

[MJTM 13 (2011–2012)]

BOOK REVIEW

Mark Galli. *Chaos and Grace: Discovering the Liberating Work of the Holy Spirit*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011. 203 pp. Hdbk. ISBN 978-0-8010-1350-8.

This book completes Mark Galli's trilogy describing the activities of each member of the Trinity. Galli is the senior managing editor of *Christianity Today*, which places him in a position to "see more than most what is going on in the contemporary church" (p. 21). His purpose in writing is to show how the Holy Spirit works to free persons from addiction to control, especially by disrupting religious expectations. He makes two key assertions: first, that chaos brought about by the Spirit can be a source for grace, and second, that freedom in the Spirit is essential to the life of faith.

Writing in an accessible style, Galli uses the biblical narrative to support his underlying theme of liberation through the Holy Spirit. He openly acknowledges that his use of narrative rather than traditional exegesis is "quirky" and his readings bear out this approach as they demonstrate how the Spirit employs "chaos" to disrupt the methods and techniques human beings use in an attempt to impose order on their lives and societies. "Chaos" is a striking word to ascribe to the work of God since the Bible claims that God has a preference for order (e.g., 1 Cor 14:33). Galli's word choice conflicts with his acknowledgement of the purpose and direction of the Spirit's work. A term such as "destabilizing" would have been a more accurate, though perhaps a less catchy choice.

The first half of the book elucidates moments when the Holy Spirit disrupts human attempts to control a given situation, especially when religion is the means of this control. Galli points out that religion has many intrinsic advantages that enable groups to

operate in cohesive ways and hence cannot be simply discarded, but hastens to add that religion is not the primary concern of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, he argues that the Spirit often subverts religion when it gets in the way of God's purposes.

Galli begins in the first chapter of Genesis with the Spirit of God brooding over the deep. Instead of the traditional exegesis of this passage that sees God bringing order to a formless chaos, he depicts the initial stage of creation as being calm, ordered, and tranquil before giving way to the chaos of creation. His reading supports his thesis, but it also gives the impression of eisegesis. This is unfortunate, since questionable interpretation at the outset could cast doubt on his interpretation of other passages.

Galli then takes a whirlwind tour of the Old Testament from Adam and Eve to Isaiah in order to illustrate a recurring theme of human addiction to power and control that God undermines again and again. His portrayal of the relationship between God and this human addiction sets the stage for the New Testament narratives about Jesus. Jesus, led by the Spirit, provocatively challenged the status quo.

The second half of the book engages with the book of Acts and church history to critique what Galli sees as a tendency for excessive control in the contemporary church. Sermons geared to the needs and wants of the audience, marketing, and the management practices of mega churches, among other things, are all held up as contemporary practices that can be used in controlling ways that leave little room for the operation of the Spirit. Galli resists both being hyper-critical of the church and offering formulaic solutions, reflecting how seriously he takes the implications of the freeing and disruptive work of the Spirit.

Woven into the discussion is the assertion that the freedom that comes from God is not about deal-making or guilt-ridden obligation. Instead, God's uncoerced love transforms the recipient into someone who desires to share that love in the same spirit of freedom. The practical implications of this include surrendering control to the Spirit and learning to love the church instead of attempting "to reform it or save it or control it in any way" (p. 180). He openly acknowledges that the freedom given by the

Spirit is dangerous in nature. Freedom in the Spirit can lead to abuse and misunderstanding, but God's ability to work through human weakness can overcome these potential pitfalls. Again, Galli successfully avoids giving simple answers to difficult and complex situations.

Chaos and Grace is a well-balanced work that is simultaneously provocative. While the broad reading of biblical narrative sometimes glosses over important details, it also drives home the challenge to let go of attempts to control life and morality through religious means in order to embrace the risks and rewards of living in the Spirit. The "companion guide" at the end of the book makes it especially suitable for church small groups.

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