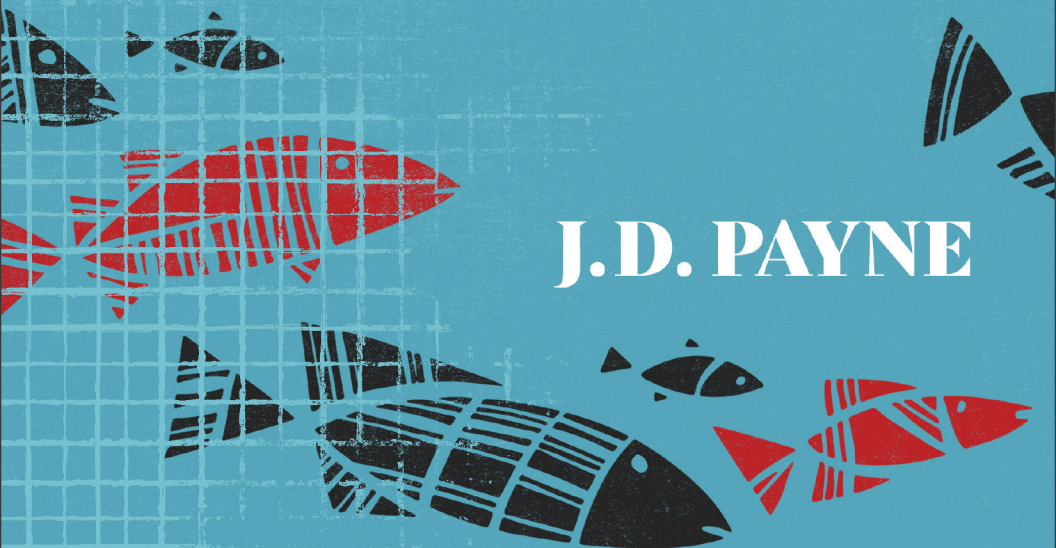


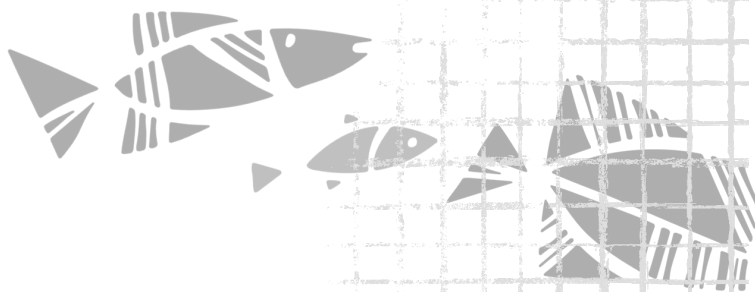


# APOSTOLIC IMAGINATION

Recovering a Biblical Vision  
for the Church's Mission Today

J.D. PAYNE





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# Introduction

**B**efore I owned a GPS device or smartphone, I was passing through Nashville one evening traveling to Louisville. It was dark, and I was distracted by the lights of the city and construction signs on the interstate. Thinking I was in the correct lane to continue North on I-65, I somehow ended up traveling Northwest on I-24. I am embarrassed to write this, but I drove the interstate for two hours before realizing I was lost and in the wrong part of Kentucky! The sad truth is I had traveled the three-hour I-65 route from Nashville to Louisville on numerous occasions. Yet, my mind was elsewhere. I was distracted, busy, believing I was traveling the proper path but going in the wrong direction. Eventually I arrived at my destination. Eventually. Unfortunately, matters of distraction and busyness are not limited to my story but have also become part of the Church's present reality.

During the first three centuries, the Church experienced rapid and widespread growth.<sup>1</sup> What was seen as a sect of the Way, consisting of troublemakers who “turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6), eventually became one of the recognized religions of the Roman Empire. While a great deal of attention has been given to the movement of Christianity toward the West, for centuries preachers also traveled East.<sup>2</sup> Much expansion of the faith occurred through the work of

1. Throughout this book, I refer to the universal, denominational, national, or regional Church with a capital C. I use a lowercase *c* when referring to the local expression of the Church.

2. Philip Jenkins in *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—and How It Died* (New York: HarperOne, 2008) provides a fascinating account of an aspect of Christian history's first millennium that often receives little attention in the West.

missionary monasticism from AD 500 to 1500.<sup>3</sup> The Reformation, Pietism, colonialism, Moravians, and Great Awakenings contributed to developments that brought the Church into the “Great Century of Missions” (1792–1910), with the remarkable development of mission societies. The twentieth century saw numerous conferences and congresses that addressed world evangelization. The century was also marked by a fantastic amount of discussions and publications regarding the theology of mission. This reality coincided with many people being sent into the world. By the early twenty-first century, it was estimated that 1.6 million US citizens were going on annual short-term trips.<sup>4</sup> The past seventy years also included the Church Growth Movement, the Lausanne Movement for World Evangelization, and the Missional Church Movement, all bearing on the task of the Great Commission.

By the twenty-first century, scholars had produced a wealth of studies on the amazing growth of the Church throughout Asia, Africa, and Central and South America. The Church throughout the Majority World is now both larger and growing faster than the Church throughout the traditionally Western contexts.<sup>5</sup> Missions is no longer understood to be from the West to the rest of the world, but from wherever the Church is located to all places on the planet.<sup>6</sup> The new catchphrase: missions is from everywhere to everywhere.

## Lack of Clarity

Yet, with all the discussions, publications, and *missions* taking place, a great deal of confusion remains. The language of mission is unclear.<sup>7</sup>

3. Edward L. Smither, *Missionary Monks: An Introduction to the History and Theology of Missionary Monasticism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016).

4. Robert J. Priest, “Introduction,” in *Effective Engagement in Short-Term Missions: Doing It Right*, ed. Robert J. Priest (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2008), ii.

5. Philip Jenkins drew much attention to this growth in *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

6. Patrick Johnstone, *The Future of the Global Church: History, Trends, and Possibilities* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2014); and Jason Mandryk, ed., *Operation World: The Definitive Prayer Guide to Every Nation*, 7th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2010).

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

Is missions found in passing out gospel tracts in China or overseeing food distribution in Nicaragua? Is missions fulfilled by church planting in Iraq or constructing a building for a church in Russia? Does missions include all of these examples and others as well? Identity is unclear. Is every Christian a missionary, or only those who relocate their lives to a remote location overseas? Are doctors and teachers actually missionaries, even if they do not share the gospel verbally, or are evangelists the only missionaries? The purpose and priority of missions is unclear. Do missionaries go to serve people with great physical needs? If so, what is the difference between missionaries and any NGO workers? Do missionaries go and share the gospel and do nothing related to social justice? Is priority given to evangelism or meeting social needs? Or, is there no overarching priority, but rather multiple priorities related to the individuals who go and not the Church as a whole? Practices are unclear. What are missionaries to do on the field? Are they to be involved in church-planting activities? Are they to be involved in relief and development? Are they to be involved in training leaders? Caring for the environment? Freeing those captive to human traffickers? Alleviating poverty?

How should funding and sending structures be established? Should the Church spend most of the offering money at home or abroad? Should people be sent to reached or unreached areas of the world? Or are all locations equal? How should pastors lead church members to reach the nations?

People are making inquiries about the Church in the West. Is the West a mission field?<sup>8</sup> If so, it is unlike anything that has been traditionally labeled a mission field. If the West is a mission field, then how should the Church, which operates from a pastoral approach to ministry, function in contexts that demand *apostolic work*? What

8. Many books have been published on this topic. A good place to begin is searching for resources connected to the Gospel and Our Culture Network. In both the UK and US, this group led an early charge related to mission in a post-Christianized context. Drawing much influence from the work of Lesslie Newbigin, the group influenced the thinking of many in what became the Missional Church Movement, which was birthed with the publication of *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). Both this network and this movement have experienced diminishing influence in North America in recent years.

about the role of the Church in the West in a postcolonial age?<sup>9</sup> If the Church is larger and growing at a faster rate in the Majority World, then how should Western churches consider the future of their kingdom labors? What does biblical partnership look like in the twenty-first century?

My reason for writing this book is because the Church has become lost in the disciple-making task. The Church has ventured away from the apostolic path and continues down a road involving numerous important and good activities labeled as missions. The need of the hour is to ask, What is the apostolic imagination that influenced much of the first-century labors, and how does it affect the Church's global task today?

## Apostolic Imagination

By its very nature, the Christian faith is apostolic. Without this defining element, it ceases to be the Christian faith. The good news of the redemption and restoration of all things in the Messiah was meant to be proclaimed to both Jew and Gentile. While the Church has made missions a complicated matter, such was not the case in the first century. The movement of sending, preaching, teaching, planting, and training was unquestioned in the Scriptures. While challenges arose over matters such as the Gentile inclusion, food distribution, team conflict, and persecution, the Church's *raison d'être* and *modus operandi* were clear.

The disciples had a deep sense of living out the eschatological fulfillment of God's mission. The last days had arrived, as confirmed with the Messiah and the outpouring of the Spirit (Acts 2:16; Joel 2:28–32). The ingathering of the Gentiles had begun in earnest (Acts 13:47; Isa. 49:6). They would glorify God for his mercy (Rom. 15:8–13), provoking Israel to jealousy until salvation arrived (Rom. 11:11–12). The next event on God's calendar was the judgment and restoration of all things. Now was the day of repentance and faith (Acts 2:20; 17:31). Now was the time to go and share the good news.

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

A new imagination guided the disciples. Although it was not for them to know the times and season of the restoration (Acts 1:7), they were sent into the world (John 20:21) to give priority and urgency to being a witness (Luke 24:48; Acts 1:8), preaching the gospel (Mark 13:10; 14:9; Luke 24:47), making disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:18–20). The evangelization of Jew and Gentile was emphasized throughout the Gospels. Those who came to faith in the Messiah were to be gathered into newly formed kingdom communities and taught how to live the kingdom ethic, which instructed them in their relations with God, other kingdom citizens, and those outside the kingdom. These local expressions of Christ's body were to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly in their societies (Mic. 6:8; cf. Deut. 10:12–13). The book of Acts, Pauline and General Epistles, and the Apocalypse testify to a prioritization and urgency of certain tasks found in the apostolic imagination. The God who created was about to restore all things, but the good news was to be communicated throughout the world so that Christ might become “wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption” to those who had not yet heard the gospel (1 Cor. 1:30).

This book 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. This imagination motivated them to fill Jerusalem with the teachings of Christ (Acts 5:28). This imagination “turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6). This imagination resulted in our conversions. And this imagination will continue to take the Church to the nations until the parousia.

## **Always Reforming**

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). Part of our journey to understand the apostolic imagination is to examine the imperatives in the Scriptures. Other times, the method is to study the indicatives and story line. Actions frequently come from thoughts and considerations. This approach is not an act in wishful thinking, an attempt to recreate ancient Middle Eastern cultures among contemporary audiences or



to read contemporary rationale into the minds of the first disciples. Although there are challenges with this approach to research, it is absolutely necessary for the life and health of the Church. The desire should be to believe what they believed and to contextualize practice based on what they modeled. This is an act in wise stewardship. The claim that only orthodoxy should be imitated and not orthopraxy belittles the apostolic Church while practicing hermeneutical gymnastics. It is a detrimental inconsistency to assume that the Church is to be constantly reformed by the Word of God yet the Church's practices are to go without evaluation. Just because the Church has done what the Church has done does not mean Christians should continue doing the same. Context is critical, but not king. Sometimes a slight revision is all that is needed in contemporary expressions. Other times, a radical overhaul is necessary. Although we cannot revise the past, the Church should not sit idly by, believing that past practices must bind Christians today.

I read student course evaluations with a bit of fear and concern. I think all professors do. After a nondenominational course that addressed church-planting strategy and challenged the students to understand biblical principles and consider their application within their contexts, one student's evaluation read, "What Dr. Payne taught will never work in my denomination! This class was a waste of my time." I started asking myself: Was the class content unfaithful to the biblical text? If not, and such practices for disciple making are impossible amid contemporary ecclesiology, then what must change? The Scriptures? The denominational structure? Or should the denomination embrace pragmatism and take a cafeteria approach to the Scriptures by picking and choosing what to embrace and what to avoid? Should the denomination write off the weight of biblical truth for such ministry and give more credibility to present context built upon history? If such is the case, does this mean the cultural manifestation of ecclesiology trumps a biblical model if the latter is unable to connect with the denominational structure? Or maybe my class indeed was irrelevant and a waste of time.

On another occasion, I was in a conversation with a Southern Baptist theologian regarding a biblical expression of local churches. Without considering either the strengths or limitations of my propositions,

he quickly voiced his opposition: “This will not support the Southern Baptist Convention!” No biblical rebuttal was provided. His reaction revealed the location of his heart, which was cemented into an unquestioned manifestation of a cultural preference, opposing a possibly more excellent way. 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.

This book is not an attempt to argue for a return to the first century. Such is an impossibility. Neither is this work a case for disregarding historical developments and contemporary contexts and blindly attempting to apply first-century practices to the present. However, lest I be misunderstood, there is much to learn from the Bible in addition to doctrine. Principles and methods of apostolic actions can be discerned from the biblical descriptions. While some questions remain unanswered, practices should not be glossed over or discarded.

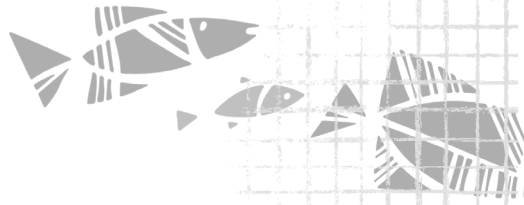
This journey into the imagination of those who are millennia removed from the present is no easy task. I expect to fall short and beg your pardon in advance. Yet the work is worth the risk. Something is not right in what the Church has come to call missions. Without certainty and definition, the Church drives through a fog, doing a multitude of activities, believing everything is fine. Actions and distractions are dangerous and often lead to taking the wrong highways and neglecting the expectations of Christ.

Some readers will conclude that this book is an attempt to send fewer people to the field (cf. Matt. 9:37; 13:38). Such is neither my purpose nor what I believe will be the outcome. It is my desire that more and more people will commit their lives to global disciple making. Neither do I write this book to question others’ callings or ministries or to belittle their service. This book is not an attempt to reduce the value and importance of the multitude of ministry activities that are being conducted throughout the world. Many people have made *great* sacrifices for the kingdom. I rejoice in such actions

and praise God for such servants, even those who disagree with my conclusions. It is my desire that more and more churches will become involved in sending more people to participate in caring for widows and orphans, ending human trafficking, teaching English, conducting medical clinics, feeding and sheltering the poor, developing businesses to provide sustainable jobs and make profits for communities, caring for the environment, and serving in a multitude of other ministries. In this, God is most glorified. The body of Christ is diverse and rightly manifests diversity in ministry activities at home and abroad. My concern, however, is that the Church, while involved in many important activities, may be neglecting a weightier matter.

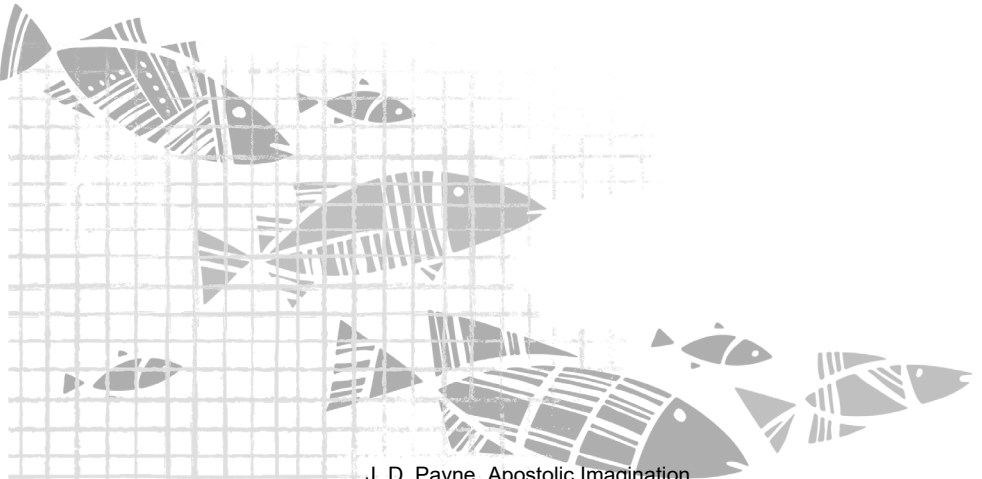
This book is written to call the Church to accountability and more faithful service. If five billion people remain without the Savior, then an “anything goes” attitude toward the apostolic task is insufficient. The task is great, and the Master has not returned. The Church does not need a GPS but indeed has the living Word and dynamic Spirit. There is no time to be traveling in the wrong direction, believing that we will soon arrive at the proper destination.

It has been a delight to have a partnership with colleagues at Baker Academic. I am thankful for the friendship and hard work of Dave Nelson and others at Baker who collaborated with me on this project. I take full responsibility for any shortcomings of this work. As always, I greatly appreciate the prayers and encouragement that came from my family throughout this project. Sarah, Hannah, Rachel, and Joel, you are the greatest! I am so thankful for you!



## **PART 1**

# **FOUNDATIONS**





## CHAPTER 1

# What Is the Apostolic Imagination?

**I**magination is a gift from God. Unfortunately, it is often referenced in relation to childish thoughts and actions. Adults make comments such as these: “He has an active imagination, thinking there are monsters under the bed.” “She really uses her imagination when playing with toys.” Their statements reveal the belief that fiction is the substance of one’s imagination. While there is definitely an element of truth here, it is limited to a small area of what constitutes the imagination and has no relation to this book.

Imagination in the Bible is frequently connected to evil and stubbornness (Gen. 6:5; 8:21; Deut. 29:19; Jer. 3:17; 7:24; Prov. 6:18; Luke 1:51; Acts 17:29; 2 Cor. 10:5). The unregenerate heart is not concerned with the things of God. Jeremiah describes it as deceitful (Jer. 17:9). Without divine transformation, the imagination is apart from Christ and capable of nothing of eternal value for the kingdom (John 15:4–5).

However, Paul writes that believers are to “set [their] minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col. 3:2). Every thought is to be shaped in obedience to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). This is no command to overlook daily reality and fixate on a date

when time is expected to cease. God's mission is to be executed by and through his people. Their relationship with Christ has transformed their position before God, and holy living should be the result (Col. 3:3–17). The apostolic imagination is a mind that is set on the things of Christ and his kingdom (Matt. 6:33; 11:29; 22:37; cf. Deut. 6:4). It recognizes the limitations of the world and understands people's relation to God and one another (Rom. 1:21; 8:8). It rests in the peace that only God can provide (Isa. 26:3). The apostolic imagination is a mind that is set on the Spirit (Rom. 8:6) and reflects a ministry led by that Spirit into a broken world. This imagination was found in the Great Apostle (Heb. 3:1), who did nothing from selfish ambition or conceit. Rather, Jesus Christ's imagination established a vision of God's mission and the cross (Heb. 12:2), which would reveal divine humiliation, servanthood, and exaltation so that the mission may be fulfilled (Phil. 2:3–11). The imagination assists with the application of knowledge to life and ministry. The divinely given wisdom that saturates the imagination assists with problem-solving and the ability to be a wise steward with what has been received.

During the first century, the apostolic imagination was a Spirit-transformed mindset that helped facilitate urgent and widespread gospel proclamation, disciple making, church planting, and leadership development. That imagination established a mental framework related to strategy. To use a contemporary expression, it offered the apostolic teams a "score card" to evaluate their labors in light of God's expectations. Christ had commanded the good news to be shared and believers to be taught obedience to his commands. This was the way in which the kingdom ethic would be understood and lived out among the nations. They knew the Master would soon return to evaluate their stewardship of his mission (Matt. 25:14–30; Luke 19:11–27). Just as the people of Israel were to manifest the coming kingdom of God to the world (Exod. 19:5–6; Deut. 4:4–8), now the people of God were the Messiah's called-out ones to provide a foretaste of the kingdom come. The downfall of strongholds would come about through a supernatural work that was not waged against flesh and blood (2 Cor. 10:3–5; Eph. 6:12). As the day of the Lord approached, the Spirit and Word would sanctify communities, thus transforming life, culture, and civilization. This was not a plan

to create a utopia on earth, but rather to bring in the full number of Jews and Gentiles before the day in which the dwelling place of God would be found among his people (Rom. 11:25–27; Rev. 21:3). A judgment would arrive, but the Church, wherever localized, was to proclaim to the world, “If you want to see where the future is going, then look at us and join our community!”<sup>1</sup>

## Past and Present

The apostolic imagination is connected to history and present reality. It demands returning to the first century and asking questions related to both belief *and* practice. It calls to the Church in the present to be a wise steward with available time and resources in light of God’s mission. The apostolic imagination does not neglect Church life after the first century but challenges the Church in every age to evaluate the predecessors and practices. There is much to learn, but not everything learned is worth applying in the present.

## Scriptures Reveal Contextual Approaches

It is a scary and humbling experience to read a review of one’s book. After evaluating one of my church-planting texts, a reviewer concluded by asking, “How does Payne know how the first-century believers planted churches?” His point was that we cannot be certain of the biblical methods. Although I am still surprised by this question, given the general descriptions in Acts alone, it leads to an important point: the Scriptures were *not* written to teach us how to plant churches. In fact, the Scriptures were *not* written to teach us how to do a great deal of things. However, many principles are applied and practices described in the Bible that later generations may learn and contextualize to their settings.

Jesus modeled actions before the Twelve and sent them into communities to repeat what they saw (Matt. 10:5–8). This approach was

1. Goheen declares that this should have been Israel’s attitude throughout the Old Testament. Michael W. Goheen, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 51.

used with the seventy-two (Luke 10:1–12). Their ministries comprised evangelizing, teaching, healing, and exorcisms. This model is described after the ascension throughout the book of Acts. The Pauline Epistles sometimes shed additional perspective on unmentioned details in the Acts narrative. Though the Bible is not a how-to manual, the Church is not left in the dark regarding apostolic practice. Each generation has enough details to examine and make wise applications, adjusted to their contexts. Paul clearly expected churches to imitate him in practice and thus in ways beyond merely right belief (1 Cor. 11:1–2; Phil. 3:17; 4:9; Col. 4:2–6; 1 Thess. 1:6–7; 1 Tim. 4:12–15).

## History and Contexts Are Not Kings

The apostolic imagination welcomes the study of history. Outstanding kingdom work did not occur only in the first century.<sup>2</sup> However, the Church's activities at times have fallen short of manifesting apostolic imagination. Though the New Testament was produced in first-century cultures and contexts, such is no excuse for setting aside apostolic practices. Just as the principles of exegesis can lead to an excellent understanding of the texts for doctrine, this process provides clarity into an understanding of actions as well. It is illogical to advocate the ability to recover one without the other. The difficulty lies within the Church in any age. Will the Church always adjust and conform Christian doctrine and practices to the Word of God? This is the challenge. The apostolic imagination recognizes that a great deal of latitude is permitted for life and ministry, but continual evaluation is part of stewardship. The Church's heart and mind often embrace apostolic doctrine, but the ecclesiology often rejects apostolic practice.

## Stewardship in the Present

The apostolic imagination is concerned with leveraging both historical knowledge and contemporary opportunity. Everything granted

2. For an important and outstanding historical study, see David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 20th anniversary ed. (New York: Orbis, 2011).



to the kingdom citizen is under the Church's stewardship. Time, knowledge, vocation, education, finances, influence, opportunities, gifts, interests, passions, talents, and skills are blessings given "from the Father of lights" (James 1:17) and are to be enjoyed and used for his glory in the world. The story of God's people is a story of God's blessings. He bestows good gifts for his people's delight *and* work. God blesses his people to be a blessing to others. The Church has no problem grasping the truth that blessings are for enjoyment. Yet the actions required to bless the nations are frequently neglected. Blessings were extended to Abram that "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). The psalmist desired God's blessings that his "way may be known on the earth," his "saving power among all nations" (Ps. 67:1–2). In every age, the Church is confronted with a kingdom stewardship intimately connected to God's mission in the world during the time in which Church members live and move and have their being. The apostolic imagination calls attention to the past and present for the advancement of the good news to the nations.

## **Rooted in the Mission of God**

The evangelists drew attention to how Christ's advent and ministry fulfilled Old Testament prophecies pointing toward the redemption of God's people and restoration of the cosmos. Luke referenced many texts to explain first-century occurrences described in the Acts narratives. The gospel advanced as imaginations were developed and supported by Old Testament passages. The coming of the Spirit fulfilled Joel's prophecy (Acts 2:16) for global mission. Psalm 2 emboldened hearts to preach the good news even amid persecution (Acts 4:25–26). Isaiah shed light onto the apostolic labors among the Gentiles in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:47). Amos (9:11–12) helped resolve the conflict at the Jerusalem Council and fueled future work among the Gentiles (Acts 15:16–17). Paul referenced Isaiah (52:15) for the rationale of preaching where a foundation was not established (Rom. 15:21). The Apocalypse, with over 350 allusions to the Old Testament, exhorted churches to endure as God's mission was expressed in the world through their actions (Rev. 13:10; 14:12). Even in the face of death, they conquered Satan by "the blood of the Lamb and the word

of their testimony” (12:11) and became part of that grand multiethnic, multinational gathering around the throne (5:9–10; 7:9–10). It is this connection to God’s mission that enables Christian imagination to have a vision of the possible in light of numerous global challenges.

## Vision of the Possible

Paul’s desire was to take the gospel to those who had never heard it (Rom. 15:20). His imagination included the logical acknowledgment of the foolishness of this task. Gentiles quickly claimed the folly of the gospel message. Jews saw it as a scandal and an absurdity. The message was clearly a stumbling block to many (1 Cor. 1–2). The news of repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus (Acts 20:21) did not make sense to the heart and will unmoved by the Spirit. Yet the apostle’s imagination also included a conviction in the power of God. Isaiah declared that God would destroy the wisdom of the wise, and Paul held on to this truth (1 Cor. 1:19; Isa. 29:14). His imagination understood that the message proclaimed was the power of God (1 Cor. 1:18) and that God was pleased to work through such folly to bring the nations to himself (1 Cor. 1:21).

Paul’s declaration that he and his team had the “mind of Christ” is significant to the point at hand. He understood that the Spirit of God alone knew the thoughts of God and that the apostolic team had received this Spirit. What they were teaching the Church was guaranteed to be from God (1 Cor. 2:11–13). The apostolic imagination has a vision of God’s possibilities in the world because it is intimately connected with the Spirit. This imagination does not see a future day based merely on luck, wishful thinking, speculation, or guesswork. Rather, the sanctified mind understands the dynamic work of the Spirit in the world, in times past and present, and is able to imagine a future possibility of redemption and transformation. The following are a few possible futures that belong to the apostolic imagination.

**Salvation of others.** Divine election is not only required for salvation; it is also a guarantee that redemption will occur through gospel proclamation. From Genesis to Revelation, God’s sovereign will is displayed and actualized in time when people respond with belief (cf.

Acts 13:48). For example, the psalmist imagines a time when Egypt, Babylon, Philistia, Tyre, and Cush will know the Lord (Ps. 87:3–7). The first-century disciples were able to see a future with men and women who represented Jews, Samaritans, God-fearing proselytes, and Hellenistic Gentiles entering the kingdom of God. They knew that God sent the Son to save people from their sins (John 3:16–18). It was this perspective, as related to his own calling to salvation and apostleship, that led Paul to make significant sacrifices in order that some might be saved from the judgment to come (1 Cor. 9:22–23).

**Sanctification of believers.** The commission from Jesus was to make disciples, not converts. While disciple making begins with evangelism and conversion, such is the tip of the Great Commission iceberg. Growth in faith, thought, and actions is the result of healthy discipleship. The apostolic imagination expects such transformation within local contextualized expressions of the body of Christ. Summarizing the work and vision of his apostolic team, Paul wrote, “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ” (Col. 1:28). The Lord “gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ . . . to matur[ity]” (Eph. 4:11–13). Whenever Paul discerned that the sanctification of the saints was not occurring in an appropriate fashion, he was quick to state his concern. After eighteen months in Corinth, he was unable to address them “as spiritual people” but had to feed them “with milk, not solid food,” for they were still walking in the flesh (1 Cor. 3:1–3). The apostolic imagination recognizes the power of the Spirit and the Word in the life of a church and formulates a vision of what sanctification might bring in the near future.

**Commitment of new churches to the Spirit and Word.** Apostolic teams were not permanent fixtures attached to newly planted local churches. Just as Jesus did not abandon his disciples in Jerusalem but provided leaders for the new church and sent the Spirit, apostolic teams also prepared churches for the future. Paul would return and visit the congregations or send others to visit. He would work with those churches to have their own elders (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). Sometimes he would send letters to instruct, encourage, rebuke, exhort, and

answer questions. The apostolic imagination understood that the new believers were filled with the Spirit and were to be released to live out the kingdom ethic in their contexts and beyond.

**Partnership with new churches.** The apostolic imagination has a future vision of partnership in the ministry. It is this mindset that sees a future in which unbelievers not only become disciples and form local churches but those churches also become partners in advancing the gospel. After Paul departed from Macedonia, the Philippian Church partnered with him in his apostolic work in other locations (Phil. 4:15). Paul asked the Colossians to pray for his team as they preached the gospel (Col. 4:3). Though he had not yet met the Roman Church, his letter sought their assistance as he made plans to work in Spain (Rom. 15:24). The New Testament letters acknowledge numerous flaws in the first-century churches, yet there is no evidence of paternalism in the relationship between the apostolic teams and the churches. Even the language of spiritual fathers and children was not used to represent the restrictive elements found in later Church history, but to demonstrate the community found within the family of God.

**Multiethnic Church around the throne.** Racial and ethnic prejudices were widespread in the first century. Jews and Samaritans avoided one another (John 4:9). Devout Jews refrained from certain interactions with Gentiles (Acts 11:3; Gal. 2:11–14). God’s election of Israel was never to exclude the nations from his shalom. Rather, it was the means by which the nations would come to know God. A “mixed multitude” fled Egypt along with the Hebrews (Exod. 12:38). Torah welcomed Gentiles into the community of Israel (Exod. 12:49; Lev. 19:34). Rahab and Ruth were examples of a historical incorporation of Gentiles (Josh. 6:17; Ruth 1:16). Solomon dedicated the temple with a prayer that Gentiles would come to the God of Israel and fear him (1 Kings 8:41–43, 59–60). In what has been called “one of the clearest Old Testament statements on the theme of missionary outreach,” Isaiah prophesies that the Lord will gather the nations to himself (Isa. 66:18–23).<sup>3</sup> James (the brother of Jesus) drew attention

3. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O’Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 52.

to Amos's prophecy that Gentiles would be included in the "tent of David" (Acts 15:16; Amos 9:11–12). Paul recognized that the Jew and Gentile relationship with God and one another was a mystery revealed in Christ as he removed "the dividing wall of hostility" to create one fellowship (Eph. 2:14–16). With this Old Testament backdrop, one wonders if John was surprised to view the diversity around the throne (Rev. 7:9).

***Elders overseeing churches.*** The local expressions of the universal body of Christ came into existence as the Church engaged in apostolic activities. What began with Jesus in Jerusalem resulted in the increase of churches across the Roman Empire. It was out of a disciple-making movement that these churches were planted. The early believers carried an imagination with them that saw unbelievers coming to faith, being gathered as local churches, and developing their own pastoral leadership. These communities of saints, living and expressing the gospel in their locales and beyond, were not governed by a heavy hand from afar. Jerusalem or Antioch did not micromanage their ministries. The apostolic teams served these groups in such a way that when they departed to begin work elsewhere, the churches could continue with the stewardship they had received.

***Gospel spreading rapidly and with honor.*** The apostolic imagination understood the gospel as capable of rapid dissemination across a people. Throughout Acts, Luke periodically pauses and offers a summary of the widespread distribution of the message and the multiplication of disciples (Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7; 9:31; 16:5; 19:20). Paul was encouraged by the example of the Thessalonians, how "the word of the Lord sounded forth from" them throughout Macedonia and Achaia (1 Thess. 1:8). He later requested their prayers so that, through the apostolic team, "the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among" them (2 Thess. 3:1). The disciples' imagination included a vision of a global community of believers, made possible through the proclamation of the gospel along the highways and hedges of societies. This vision was imbued with an urgency since the anticipated time was short. Even though opponents would work to slow and stop the communication, gospel advance continued in spite of threats (Acts 4:19–20), imprisonments (16:16–34; 28:31; Phil. 1:12), and violence (Acts 11:19–21; 12:1–24).

***Model imitated and reproduced.*** The apostolic imagination sees beyond self to the involvement of new believers in kingdom work. The apostles' work accomplished on the frontier did not reflect well-established ministries of churches that had been in existence for years. What existed in microcosm within the apostolic team was to be magnified in the local church. Development would come with time. Apostolic teams did not come into a new community with complexity, but rather with a simple example that could be imitated. They did not bring highly detailed evangelism and justice ministries that would take years for new believers to understand and facilitate. It was a simplicity of method, empowered by the Spirit, that Paul attributed to the gospel sounding forth from Thessalonica. He reminded them that they knew "what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord" (1 Thess. 1:5–6). In the imagination that transforms the Church's mission, not everything ends with apostolic teams. This perspective can see beyond the present to a near future when new believers and young churches are able to manifest wise stewardship and carry out the ministry of Christ. Such imagination recognizes that these churches are able to carry the gospel farther and faster within their contexts than the outside teams. These churches are able to stand for justice and show mercy within their communities in more relevant ways than the itinerant workers.

## Motives

Before concluding this chapter, it is necessary to inquire about the motives connected to the early imagination that moved the Church beyond local ministry in Jerusalem, Antioch, Thessalonica, and other cities.<sup>4</sup> The initial believers operated from a trinitarian drive. God is both transcendent and immanent. He is "a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Jon. 4:2). He loved so much that he sent the Son to save people. Jesus humbled himself and gave his life as an atonement for sin, so that the unrighteous

4. Johannes Verkuyl's work was most helpful in crafting this section. I do not address all the motives he provided, yet I do adapt portions from his classic work *Contemporary Missiology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 163–75.

may become righteous (2 Cor. 5:21). Christ had sent his people into the world to represent him and replicate what he modeled before them. The Spirit was sent as a seal of God's confirmation and to empower his people for global witness. The following is not a mutually exclusive or exhaustive list, but rather a general representation of those early motives.

**Doxology.** Johannes Verkuyl writes, "This motive of *gloria Deo* [glory to God] is not only present in virtually every theoretical treatment of the motives for mission, but it also inspired the life and work of many missionaries themselves who during the centuries have participated in the missionary enterprise."<sup>5</sup> The early believers were motivated to see God's glory among the nations. Throughout the Old Testament, God frequently acted so that the nations would know he is the true God (Exod. 9:14, 16; Deut. 4:6–8; Hab. 2:14; Mal. 1:11). Their imagination was filled with prophecies of the kingdom established on the earth, with the nations streaming to Zion (Mic. 4:1–3). The psalmist's words echoed in their minds: "Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you!" (Ps. 67:3, 5). "Let everything that has breath praise the LORD!" (Ps. 150:6). This grand view was likely behind the desires that "every knee should bow" before Jesus and "every tongue confess" him as "Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:10–11; cf. 1 Pet. 4:11).

**Gratitude.** Michael Green described gratitude as the most significant motivator for the first disciples.<sup>6</sup> They had been called to Christ and had been entrusted with "the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18). Deeply moved by their conversion experiences, they took the gospel to the nations.

**Obedience.** Jesus told his disciples that they would show their love for him by obeying his commands (John 14:15; cf. 1 John 2:3). As obedient disciples, they were not to be "conformed to the passions" of their "former ignorance" (1 Pet. 1:14) but were to comply with Jesus's expectations. John rejoiced when he heard of believers "walking in the truth," just as the apostles had been commanded by the Father (2 John 4). The Matthean Great Commission involved Jesus's

5. Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology*, 165.

6. Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 236–43.

disciples teaching new disciples to obey all that Jesus commanded (Matt. 28:20). As the Twelve extended the gospel and taught others, they were part of what would become a cyclical process. The new disciples would be taught the commands of Christ related to making disciples and were expected to obey, showing that obedience with their actions.

Obedience was often connected with calling. Paul frequently introduced his letters by mentioning his calling to be an apostle (e.g., Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1). He recognized that his apostolic task came with expectations (1 Cor. 1:17). These responsibilities were critical in bringing about “the obedience of faith . . . among all the nations” (Rom. 1:5; 15:17–18). Paul identified his ministry as “a stewardship” (1 Cor. 9:17), which compelled him to preach the good news to both Jews and Gentiles (1 Cor. 9:16–19).

***Parousia and judgment.*** The biblical worldview was that time moved in a linear direction with beginning and ending points. Though the Old Testament vision of the last days had a hard and definite terminus immediately followed by the restoration of all things (Joel 2:28–32), New Testament revelation provided a more detailed perspective. The present age and the age to come blended together in history. The initial coming of Christ and the Spirit transitioned the world into the last days. The kingdom was already, but not yet (Matt. 6:10). Revealing an Old Testament eschatology, prior to the ascension, the disciples asked Jesus if he was going to “restore the kingdom to Israel” (Acts 1:6). His response was that they should not be concerned with the timing; instead, they were to bear witness to him throughout the world. The end was yet to come for the gospel had not been proclaimed to all nations (Matt. 24:14; Mark 13:10; 14:9).

The parousia became imminent *and* was intimately connected to the advancement of the gospel. Jesus’s delay did not become an excuse for going to the nations but was a manifestation of God’s patience toward the unrepentant (2 Pet. 3:8–10). David Bosch was correct in writing, “It is not true that, in the early church, mission gradually *replaced* the expectation of the end. Rather, mission was, in itself, an eschatological event.”<sup>7</sup> David’s fallen tent had to be rebuilt with

7. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 42.



Jew and Gentile before “the kingdom of the world” became “the kingdom of [God]” (Rev. 11:15). The enemies of Christ would eventually become his footstool (Ps. 110:1); for now the Church was to be significantly involved in the redemption and restoration of all things. The disciples believed that the day of salvation had arrived for all. Repentance and confession of Christ was the proper response to the good news of the kingdom, protecting believers from the judgment (Acts 2:38; 16:30–34; 20:21). Life was like a mist that would quickly vanish (James 4:14). The day of the Lord would come like a thief at night (1 Thess. 5:2).

A holy respect for God motivated the first-century churches. The judgment and wrath of God were shown numerous times throughout the Old Testament. God could “destroy both body and soul in hell” (Matt. 10:28). The disciples recognized God’s wrath as an awesomely terrible thing against ungodliness (Rom. 1:18). They also knew that God would judge his people, and it would be “a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:30–31). Everyone was to appear before the judgment seat of Christ to give an account of their actions. This future image, impressed on the apostolic imagination, motivated the early disciples to go and sacrifice themselves to “persuade others” to follow Jesus (2 Cor. 5:10–11).

**Affection.** Love, mercy, and compassion also fueled the drive to reach the nations. The disciples understood what it meant to be in the kingdom of darkness and then transferred into the kingdom of God (Eph. 2:1–10; Col. 1:13). Knowing that they were once children of disobedience and that their neighbors remained in that state, early Christians were no doubt motivated to action.

Great affection for new believers also motivated the early disciples to develop them into healthy churches. Paul’s reflections on his time in Thessalonica reveal that he and his team “were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us” (1 Thess. 2:8). He wrote to the Philippians of his love and longing for them, describing them as “my beloved” (Phil. 4:1).

**Blessings.** Blessings came to those who walked faithfully with God. If the sinful parents of this age knew how to give good gifts to their children, then God was clearly able to give immeasurably greater gifts

to those who asked him (Matt. 7:7–11; cf. Eph. 3:20). The citizens of the kingdom were a blessed people (Matt. 5:3–12). This was especially true in relation to the Church’s apostolic work. After describing his willingness to make great sacrifices to save others, Paul declared, “I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings” (1 Cor. 9:23). Even after threats and abuse, the apostles found joy that they were able to suffer for Christ (Acts 5:40–42). The Church was engaged in disciple-making efforts and took delight and satisfaction in knowing that those efforts were in partnership with the God of creation. The early Christians were blessed to be living during a time that the prophets foresaw and engaged in divine actions that would usher in the new heaven and the new earth.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

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1. How would you summarize the apostolic imagination in your own words?
2. What is the value of studying the Church’s history in relation to the global work of the Church in the present?
3. Which of the motives addressed in this chapter are most pronounced in your life? What are the limitations of being motivated by only one motivator?