

Chaos and Grace: Discovering the Liberating Work of the Holy Spirit

MARK GALLI

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Identifying the ways in which God's Spirit maneuvers and works in the world has never been a task undertaken with ease by the committed faithful. Yet, this is exactly what author Mark Galli, current Senior Managing Editor at *Christianity Today*, attempts to do in his latest publication, *Chaos and Grace: Discovering the Liberating Work of the Holy Spirit*. With a foreword written by Will Willimon, former chapel dean at Duke Divinity School, this book completes the third and final volume in Galli's series on the Trinity. The former two works in this Trinitarian trilogy address, first, Jesus Christ in *Jesus Mean and Wild: The Unexpected Love of An Untamable God* (Baker, 2008) and second, the nature of God, in *A Great and Terrible Love: A Spiritual Journey Into the Attributes of God* (Baker, 2009). While surely informed by these two previous publications, *Chaos and Grace* stands on its own as Galli seeks to demonstrate the potentially disruptive and untamed nature of the Holy Spirit—what he terms “holy chaos”—whose power can ultimately transform human lives dominated by a need for constant control and obsessive ordering over their circumstances in all domains of life, including religious life. This “holy chaos” of disorder spawned by movements of the Spirit, which Galli interprets as “gift,” serves as a means by which God chooses to both liberate persons from the duties of religion—worship, prayer, scripture reading—and also to relieve persons from their “addiction” to living such overly managed and restrictive lives (18). For Galli, abandoning this detrimental control and appreciating God as the “instigator” of dismantling chaos puts the Christian on the way to living “the life of freedom” which may become a “real possibility” (18-19).

To bring his theme alive, Galli divides the book into two parts. The first half (roughly ninety pages) is devoted to the testimonies included in the entire biblical narrative demonstrating how God either subdues chaos to order or creates confusion and/or disorientation to bring about God's own liberating purposes for God's people. Galli begins with the creation narrative in chapter two, and for the next nine chapters recounts the experiences of Adam, Eve, and the serpent, the story of Cain and Able, the Tower of Babel, the faith journey of Abraham and Sarah, the deliverance of the Hebrews by Moses from the Egyptians, the ministry of Jesus, the missionary work of Paul, the event of Pentecost, and the subsequent formation of the Church as reported by the book of Acts. The purpose in this “narrative” approach, by his own admission, is to “sketch in narrative fashion the themes of chaos and liberation as they are found in the Bible” (19). In doing this, however, Galli does not “spend a lot of time exegeting the text in a way that has now become more or less expected and traditional...” (19), but is more concerned

about presenting his themes of control, chaos, and liberation in Scripture as “narrative,” because, in keeping in line with the Holy Spirit, it “cannot be so easily controlled” through the “strictures of careful argument” (20). As such, Galli couches familiar biblical narratives in language elaborating upon his themes: the Spirit of God that “tinkers” in the work of creation (37); human beings are created in God's image as “mischief makers” (37); “curses” become “blessings” and “chaos characterized by suffering and death” (47); the story of Shinar (Tower of Babel) as one of “divine judgment against human addiction to order” and “the Spirit of God's relentless drive to push his creation to the edge of chaos” (52); Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac “has forsaken all attempts to control the divine command and promise...” (61); the “Old Testament tells the same story—of a God who offers the freedom of obedience to a people addicted to control” (62); oppressors, such as the Pharaoh of Egypt, do not “like anything out of their control” and they “always try to bring the chaotic thing called life to a heel” (64); Moses who “bungles things” (64); God calls the people (Hebrews) “into freedom in the most unlikely place” (65); the story of Jesus Christ as “nothing but the story of liberation” (73); God's order that seems “on the verge of chaos” (74); sin as “order” where God “does not want order” (75); the sign of God's coming as “disruption and confusion” (77); in fulfilling the law, Jesus “introduced chaos” (80); the “Acts of the Apostles” as “responding to the unsettling work of the Spirit” (82); the Spirit that descends at Pentecost in which “the same sort of chaos...results” (86); Peter and John filled with “happy confusion” (86). Through these scriptural examples, the reader comes to recognize, ever so slightly, the particulars of what Galli means by control, chaos, and the liberating actions of God and God's Spirit. This first half of the book, with its deep entrenchment in scripture, allows him to move forward with these ideas as he sees them operating within the present day life of the church.

Part two of *Chaos and Grace* (the next ninety-four pages) is devoted to what Galli calls his “analysis of current church culture” (20), and by “church” he means primarily the “evangelical” branch of Christianity in North America (107-108, 113-114, 158, 161, 167). Although he continues to rely quite heavily upon scripture in these latter chapters through his primary use of Acts of the Apostles, Galli finally offers his own deeper insights into the way liberation can happen, through chaos, to both individual and church community alike. “Chaos is the work of the Spirit,” he claims, “who disturbs the status quo, whether that status quo is political, social, religious, or spiritual. Chaos reveals the excessive order and forces us to make a decision—either to grasp ever harder to control or to let our lives be led by the Spirit” (91). Indeed, these sentences comprise the heart of Galli's thesis, which he repeats throughout the rest of the book in various ways. In another subsequent section, Galli makes similar claims, but then includes the role of Jesus Christ who calls Christians to live in freedom after letting go of the “addiction to control,” adding that “we might slowly but surely grow up in Christ and learn to live in the freedom and love he calls us into” (104). To further his thesis, Galli addresses, most notably: the meaning of a life lived in freedom through liberation (chapter 11); the “captivity” of the church to such foes as individualism, consumerism, and marketing, what he names as the “horizontal,” focusing only on needs and

aspirations of people rather than God (chapter 12); an even greater preoccupation with marketing strategies and campaigns on the part of the church (chapter 15); and, finally, his distinction between the need to search for a “honeymoon” church, a “real” church, and the “actual church” which includes “hypocrites,” “signs of favoritism,” “outright prejudice,” and “division,” but one in which the Holy Spirit “abides” nonetheless (chapter 19). Galli concludes with an epilogue that envisions the Christian faithful as less caught up in religion and more free to live a dynamic life (183). He states here that the point of *Chaos and Grace* is “to help all of us to live more boldly and openly—with one another and in the Spirit” (184). The final twelve pages, *A Companion Guide*, offer thought provoking questions to help the reader and/or a study group navigate through each chapter in a more focused manner.

For the layperson who knows something about leading an overly structured life of details (which, in the end, may be many to most of us), including one of a stale and perfunctory spirituality, Galli’s work will have its merits. He reminds his audience that to be alive in one’s Christian faith is not only to be connected to a God of “peace and order” (19), but to One whose Spirit continues to penetrate through the ordinary and expected in human life, often wreaking havoc upon busy and automatic schedules, rigid ways of belief that one may have fallen into, or the comfortably quotidian that has come to settle in and occupy a life. Losing one’s controlling grip upon matters of life and faith is not always a negative sentiment for Galli, for he believes that at just this moment—when the overwhelming activity of chaos has declared victory—God’s liberating purposes of a life created for openness and freedom are revealed, shared, and known. That God continues to seek out and abide in and with human relationship despite the common pattern of God consistently having to break through the fervent human need for control (62) is what Galli identifies as God’s “gift” of “free grace” (181-182).

While the larger thesis of *Chaos and Grace* is admirable, one may question the method and smaller details of how Galli arrives there concerning his major themes. For instance, he makes pervasive use of the term “holy chaos” from the outset in the book without describing exactly what *he* means in depth by the term, or how it manifests itself in daily living, even though he cites many biblical narratives that seem to exemplify this concept. Although he can be heard on a radio interview (*Inside Look with Greg Wheatley*, January 21, 2012) making the distinction between the familiar “regular chaos” and his “holy chaos” (at the interviewer’s request), Galli makes no attempt to meaningfully clarify this in the book. Thus, it leaves the reader to wonder whether *all* chaos is holy and “instigated” by God (which leads to further difficulties regarding evil). Moreover, if there is a distinction between the two, what is the criteria for discerning this difference? Finally, is identifying chaos as “holy” supposed to be able to allow one to view and experience it differently (i.e. passively or in a more benevolent manner) *in the midst of its occurrence* than one would otherwise endure? Is it only in its *aftermath* that such a view of chaos can be formed? The reader is left to wonder.

Another issue that arises in *Chaos and Grace* is the seemingly totalizing views Galli offers that do not allow for nuance. Two examples must suffice regard-

ing his other two major ideas: liberation and control. Regarding liberation, Galli states in the introduction that “...liberation is no small theme, and one I believe needs to be revisited in our time, though without all the Marxist baggage of what is called liberation theology” (19). Why use “baggage?” While liberation theology has certainly drawn its critics, and even though Galli may be writing to a more conservative audience, there seems no need to lump all of liberation theology—some of which surely has been successful at refocusing the attention of mainstream theology and faith towards those who have been historically underrepresented—into a category of “Marxist baggage.” Second, Galli names the “desire for order and control” as “an unrighteous longing” towards the end of the book (178). Must the pining for order and control be classified as “an unrighteous longing?” Surely, one would hope, that he means here the “addiction” to seeking excessive control over all aspects of one’s life and not the “desire for order and control” as being in and of itself “unrighteous.” While he deeply criticizes this addictive behavior for most of the book, it would perhaps be more helpful for the reader if Galli qualified his thought concerning the advantageous qualities of order and control, and the reasons behind the human need for it, rather than ending the work by categorizing it as “unrighteous.”

Mark Galli’s *Chaos and Grace* will reach and challenge those seeking a more dynamic and living spiritual life. But even after 203 pages, one may be left wondering, still, if the Holy Spirit of God remains something that must be unearthed and “discovered.”

STEWART JAMES EVERETT
UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY