

Christian mission—at least as it has traditionally been interpreted and performed—is under attack not only from without but also from within its own ranks.

Apostolic Imagination:

Recovering a Biblical Vision for Mission

BY **J. D. PAYNE**

J. D. Payne is professor of Christian Ministry at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama and author of the forthcoming *Apostolic Imagination: Recovering a Biblical Vision for the Church's Mission Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022). He may be contacted at jd.payne@samford.edu.

David J. Bosch noted the “Christian mission—at least as it has traditionally been interpreted and performed—is under attack not only from without but also from within its own ranks.” The present “crisis” was just one of many throughout Church history that created a need for a new paradigm of mission.¹ Three decades following the publication of Bosch’s magnum opus, evangelicals remain in a state of transition and confusion when it comes to the Church’s global task. A new paradigm has not fully arrived. Recent books reveal questions that remind us of the continuation of this liminal state. David Hesselgrave’s, *Paradigms in Conflict: 15 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today*, noted the existence of

contemporary tensions.² *Pressure Points: Twelve Global Issues Shaping the Face of the Church* addressed some of the significant questions asked at Cape Town 2010 affecting global practice.³ Michael Pocock, Gailyn Van Rheenen, and Douglas McConnell’s *The Changing Face of World Missions* noted many contemporary issues global workers experience in their labors during this transition period.⁴ Paul Borthwick’s *Western Christians in Global Mission* attempted to answer the question about the role

2 David J. Hesselgrave *Paradigms in Conflict: 15 key Questions in Christian Missions Today*, 2nd edition, Keith E. Eitel, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2018).

3 J. D. Payne, *Pressure Points: Twelve Global Issues Shaping the Face of the Church* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2013).

4 Michael Pocock, Gailyn Van Rheenen, and Douglas McConnell, *The Changing Face of World Missions: Engaging Contemporary Issues and Trends* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

1 David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 2, 4.

of the West in kingdom advancement.⁵ Denny Spitters and Matthew Ellison's brief but provocative work, *When Everything is Missions*, argued that much of what evangelicals are calling missions is not missions.⁶ Bosch's crisis remains.

If missions is rooted in the apostolic nature and actions of God and His Church, then we must consider the apostolic mindset behind such actions. How does God view the world in light of His mission?

Apostolic Imagination: A Starting Point for Rethinking Contemporary Mission

What is a possible way to navigate this liminal state and position the Church for future evangelical mission? If *missions* is rooted in the apostolic nature and actions of God and His Church, then we must consider the apostolic mindset behind such actions. How does God view the world in light of His mission? What is His expectation for the Church before the Parousia? How might the first-century apostles have contextualized their efforts in the 21st century? The apostolic imagination is concerned with questions such as these and should serve as a guide to conceptualizing global disciple-making efforts.

My forthcoming book, *Apostolic Imagination: Recovering a Biblical Vision for the Church's Mission Today*, addresses several areas of evangelical work that need examination and revision.⁷ Language, purpose, missionary identity and function, strategy, locations of operations, resources, sending structures, partnerships and the role of the West are some of the important issues addressed. In this article, I attempt to share some thoughts in view of an apostolic imagination.

What was missions yesterday is not missions today, and may be radically different tomorrow.

5 Paul Borthwick, *Western Christians in Global Mission: What's the Role of the North American Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012).

6 Denny Spitters and Matthew Ellison, *When Everything is Missions* (n.p.: Bottomline Media, 2017).

7 *Apostolic Imagination: Recovering a Biblical Vision for the Church's Mission Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022).



Rethinking Language

Whenever the Church lacks robust exegetical support for her theology and terms, then extrabiblical nomenclature can result in concepts with a variety of meanings.⁸ The Church uses the modern language of mission, but is often inconsistent with her definitions. The breakdown in the language of mission has resulted in a breakdown in communication.

Prior to the 16th century, *mission*, from Latin, was a reference to the work of the Trinity.⁹ The language of *mission* and *missions*, applied to Christians, first finds itself in the 16th century with Ignatius of Loyola and the notion of the Jesuits being sent into the world, and eventually embraced elements of colonial and military conquests.¹⁰

However, the language of sending existed long before the Renaissance. The use of *apostolos* and *pempo* fills the New Testament to address matters related to God's mission in the world. When terms are extrabiblical, it is difficult to assign an agreed upon meaning.¹¹ The result is that the definitions for *mission*, *missions* and *missionaries* will not remain constant but change based on contemporary realities and readers' perspectives. *What was missions yesterday is not missions today, and may be radically different tomorrow.*



Rethinking Purpose

Missions is about practicing medicine, digging wells, publishing literature, planting churches, putting a roof on a building, educating missionary children, advocating

8 Michael W. Stroope, *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), xiii.

9 Bosch, 1.

10 André Seumois, *Théologie Missionnaire: Délimitation de la Fonction Missionnaire de L'Eglise* (Rome: Bureau de Presse O.M.I., 1973), 9.

11 Even with biblical words, scholars frequently disagree over definitions.

for social justice, and taking two-week summer trips. The Church engages in missions even when the gospel is never shared. Culturally preferred definitions have hijacked the biblical purpose behind global activity.

Apostolic purpose is now optional when it comes to the Great Commission. While apostolic purpose is rooted in the local church (Acts 13:1-3), it extends into a realm where the Church does not exist (Rom. 15:20). Missions is multifaceted, but apostolic purpose is singular. Throughout history, ministry rightly became multifaceted after churches were established. However, the Church repurposed her apostolic task as the language of mission segued into the language of established ministry and pastoral hegemony.



Rethinking Identity

Though it is popular to teach every Christian is a missionary, such causes confusion when one attempts to look for such servants in the Bible that correspond to desired contemporary expressions. I once read a social media post on a Sunday morning whereby the author told church members to look around their worship areas for people sitting alone. After finding such people, the followers were told to go meet those individuals because “we are all missionaries today!” Alan R. Johnson writes of the problematic nature of an identity crisis: “If there is indeed no difference between what I should be doing in my own local church in my own sociocultural setting and somewhere else, there is no compelling reason to cross geographic and cultural boundaries at all.”¹²

Though it is popular to teach every Christian is a missionary, such causes confusion when one attempts to look for such servants in the Bible that correspond to desired contemporary expressions.

¹² Alan R. Johnson, *Apostolic Function in 21st Century Missions* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2013), 52.



Rethinking Function

As theologians in the 20th century were forced to respond to the volume and success of the Church’s global activity, they turned toward the Scriptures with the modern language of mission in hand and argued that the *missio Dei* was much broader than the redemption of the elect.¹³ By implication, the Church’s *missions* needed to become more diverse and multifaceted. Traditional mission terminology was expanded to reflect the multiple actions of God throughout the Scriptures. While this development was beneficial to understanding *missio Dei*, it became problematic in that every missional function became equivalent. Apostolic priority was discarded. Now, the Church has created an equal opportunity world of global activity that did not exist in the first century (Acts 6:1-7).



Rethinking Strategy

Jesus made the promise that “this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matt. 24:14). Regardless, of one’s eschatology and definition of *nations*, the fact is the end has not arrived and much work remains. Strategic thinking is a matter of wise stewardship and the apostolic imagination.

If research is correct, that approximately 7,000 people groups remain unreached including 3,200 unengaged unreached people groups, then the wise kingdom steward is to be strategic with all resources in view of this global crisis.¹⁴ There is no room to be haphazard with global actions.

¹³ For a survey of the theological developments between 1910 and 1952 see Wilhelm Andersen, *Towards a Theology of Mission*, International Missionary Council Research Pamphlet No. 2 (London: SCM Press, 1955).

¹⁴ <https://www.imb.org/research-reports/>; accessed November 20, 2019.

Jesus preached to towns because people residing in those locations were in need of redemption (Luke 4:43). Paul's ambition was "to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named" (Rom. 15:20). Once a healthy ecclesiastic foundation was established "from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum" (Rom. 15:19), he desired to transition to Spain (Rom. 15:24) where unbelievers were found. The apostolic imagination is concerned with lostness and sanctification. It is concerned about the gospel speeding ahead and being honored (2 Thess. 3:1) and new churches receiving the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27).



Rethinking Resources

At the turn of the century, David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson noted an abysmal 0.1% of all financial resources were directed toward disciple-making efforts in the most unevangelized countries.¹⁵ R. W. Lewis wrote for every 30 missionaries who go to the reached people groups of the world, approximately one missionary goes to the unreached.¹⁶ According to her research, this means an estimated 95 percent of all missionaries are serving among active Christians who are reaching out to nominal or near-culture unbelievers of their own people group.¹⁷

This allocation of resources is unacceptable. The present reality is far from the apostolic imagination that recognizes the urgency of leveraging resources to extend the gospel to all nations.

15 David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian Trends AD 30-AD 2200: Interpreting the Annual Christian Megacensus* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2001), 661.

16 R. W. Lewis, "Clarifying the Remaining Frontier Mission Task," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 35 #4 (October-December, 2018): 159.

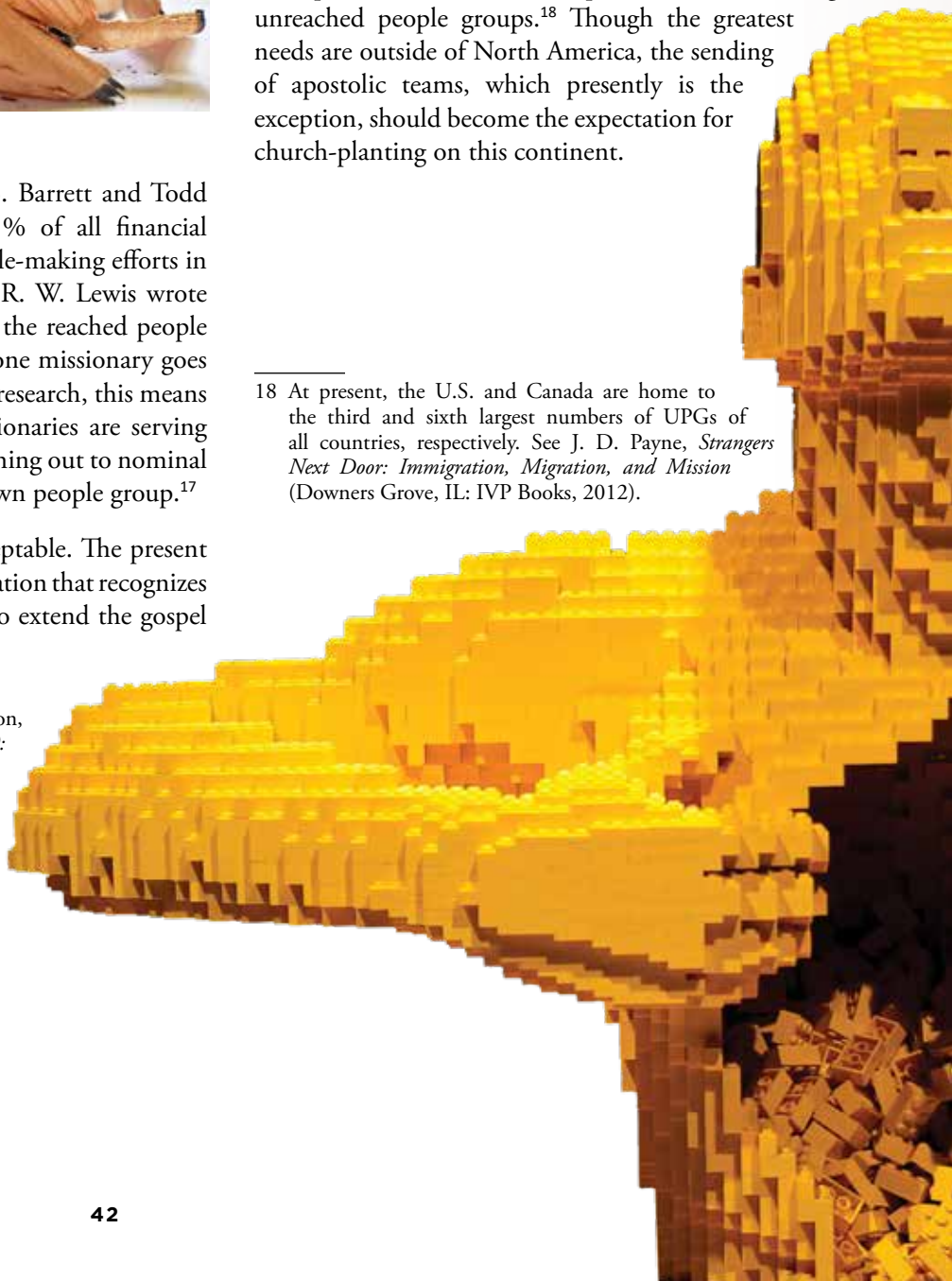
17 Ibid., 160.



Rethinking North America

Churches and agencies view North America through pastoral lenses. This reality has resulted in many viewing the North American context as reached and not in need of apostolic labors. While some groups use the words "mission field" to rally Christians for locations in the United States and Canada, what is generally meant is additional established churches and pastors are needed, *not* apostolic teams sent to plant churches among unreached people groups.¹⁸ Though the greatest needs are outside of North America, the sending of apostolic teams, which presently is the exception, should become the expectation for church-planting on this continent.

18 At present, the U.S. and Canada are home to the third and sixth largest numbers of UPGs of all countries, respectively. See J. D. Payne, *Strangers Next Door: Immigration, Migration, and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012).





Rethinking Partnerships


The matter of partnerships is both biblical and critical for global work (Phil. 1:5; Rom. 15:24). Kingdom citizens are being sent from Western and Majority World contexts to other Western and Majority World contexts. The apostolic imagination recognizes the need for kingdom collaboration and seeks to develop healthy partnerships.

The Western Church should not think that just because a dark history exists that he should simply pass the baton to Majority World churches and check out of Great Commission activity. The commands of Christ apply to His Church wherever she is found—regardless of her past! The Lord has provided a great deal of experience, resources, and wisdom to older churches that are to be humbly shared through relationships.

There is much the West can learn from Majority World churches. Strengthening such relationships offers great potential for taking the gospel farther and deeper into Majority World settings. In the West where many unreached peoples have migrated, as well as many Christians, opportunities abound for churches to collaborate, as equals, with brothers and sisters in apostolic labors for reaching the nations across the street.



Conclusion

The global work of the Church needs to be evaluated with an apostolic imagination. This process of rethinking is a matter of wise kingdom stewardship. Developing and applying an apostolic imagination will enable the Church to understand her present realities and make necessary adjustments. This conceptualization is not a novelty. The apostolic imagination is an ancient gift that remains to be opened in many evangelical circles. 

**Apostolic Imagination—
rethinking from the inside, out.**