

The Christian Gospel: A Short Account of the Momentous News About Jesus Christ

Payne, Tony. *The Christian Gospel: A Short Account of the Momentous News About Jesus Christ*. Sydney: Matthias Media, 2023, 77 pages.

Australia and Canada share many features in common. Historically, our two countries are profoundly marked by British colonial expansion. Politically, both nations are envied on the global stage as stable, progressive, democracies that serve as middle-powers in their respective regions. Culturally, Australia and Canada are nations of immigrants, with a growing awareness of the impact upon the Indigenous peoples and the need for reconciliation. Ecclesiastically, both countries reflect the legacy of European Christendom spread abroad, and both nations are now experiencing the challenge and complexity of Christian witness in what Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor calls “A Secular Age.”

Tony Payne’s new publication *The Christian Gospel* seeks to speak directly to those impacted by these common features identified above. Payne names a variety of people he knows in Australia who have either grown up in church and drifted away from

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Christianity, or those who are born and raised in a secular household now apathetic towards the claims of Christian faith. While reading Payne’s work, I found his imagined reader (p.4) to be familiar here in Canada as well, a growing segment of the population missiologists refer to as “nones and dones.” Payne invites his reader, who we might call an “affable agnostic neighbour,” first to know themselves and the world around them better by appreciating the deep impact of the Christian gospel on Western culture. Second, Payne pushes further to provide both an invitation and a pathway for one to take steps towards faith in Jesus, by building their own lives on this gospel truth.

Beginning with the Creation, Payne invites the reader to consider God’s big story of salvation, focusing on the potential and problematic nature of human beings, being human. With humour and contemporary imagery, Payne traces the foundational problem of Sin in the world, as well as the corresponding impact upon human creatures and our relationship with God and one another. Reflecting on God’s justice and our own human mortality, Payne nudges the reader towards a longing to resolve this tension of how best to live a meaningful life in a fallen world. Carefully noting the joy and gift of the Old Testament, including the clear love of God from the Hebrew Bible, the reader is then introduced to the paradigm-shifting encounter of the incarnation of Jesus – Messiah, Christ, King. Drawing on Paul’s “unknown God” exchange

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in Acts 17 with philosophers in Athens, Payne invites the reader to consider the wonder of the resurrection in light of the awesomeness of the knowledge that God created the entire universe. Is resurrection from the dead really that incomprehensible when you stop to consider the One who gave life to everything we see in the world and beyond?

Near the end of his short book, Payne returns to his initial argument that not only should those living in a post-Christendom context have a deeper awareness of the impact of the Christian gospel on the West, but that this same gospel invites us to do something as a result. Payne writes, “The Christian gospel is about the rebellion of every human being against the God who created us, and it’s about what God has done in history through Jesus Christ to completely change the terms of that relationship. And what God has done through Jesus can’t be ignored, as if it didn’t happen. It calls for a response.” (p. 66) Payne confronts the reader with a stark choice – living in response to this gospel either by a Frank Sinatra like “my way” or “God’s way.”

Payne ends his work with a deeper dive on what living in “God’s way” could look like for the reader. Concrete suggestions are made for those interested in walking the road of discipleship including “talking to God (prayer),” “submission to Jesus (conversion),” and “trusting in Jesus (holiness),” as one goes deeper in their relationship with God in Christ.

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The Christian Gospel admirably covers a lot of theological ground in a short number of pages. Written in a winsome, compelling, and invitational tone, this evangelistic and apologetic publication would be one that I would happily place in the hands of those who were seeking to know more about the basics of the Christian faith.

Where I would like to have seen more emphasis, however, is in a clearer and deeper sense of ecclesiology throughout the short book. Payne notes that “Western culture lionizes individual freedom” and that “this individualist drumbeat is so relentless in our culture that we barely even notice it anymore,” and yet much of the writing is directed *to the individual* without much reference to the Ekklesia. While commending the church as part of one’s trust in Jesus (p. 76), there is still a carefulness in the wording noting “preconceptions” and “previous experiences” that were not positive. It’s understandable, of course, in light of mission history in the West, but I was left longing for a more fulsome argument of why in a secular and individualistic age, belonging to Jesus means living out the faith in community. While appreciating the caution needed when discussing church and belonging in a post-Christendom context, I was eager to hear reasons why belonging to the local church as the Body of Christ is essential in a spiritual but not religious age.

With these reservations noted, I commend *The Christian Gospel* as a thoughtful and contextual tool for evangelism and

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apologetics in Western settings such as Australia or Canada today. Tony Payne's work will be a welcome addition to small group ministries and congregational outreach in equipping their members to articulate their Christian faith in a way that is effective with those where they live, work and play.

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