

The Lost Message of Paul

small group series

Part 1: Understanding Paul

1

Do you agree with Steve that faith evolves and, if so, how has your faith evolved or changed over time?

2

Steve says that the Church needs to be able to hold 'a gracious conversation' around the nature of our faith. Why do you think this can be difficult for us?

3

If it is true that a text without context is a pretext – what do you think we can do to ensure that we are reading the apostle Paul's work more authentically?

4

What is your view of Paul? Why do you think that he has such a bad reputation with so many people? (Perhaps read the story of Howard Thurman at the start of chapter two).

5

What do you think actually happened to Saul/Paul on the Damascus road? What do you think it means when we read that Jesus spoke to Paul? How does God speak to you?

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Part 2: Works, faith and faithfulness

1. By the time of Martin Luther, the medieval Church had developed a system of control and power, with Hell being the ultimate threat to those who violated it. Do our churches today create their own systems of control and power? If so, what might they be?

2. Steve argues that Luther saw parallels between his 16th century struggles with the Catholic Church and Paul's 1st century critique of Judaism, and then made the mistake of reading his own worldview back into Paul rather than allowing Paul to speak for himself. In chapter seven Steve writes 'We must learn the lesson and do all we can to resist the temptation to read our own situations back into Paul. Instead we have to do the hard work of getting into his world and allowing him to challenge us ... If we fail to do this we appoint ourselves ventriloquists and turn Paul into our dummy.' How do you feel about this statement? Do you recognise this problem – and how can it be avoided?

3. Have you ever experienced angst over whether your faith is strong or good enough? Do you worry that you have too much doubt for it to qualify as 'effective' or 'saving' faith?

4. The Jewish people believed that they were saved by God's grace and then developed a number of 'badges' as reminders of that salvation; such as circumcision, food laws and the practice of the Sabbath. However, by Paul's day, some Jews had come to believe that those badges were the things that saved them or at least added to their standing with God. What are the false 'badges of salvation' that our churches use today?

5. Steve argues that the ancient Greek New Testament word which we have translated 'faith', is better translated as 'faithfulness' in the sense of loyalty. How would this understanding affect our own Christianity?

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Part 3: The Faithfulness of Christ

1

Steve, and many scholars, argue that the New Testament translations that speak of being saved by 'faith in Christ', should more accurately translate Paul's words as being saved by the 'faithfulness of Christ.' If this is true, how does it change our understanding of salvation?

2

Do you agree that the requirement of having 'faith in Christ' can sometimes feel like a very difficult 'work' in and of itself?

3

Paul, according to Steve, believed that 'God will come and swallow up death' so that all are saved. Do you agree with this? Do you think this is too optimistic, and if so, why?

4

If it is true that 'everyone is in', what is the point of church and mission?

5

Steve says that 'we are made by God – we are good'. The concept of 'original sin' he argues, is not taught by the story of Adam, Eve and the snake. What is your understanding of that story? Do you agree with Steve and, if so, what impact does this have on our understanding of our own humanity?

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Part 4: Wrath, Hell and judgement

1. In the video, Steve refers to the theologian Karl Barth who taught that all descriptions of God are just repetitions of the fact that God is love. In other words, all of our understanding of God should be viewed through the lens of love. Do you agree or disagree with this, and why?

2. How do you understand the concept of 'judgement'?

3. Steve argues that Paul views judgement as something positive – a time when injustices are corrected. If we embrace this understanding, how might our churches be different?

4. How do you feel about the idea that God will save everyone?

5. Can you think of any examples from your own life where being shown love has melted your or someone else's fear, anger or aggression?

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Part 5: The Kingdom of Heaven

- 1 Steve says that our understanding of Heaven has often been influenced by art and poetry rather than the Bible. Can you think of any ways that our culture has influenced our understanding or expectation of Heaven?
- 2 How would focusing on bringing the Kingdom of Heaven to the 'here and now' impact the way we live our lives?
- 3 How would focusing on bringing the Kingdom of Heaven to the 'here and now' impact the way we do church and mission?
- 4 Steve explains that the New Testament only gives us signposts to life beyond death. Therefore, how much should it be a focus of attention in our churches? Should we focus more on life before death, than life after it?
- 5 Steve says that Paul believed Jesus will ultimately save or rescue everyone through his faithfulness. Do you agree or disagree, and why?

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Part 6: So what's the point in it all?

1. If 'everyone is in' what do you think is the purpose of church, mission and evangelism?
2. Does the thought that people who do not live as Christians will still be saved make you resentful?
3. Does the idea that you are saved regardless of what you do, make it easier or harder to address the parts of your life which you do not feel reflect the Kingdom of God?
4. Having reflected on Paul and his teachings over this series, has your perception of him changed? If so, how?
5. If you have changed or evolved your perspective on Paul, how do you think this will affect your life?
6. If you have changed your perspective on Paul, how do you think this should affect our churches?