' message is focused on making us citizens and recipients of the Kingdom of God today. So much Christianity presents itself as a 'faith to die by' asking questions such as, 'If you were to die tonight, where do you think you will spend eternity?' However, Jesus' message is about a faith to live, love, work and play by, today. And it's not just personal and it's definitely not private, but rather it is public and corporate.

Too often it's the thought of our 'heavenly reward' that motivates us to take action rather than the spiritual and social depravation and injustice that we see around us. Our goal is to rack up spiritual Brownie points in order to build the 'heavenly mansion' we'll live in after death and, of course, to get other people there as well. But such attitudes are a travesty. If we think of the Gospel *only* as a means by which people get to heaven then we are misrepresenting and missing the major thrust of the message of Jesus. As the Victorian preacher Charles Spurgeon put it, 'A little faith will take you to heaven, but I pray for the kind of faith that will bring heaven to earth.' Authentic Christian faith isn't so much about ordering your private world as ordering the whole world.



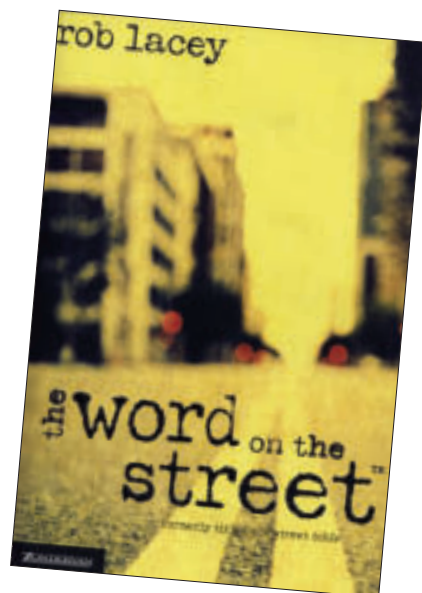
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Shalom

The word *Shalom* appears over two hundred and fifty times in the Hebrew Scriptures and is a kaleidoscopic vision of what life is like when lived in line with God's agenda. It incorporates contentment, health, justice, liberation, fulfilment, freedom and hope. It isn't the provision of wealth so that you can buy yourself out of the troubles of life, which as Marilyn Monroe once observed (when she commented, 'Money doesn't buy you happiness, it just buys you a more expensive set of problems') doesn't work anyway!

Shalom is the equipping of a person so that they can cope with life's suffering and sorrows as well as bask in the beauty and joys it brings. *Shalom* is about comprehensive well-being and flourishing at every level of life – socially, economically, spiritually and politically. The tragedy of what many modern-day health and wealth preachers have done is to take this panoramic vision of *Shalom* and reduce it to something that merely imitates our consumerist, get-rich quick, individualistic, self-centred society. And those who buy into it miss out on the reality of the Kingdom of God because they have been sold a pale, shallow and ultimately unsustainable vision. But because of this abuse many reject the concept of a prosperity gospel altogether – and who can blame them. After all, no one minds the story of a poor man who gave his life for others, what they despise are the men who get rich by peddling a story of a poor man who gave his life for others. However, the best response to abuse isn't non-use, it's right use.

The Jews knew full well what the word *Shalom* meant. However, what was new for them was for



Jesus to boldly declare that it would now be made available to all. Until then, life in Palestine was all about the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’, the ‘ins’ and the ‘outs’. Like all political/religious systems, whether intentionally or not, Israel’s society had concentrated power and privilege on the few and abandoned the many. But all that is what Jesus had come to change.

A quiet revolution

‘If you have ears, pay attention,’ (Mark 4:9) said Jesus. With these words he prepared to connect in the minds of his followers two concepts that had been wrenched apart: Kingdom and *Shalom*. Later, in one of his Kingdom parables he asks his disciples the rhetorical question, ‘What is the Kingdom of God like? What story can I use to explain it? ... It’s like a seed sown, shooting up and growing quietly’ (Mark 4:30-32a). Jesus constantly undermined the nationalistic fervour and demand for open revolt, warfare or revolution that so many Jews hankered after. There would be no violent upheavals. The Kingdom is about a quiet, social and spiritual revolution, not a bloody and political one. But more than that, it is to be a place of flourishing for the oppressed and marginalised rather than the realm of continual self-interest for the already privileged. It was the ordinary, poverty-stricken (*Shalom*-denied) and oppressed Jewish people that desperately *needed* God to do something for them, and do it now! And it was to these ordinary citizens of Israel that Jesus took his message of the in-breaking Kingdom with its accompanying promise that the *Shalom* (prosperity) of God would be theirs.

So it is that Jesus begins his three years of teaching with the explicit declaration that the Kingdom, the in-breaking *Shalom* of God had finally arrived. Some might not recognise it, for its shape was different to everybody’s expectations – however, different, not because it promised less, but rather because it delivered far more.

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Values added

A *Shalom*-filled place of learning is one where every space is filled with so many cubic metres of heaven-on-earth. God’s priorities rule. His concerns are paramount. Relationships matter. If, as followers of Jesus, we are ‘worth our salt’ we need to *be, think, speak* and *act* distinctively. When



Alan Mann



Steve Chalke



Rupert Kaye

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some educationalists talk about ‘value added’ perhaps we should also talk about ‘values added’, and when other educationalists talk about ‘turning round failing schools’ perhaps we should *also* talk about ‘the importance of promoting positive relationships’. It is not *either/or*. It is *both/and*.

Imagine classrooms, playgrounds, canteens, assembly halls, corridors and staffrooms where the needs and concerns of the here-and-now are deemed as significant as the requirements of the soon-to-be, the far-off-future and eternity. Imagine policy makers and politicians who encourage schools and colleges to prioritise the nurture of personal worth, well-being and happiness. Imagine researchers, journalists and business leaders paying more attention to a school’s ethos, values and culture – to the quality of relationships and the preponderance of laughter – than to raw data about academic progress and outcomes.

A business leader once remarked [to Rupert], ‘I guess you could say I believe in four Rs: *reading, writing, ’rithmetic* and, most important of all, *relationships*. Let me put it this way, I’d rather employ a young person with two Cs and a D in their exams but an honest, hardworking, friendly disposition than a thieving, lazy, selfish so-and-so with twelve A-stars on a piece of paper!’

■ Steve Chalke, Rupert Kaye and Alan Mann

