

Apostolic Imagination: Re-Thinking the Future of Evangelical Mission

J. D. Payne¹

Evangelical Missiological Society

October 9-10, 2020

In 1991, 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.² Missionary practice consisted of a variety of activities throughout the world. Confusion surrounded the definition of mission. Bosch’s solution was not to be found “in embracing the values of the contemporary world and attempting to respond to whatever a particular individual or group chooses to call mission.” His response was that “we require a new vision to break out of the present stalemate toward a different kind of missionary involvement—which need not mean jettisoning everything generations of Christians have done before us or haughty condemnations of all their blunders.”³

Three decades following the publication of Bosch’s magnum opus, evangelicals still find themselves in a state of transition and confusion when it comes to the Church’s global task. The new paradigm has not fully arrived. An examination of recent books reveals 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.⁴ My book, *Pressure Points: Twelve Global Issues Shaping the Face of the Church* addressed some of the significant questions asked at Cape Town 2010 affecting present and future mission practice.⁵ Michael Pocock, Gailyn Van Rhee, and Douglas McConnell’s *The Changing Face of World Missions* noted many contemporary issues missionaries experience in their labors during this transition period.⁶ Paul Borthwick’s *Western Christians in Global Mission* attempted to answer the question about the role of the West in Kingdom advancement.⁷ Denny Spitters and

¹J. D. Payne is professor of Christian Ministry at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama. He may be contacted at jd.payne@samford.edu.

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

³*Ibid.*, 7.

⁴David J. Hesselgrave *Paradigms in Conflict: 15 key Questions in Christian Missions Today*, 2nd edition, Keith E. Eitel, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2018).

⁵J. D. Payne, *Pressure Points: Twelve Global Issues Shaping the Face of the Church* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2013).

⁶Michael Pocock, Gailyn Van Rhee, and Douglas McConnell, *The Changing Face of World Missions: Engaging Contemporary Issues and Trends* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

Matthew Ellison's brief but provocative work, *When Everything is Missions*, argued that much of what evangelicals are calling missions is not missions.⁸ Bosch's crisis remains.

Apostolic Imagination: A Starting Point for Re-Thinking 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 contextualize their efforts in the twenty-first century? How should an apostolic people prioritize their activities? How should they view their talents, abilities, and other resources in light of the *missio Dei*? The apostolic imagination is concerned with questions such as these and should serve as a guide to conceptualizing global disciple making efforts. Given the audience for this paper, I assume, perhaps wrongly, evidence is unnecessary to support this postulate.

This paper points to ten areas of evangelical mission that need examination and revision. 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 missiological issues that need evaluation and adjustment in the present state. In this paper, I attempt to address the question: In view of an apostolic imagination, how should we re-think contemporary missions?

Rethinking Language

Language communicates. All language is rooted in context. The language of Scripture should serve as the descriptor for the apostolic work of the Church. Whenever the Church lacks exegetical support for her theology, then extrabiblical nomenclature can result in concepts with a variety of meanings.

Prior to the sixteenth 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 sixteenth century with Ignatius of Loyola and the notion of the Jesuits being sent into the world.¹⁰ While biblical teachings may have provided motivation for the use of such terms, it was not long before missionary activities, and language, became equated with European colonial and military expansion.

⁷Paul Borthwick, *Western Christians in Global Mission: What's the Role of the North American Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012).

⁸Denny Spitters and Matthew Ellison, *When Everything is Missions* (n.p.: Bottomline Media, 2017).

⁹Bosch, 1.

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

However, the language of sending, and what *mission* and *missions* originally represented, existed long before the Renaissance. For example, the use of *apostolos* and *pempo* fills the New Testament to address matters related to God's mission in the world. The further the Church moves away from biblical language and definition, the greater the likelihood she will move away from biblical identity and practice. In the first century, the language of the apostolic was woven into the global disciple making ethos. What is found in the Scriptures is a narrower understanding of what the Church now defines as *missions* and *missionary*. Michael W. Stroope, in *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition*, addresses the need for a change in language.¹¹ Denny Spitters and Matthew Ellison shared their concern when they wrote: "an uncritical use of words, and in particular a lack of shared definition for the words mission, missions, missionary, and missional, has led to a distortion of Jesus' biblical mandate, ushered in an everything-is-missions paradigm, and moved missions from the initiation and oversight of local churches to make it the domain of individual believers responding to individualized callings."¹² It is extremely difficult to develop a healthy understanding and future practice of mission, missions, and missionary when such concepts are defined more by church context than biblical text.

Rethinking Purpose

Biblical purpose is found in biblical language. The use of extra-biblical language has resulted in a great deal of variation in matters related to global disciple making. At present, missions is about medicine, digging wells, media, church planting, putting a roof on a building, educating missionary children, social justice, and two-week summer trips just to list a few examples. Culturally preferred definitions have hijacked the biblical purpose behind mission activity. The Church can now engage in missions even if the gospel is never shared.

Apostolic purpose is now optional when it comes to the Great Commission. Established Church ministry has become equated with missions. 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. Apostolic purpose was related to evangelism that resulted in disciples, with those disciples identifying themselves as local expressions of the Body of Christ. The Church repurposed her apostolic task as the language of mission segued into the language of ministry.

¹¹Michael W. Stroope, *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017).

¹²Denny Spitters and Matthew Ellison, *When Everything is Missions* (n.p.: BottomLine Media, 2017), 23.

Rethinking Identity

Alan R. Johnson draws attention to the intimate connection between function and identity in his book *Apostolic Function in 21st Century Missions*:

Apostolic function as missionary identity takes on paradigmatic status because it acts as a master rubric for all that we do. It covers why we do missions (for the sake of His name), where we do it (where Christ is not known), what we do (proclaim Christ and plant churches that live under God’s rule), and how we do it (by the leading and power of the Spirit, with signs and wonders confirming the Word).¹³

Today, no distinction exists between a missionary and any Christian. Both identities and functions are indistinguishable. Though it is popular to teach every Christian is a missionary, such causes confusion when one attempts to look for missionaries 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!” Johnson elaborates on the problematic nature of an identity crisis. He writes, “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. Local need will always overwhelm the less visible and tangible need of those different than us and who are far removed via physical or cultural distance.”¹⁴

Rethinking Function

In the noble attempt to get as many Christians involved in disciple making activities, the Church allowed a multitude of functions to be assigned to the category of missions. In the Scriptures, the apostolic work was a specialized task, one in which not everyone was directly involved. Paul made this clear when he noted not everyone is an apostle, prophet, teacher, or miracle worker (1 Cor 12:29).

Throughout the New Testament, teams were sent to do evangelism until disciples resulted from the labors. Those disciples were then taught to obey the commands of Jesus in a new covenant community with one another. This Kingdom expression lived out the Kingdom ethic with one another as they were led by the Word, Spirit, and elders.

¹³Alan R. Johnson, *Apostolic Function in 21st Century Missions* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2013), 77.

¹⁴Ibid., 52.

The Church must distinguish between the apostolic functions found in the Scriptures from other ministry functions. Both are valuable and desperately needed in the Kingdom. The Church has created an equal opportunity world of missions that did not exist in the first century. Painting a classroom in the name of Jesus and going to plant churches from the harvest are both important Kingdom labors. However, just as the apostles had no problem noting it was not right for them to serve tables, but had the church appoint others for the task (Acts 6:1-7), contemporary distinctions are also needed. Not everything the Church does across cultures is apostolic work.

Rethinking Strategy

The universal aspect of the Great Commission is that the Church is to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:19), with evangelism being an initial step in the process. Jesus makes 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 26:14). Regardless, of one’s eschatology and definition of *nations*, the fact is the end has not arrived and much work remains. Kingdom citizens continue to find themselves awaiting the Master’s return when He will settle the accounts (Matt 25:14-30). Given the gravity of the Great Commission and the scope of the task, strategic thinking is a matter of wise stewardship.

If the 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.¹⁵ While the Lord owns the cattle on a thousand hills, His Church does not. She is limited in time, money, and people. There is no room to be haphazard with global disciple making plans. In view of the global reality of lostness, prayerfully discerned, Spirit-guided strategic planning is necessary. This is the way of the apostolic imagination.

Rethinking Location

A friend once asked if the Church should talk about least reached places and not just least reached peoples. My response was such language may be used if it is understood that only people—and not geographic locations—can be regenerated. Jesus did not die for the boundaries of my city. He did not come to seek and save towns and villages (Luke 19:10). He preached the Kingdom of God to towns because people resided in those locations and in need of redemption (Luke 4:43).

Though Paul desired healthy congregations, he was not content giving his full attention, long-term, to those churches. His ambition was “to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named” (Rom 15:20). Once the proper ecclesiastic foundation was established “from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum” (Rom 15:19), he desired to transition to Spain

¹⁵<https://www.imb.org/research-reports/>; accessed November 20, 2019.

(Rom 15:24). Why? Because unbelievers were found there, not simply because it was a new location.

John Nevius described missionaries like scaffolds on a construction site. The apostolic teams remained until local churches were established with their own elders. Afterwards, those workers relocated elsewhere that “those who have never heard will understand” (Rom 15:21).

The apostolic imagination requires the Church to consider the matter of location. However, geographic thoughts are to be concerned about the lost men and women who reside in those locations. The Church does not go into all the world simply because she is able to travel to a new place. Her expectation is not to plant churches because another worship expression is needed in this or that community to attract Christian families. Rather, she is sent to the locations where gospel foundations are nonexistent.¹⁶

Relocating for any type of Kingdom activity is not reflective of the apostolic imagination. Simply transferring one’s location (short- or long-term) for ministry is not the same as following in the apostolic footsteps. The apostolic imagination is concerned with lostness and sanctification. It is concerned about the gospel speeding ahead and being honored (2 Thes 3:1) and new churches receiving the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). Its concern relates to geography only as such locations are comprised of lost people without a foundation.

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.¹⁷ R. W. Lewis wrote for every thirty missionaries who go to the reached people groups of the world, approximately one missionary goes to the unreached.¹⁸ According to her research, this means an estimated ninety-five percent of all missionaries are serving among active Christians who are reaching out to nominal or near culture unbelievers of their own people group.¹⁹ Though the United States is home to the third largest number of unreached

¹⁶While people in every location are in need of gospel proclamation, not every location is as needy as another one. The presence of evangelical churches able to carry out evangelistic work and ministry in their communities rightly diminishes the need for apostolic workers. A wonderful goal to achieve, by God’s grace, is to have one evangelical church in an urban community for every 1,000 people. Each church would consist of one hundred believers. For rural communities, one church of fifty believers for every 500 people would be ideal. For more information on discerning strategic need in a community and the research and history behind these ratios see John Mark Terry and J. D. Payne, *Developing a Strategy for Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Cultural Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 186-92.

¹⁷David 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.

¹⁸R. W. Lewis, “Clarifying the Remaining Frontier Mission Task,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 35 #4 (October-December, 2018): 159.

people groups, the United States—with all of her evangelical churches—receives more missionaries than any other country.²⁰

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. The Church that is able to rest comfortably in light of this resource distribution is not following in the way of the apostolic.

Rethinking Sending Structures (especially for North America)

While many church and parachurch structures designed to send and care for church planters throughout the world operate from an apostolic perspective, few North American organizations are designed to accommodate this ministry. Most apostolic teams that exist on this continent have to be creative with matters related to training, support, encouragement, and pastoral counsel.

For the most part, churches and agencies view North America through pastoral lenses. The need for developed pastoral structures must compliment the numerous churches already present. This reality has resulted in many churches 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 to be sent to plant churches among unreached people groups.

Whenever the Church becomes more pastoral in her functions, and less apostolic, disciple making activity in a society is filtered through the pastoral lens. The result is the development of methods and strategies that support ongoing pastoral training and established church development with little to no structural support for apostolic labors. Misapplication of a pastoral missiology to an unreached field results in the satisfaction of planting churches with long-term Kingdom citizens and pastoral leadership coming from seminaries, rather than starting churches with new converts and developing them into church elders (Acts 13-14).

The Church throughout North America finds Herself in a context where both mature church structures and apostolic structures are needed. Pastoral paradigms for long-established churches and apostolic missionary teams must operate within the same geography, though among different contexts and in different ways. This is a present challenge.

¹⁹Ibid., 160.

²⁰Regarding the United States being home to the third largest number of unreached people groups see J. D. Payne, *Strangers Next Door: Immigration, Migration, and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012), 63. Regarding the United States receiving the most missionaries see, Lewis, 163 where she references Todd M. Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross., eds., *Atlas of Global Christianity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 283.

Pastoral expressions have a long history and are well established in North America. Over the past thirty years, support structures have developed for individuals who desire to plant *and* pastor a church starting with long-term Kingdom citizens. However, the greatest need of the hour is the development of structures to facilitate the identity, training, finances, encouragement, accountability, and sending of apostolic teams to work among the unreached peoples.

An apostolic imagination recognizes the dearth of organization and does not remain content with the status quo. Change is needed. This does not mean that the Church cease sending pastors to plant and oversee churches. It does mean what is currently the *expectation* should become the *exception*. And the sending of apostolic teams, which presently is the exception, should become the expectation.

Rethinking Partnerships

Missio Nexus revealed the size of our task and need for Kingdom collaboration when they adopted as their tagline: “The Great Commission is too big for anyone to accomplish alone and too important not to try to do together.”²¹ The apostle Paul could write that he was thankful for the Philippians “because of your partnership in the gospel” (Phil 1:5). He hoped, as he traveled to Spain, Roman believers would help with his journey (Rom 15:24). The gospel was designed to spread through all the members of the Church co-laboring with one another. The apostolic imagination leads to partnership.

In view of western churches reconsidering their contexts, histories, and identities, the matter of partnerships is critical to global Kingdom work. History reveals a western hegemony when it comes to missionary activity for the past several centuries. However, today, Kingdom citizens are being sent from western and Majority World contexts to other western and Majority World contexts. Sending is not in unidirectional.

The transnational nature of global disciple making with the Church located throughout the world, allows for the development of Kingdom partnerships. While partnership is not always possible, apostolic endeavors leverage as many resources as possible that the word may “speed ahead and be honored” (2 Thes 3:1). The apostolic imagination recognizes the need for Kingdom collaboration and seeks to develop such partnerships.

Rethinking the West

History is filled with stories where the gospel not only flowed along the currents of colonial expansion, but resulted in church and missionary activity accommodating to western governments and cultural preferences. While exceptions exist, a great deal of 200 years of

²¹<https://missionexus.org/the-great-commission-big-important/>; accessed November 21, 2019.

Protestant missionary history includes paternalistic methods and strategies. Churches of the western world need to consider the future in view of this past.

The Church should not think that just because a dark history exists then western Christians 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 may be found in the world—regardless of her past! The Lord has provided a great deal of experience, resources, and wisdom to older churches, and it would be poor Kingdom stewardship to neglect such blessings because of guilt for past mistakes.

For centuries, believers went into the world and the Spirit and the Word worked. Disciples were made, churches were planted, and elders were appointed. As those new Kingdom communities followed the way of Jesus, the gospel spread and the disciples multiplied. The evangelical percentages found in many Majority World countries dwarfs those found in many western countries. India, China, Nigeria, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Thailand, and Japan—to name a few—are now sending thousands of missionaries.²² It is a new day for Great Commission activity.

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 western countries where many unreached peoples have migrated, as well as many Christians, opportunities abound for churches to collaborate with brothers and sisters in apostolic labors for reaching the nations across the street. Rather than embracing the rugged individualism and a sense of superiority that has existed for centuries, North American leaders and churches would do well to adopt a humble, servant leadership position when engaging other Kingdom leaders and churches throughout the world.

Excursus: Call to Scholars

Missiological research is severely lacking regarding the apostolic. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the new apostolic movement addressed apostolic identity and function primarily from a charismatic perspective.²³ Many evangelicals were turned-off and failed to offer serious reflection due to the research methods and personalities involved. However, a renewed interest in the apostolic has been growing throughout denominational and nondenominational circles. A few authors have attempted engagement with the biblical text and have asked questions about the *apostolos*.

In 2005, Neil Cole's book *Organic Church: Growing Faith where Life Happens*, was an early 21st century work that raised questions about "apostolic mission" and "apostolic leadership." A

²²Jason Mandryk, *Operation World: The Definitive Prayer Guide to Every Nation*, 7th edition (Colorado Springs, CO: Biblia, 2010), 950, 951.

²³David Cannistraci, *Apostles and the Emerging Apostolic Movement* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1996).

year later, Alan Hirsch published *The Forgotten Ways* in which he brought attention to several points related to the missional church, including “apostolic environments.”²⁴ Alan R. Johnson, writing from a Pentecostal perspective, published *Apostolic Function in 21st Century Missions* in 2013, in which he considered the biblical evidence and missiological thought for how the apostolic could be applied in the modern world. An extensive biblical examination of *apostolos*, written by a Southern Baptist, is Don Dent’s, *The Ongoing Role of Apostles in Missions*. Dent originally produced this work as part of his 2009 dissertation and later published it in book form.²⁵ My forthcoming work, *Apostolic Imagination: Re-thinking Contemporary Missions*, addresses this topic and most of the points raised in this paper.²⁶

Conclusion

The missionary work of the Church needs to be evaluated with an apostolic imagination. This process of conceptualizing and assessing present understandings and actions is a matter of wise Kingdom stewardship. Bosch showed how 2000 years of culture and context shaped the Church’s understanding of mission and the execution of mission strategy. His conclusion was the Church, after passing through several paradigm shifts, had entered into a new paradigm that required a new “theological response.”²⁷ Whether or not one agrees with Bosch’s response and concluding “relevant missiology” is not the point here. What matters for this paper is that global realities have shifted, just as he called it thirty years ago, and evangelical mission remains confused in the liminal state.

Both the global and ecclesiastical challenges provide the opportunity for Kingdom innovation to transition to a contemporary apostolic expression. Developing an apostolic imagination will enable the Church to consider her present realities and make necessary adjustments. While this conceptualization will seem foreign to some, such is not a novelty with the Church. The apostolic imagination is an ancient gift that has always existed, yet remains to be opened in many evangelical circles.

²⁴Since these publications, both Cole and Hirsch have published other books addressing apostolic matters.

²⁵Neil Cole, *Growing Faith where Life Happens* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005); Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating Apostolic Movements* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006); Alan R. Johnson, *Apostolic Function in 21st Century Missions* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2013); Don Dent, *The Ongoing Role of Apostles in Missions* (Nashville, TN: Westbow Press, 2019). Dent’s work is the best exegetical and missiological treatment of the topic to date.

²⁶J. D. Payne, *Apostolic Imagination: Re-Thinking Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, forthcoming).

²⁷Bosch., 189.