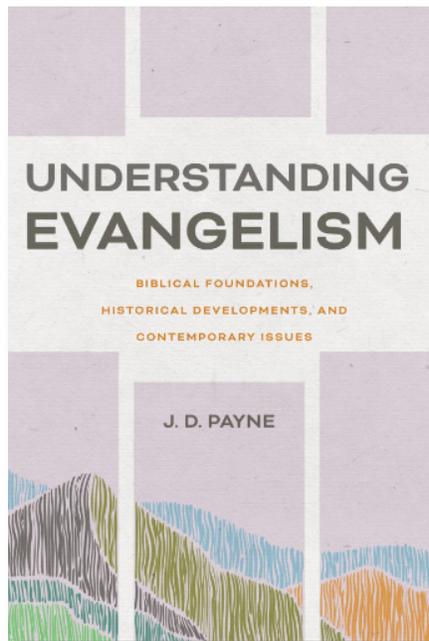


REVIEW: Understanding Evangelism: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues by J. D. Payne

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REVIEWED BY
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J. D. Payne. *Understanding Evangelism: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2025. 334 pp. ISBN: 9781540963581. \$23.00 paperback.



In *Understanding Evangelism: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues*, J. D. Payne gives a broad overview of the biblical and historical foundations of Christian evangelism. He also offers a clarion call for the church and individual Christians to participate in the intercultural proclamation of the gospel. Payne opens by making a sharp distinction between evangelism and other aspects of the church's mission and ecclesial activities, arguing that an understanding of evangelism should be narrowly defined as verbal communication of the faith to the unregenerate. He writes, "When the act is conflated with other church functions, the result is usually a syncretistic understanding of evangelism that is

neither biblical evangelism, by definition, nor evangelistic practice in the world" (29). The remaining sections of the book examine biblical and theological issues related to evangelism, its historical development in the West, issues of cross-cultural communication, and contemporary concerns related to practice.

Payne appropriately positions the church's call to evangelism within a missional hermeneutic, beginning with the Genesis creation account and the cultural mandate. He examines the Great Commission and its significance for the church today. He also argues for a theology of evangelism clearly embedded within the Reformed tradition's understanding of justification through penal substitution. For Payne, the goal of evangelism is the punctiliar conversion of an individual, a "one-time, instantaneous event [that] moves a person from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of Christ" (89). The book traces the history of evangelism, both in the early church and in

Western European and North American contexts. Payne addresses challenges and approaches to intercultural communication, and he answers specific questions about evangelistic practices in the church today, such as the use of the “sinner’s prayer,” the value of tracts, and the ethics of evangelism toward strangers.

There are, however, some limitations to *Understanding Evangelism*. Payne repeatedly critiques definitions of the gospel and approaches to evangelism that fall outside his tradition and definitions, arguing that tampering with these universal truths “leads the manipulator to a syncretized religious message that is not Christian at all” (136). In doing so, he downplays the validity of the enculturated theologies and practices of non-Western and non-Protestant Christian traditions. Payne’s history of evangelism focuses almost exclusively on the West, and he gives no attention to early African or Asian Christianities. Similarly, Payne does not address evangelism practices in the majority world today, nor does he analyze Pentecostal approaches. Finally, Payne defines a normative punctiliar conversion experience, where a gospel presentation leads to conversion, followed by incorporation into a community of faith and discipleship. This restricted definition overlooks the increasingly prevalent experiences of those who belong to a body of believers, and even practice their liturgies and rituals, prior to belief and commitment to Christ.

Understanding Evangelism is effective in its presentation of Payne’s particular understanding of Christian evangelism, and it provides a helpful historical overview of the Western church’s evolving practices. Payne is clearly engaging with missiological voices that argue for a broader understanding of the church’s mission in the world (e.g. *missio Dei* or integral mission). Whether or not one agrees with his conclusions, his elevation of gospel proclamation can be seen as a counterbalance to approaches that neglect verbal witness. Payne includes helpful extracts from historical and contemporary writers, as well as discussion questions at the end of each chapter. These encourage the reader to wrestle with the application of his arguments, making the book appropriate for classroom or small group use.

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