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Book Review

Apostolic Imagination: Recovering a Biblical Vision for the Church's Mission Today

By J. D. Payne

Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022

224 pages

\$22.99

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It is not what you think. The phrase began quite differently. It was a simple, yet funny statement: "I am a ladybug rowing a lettuce boat with oars made from baby spoons." After being relayed several times by whispering from one person to the next, it ended up being completely altered: "A Miami lady grows a lot of oats on her farm to make baby food." It commonly happens when this well-known children's game is played. The telephone game involves several people that relay an initial message by whispering down the line of players, one at a time until the message reaches the last person. Each time the message is passed, it can easily be miscommunicated in the relay process or misunderstood by the recipient who discerns it. The more people involved in relaying it, the more potential for error exists. The message becomes completely changed in transmission. This illustrates what author J. D. Payne believes has happened in relation to missions in the Church. The first-century

examples of missions in both belief and practice far differ from what the contemporary Church believes and practices as missions. Payne highlights the need to re-evaluate missions considering the first century examples from the early Church in the New Testament Scriptures.

Tenured pastor and professor of Christian ministry at Samford University, J. D. Payne has spent over nineteen years training students for ministry. In his most recent book, *Apostolic Imagination*, Payne outlines his desire for the Church to recover a biblical vision regarding its mission. He writes:

When the Church is unwilling to return to the Scriptures in constant evaluation and reformation for both doctrine and practice, then the Church has revealed a most pathetic stewardship. Such a Church may be a hearer and a doer of the Word, but the doing is limited to the letter of the law of tradition and not the Spirit of mission. The weightier matters have been neglected as five billion people remain outside the body of Christ. (7)

Payne encourages an apostolic imagination that is biblically based, but adaptable to context in practice. He defines apostolic imagination as “a Spirit-transformed mindset” that helps to “facilitate urgent and widespread gospel proclamation, disciple making, church planting, and leadership development” (12). It is “connected to history and present reality” and “it demands returning to the first century and asking questions related to both belief and practice” (13). It is “an attempt to understand the imagination that the Spirit and the Word created and shaped, which resulted in the multiplication of disciples, churches, and leaders” (5). Payne clarifies that apostolic imagination is not equivalent to apostolic succession: “No one may claim the original apostolic office and authority. The apostolic imagination applied today is much different from the first-century apostles in this area...authority today comes from one’s relationship with Christ and his Word *already* revealed” (68).

Payne also clarifies the importance of contextualization: “While the Church can and should learn from the New Testament (somehow), the Church’s context is king for understanding language and definitions. The first century is unlike the fifth, fifteenth, or twenty-first; therefore, mission understanding and practice will evolve” (32). “Every generation must continually return to the Scriptures to make certain they are aligning themselves with ‘the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints’ (Jude 3)” (5). The apostolic element of the Christian faith is indispensable; however, belief and practice must be continually reformed by the Spirit of

God and the Word of God.

Payne believes “the Church has become lost in the disciple-making task” and “ventured away from the apostolic path and continues down a road involving numerous important and good activities labeled as missions” (4). He explains this drift away from an apostolic model “has greatly hindered the dissemination of the gospel across the world” as “missionaries became less involved in cross-cultural evangelism and church planting and more engaged with Christians” (38-39). A pastoral model has supplanted the apostolic model found in the examples of Jesus and the apostles from the first century. “The greatest need for evangelism today is intercultural evangelistic labors, both across the street and across the world” (42). Payne distinguishes the pastoral versus the apostolic in this way:

The apostolic mindset and pastoral mindset operate two different paradigms of ministry, which do not need to be mutually exclusive...The mind of the pastor is on the established church. Such ministry is complex in nature. The apostolic imagination has a pastoral bent but operates initially in the context with no believers, no churches, no structures. Such ministry is simple in nature and consists primarily of basic tasks. The apostolic imagination sees ministry with one church as temporal and with planned role changes. Strategy is developed to begin the ministry with the end in mind and for contextualized leaders to become overseers. (183)

Payne highlights the importance of pastoral roles as necessary to sustain church growth, mission work, and edify the churches that are planted by apostolic teams. He clarifies, “Pastors are to be permanent fixtures with churches; apostolic teams are to be scaffolds until the work is complete” (39). Payne also reveals that “few pastors have developed apostolic imagination...Many may have the conviction of reaching the nations, are able to preach on the topic, and know that global disciple making is important, but lack apostolic experience” (182).

A reformation of strategy to prioritize and properly steward resources for missions will ensure that “the biblical understanding of the apostolic work is primarily about crossing cultural gaps, not oceans...The geographic boundaries outlined in Acts 1:8 have more to do with cultural differences than geographical distances” (148-149). “While local churches are to engage in a variety of ministries at home and abroad, a Great Commission triage should be in place. Mission involves multiple tasks, but the Church’s apostolic work is to be given first order” (114).

This book is a great resource for pastors, elders, and missionaries to help clarify biblical responsibilities and priorities in mission endeavors. It will serve to help churches clarify the role of missions in the life of the Church and help local churches better steward their resources in fulfilling the Great Commission. Payne is very articulate in his dealing with the topic of missions. His passion for setting the Church back on track in its mission work is driven by the growing number of lost souls (over 4.5 billion by recent estimate) that need to hear the Gospel message (152). He writes:

A failure to communicate clearly and biblically, when it comes to the apostolic work of the Church, reveals a significant problem in stewarding well the Lord's commission...If the Lord has assigned a task to the Church, then it is necessary to have a clear understanding regarding the task and the Lord's expectations. The apostolic imagination strives for a clarity of understanding, for much is at stake before his return. (83-84)

Payne's passion is contagious, and this book helps facilitate action steps for churches to follow in reframing mission philosophy and practice in a way that clearly and accurately models what the early Church experienced. He supports the need for stewardship of mission resources under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to sustain disciple-making efforts both locally and globally. Payne defines success as "recognized more as faithfulness to calling and the Lord's leadership and as stewardship of opportunities and resources in view of the Church's task and global realities" (162-163). The book concludes with a special section written to help pastors navigate the next steps. Pastors will find this resource quite beneficial in their efforts to revitalize and mobilize their respective churches to carry out the Great Commission more effectively.