

Book Review

C. Peter Wagner, *Changing Church: How God Is Leading His Church into the Future* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 2004). 196 pages.

Reviewed by Joseph L. Castleberry, Ed.D.

Academic dean associate and professor of Intercultural Studies,
Assemblies of God Theological Seminary

The basic thesis of *Changing Church* is Wagner's ongoing project: his proclamation that the Church entered the "Second Apostolic Age" in 2001. This mystical—and rather self-serving declaration (linked to Wagner's organization, the International Coalition of Apostles, which he serves as presiding apostle)—has little to recommend it. Wagner offers no convincing argument that the existence of contemporary apostles makes this century more comparable to the Apostolic Age of the first century than any other time in Christian history. Instead, his recognition of many apostles throughout the history of the church suggests that, rather than being "restored," apostles have always been part of the church.

In place of a compelling argument for his thesis, Wagner offers a highly charged, divisive rhetoric. By railing that all denominations are under the influence of a demonic "corporate spirit of religion," he effectively demonizes all denominational leaders. Singled out for special criticism is the Assemblies of God (A/G), the only denomination to address his arguments. Wagner could engage the A/G in an irenic fashion, seeing the clear points of *agreement and convergence* between its carefully

reasoned biblical arguments and his belief in contemporary apostolic ministry. Instead, he takes the A/G's discomfort with (but not prohibition of) the assignment of the title "apostle" as proof that it is bound by the demonic corporate spirit of religion.

Wagner's primary rhetorical weapon in raising a polemic against his brethren is the concept of "new wine." He uses this device to warn people that they will never receive new wine unless they reject their old wineskins. (Enjoying both new and old wine does not seem to be an option for Wagner.) His rhetorical tool militates against finding common ground between himself and those who accept apostleship *and* denominational identity. Condemning those who remain faithful to their denominational heritage and declaring they will miss what God is doing in the world today, Wagner explicitly calls on them to leave their denominations to join or to form new apostolic networks. Thus, he presents the choice between new wine and old wine in a most distasteful cup.

Having set the book in a polemical tone, Wagner goes on to propose that nine major changes are occurring (by God's Will) in today's church. The first of these changes is a shift from

denominational government to apostolic government. While many churches are indeed adopting this trend, there can be argument about whether this change is due to a new season God is instituting in the church. Wagner makes a generally good case against the cessationist idea that God has stopped giving apostles to the church. (Again, on this point the A/G generally concurs, although discouraging the use of the title “apostle” and warning against the confusion between the authority of the twelve unique apostles of Christ and that of subsequent apostles.) Nevertheless, an insufficient discussion of the nature of spiritual authority mars his argument.

Another change Wagner suggests is a shift from “a church vision to a Kingdom vision.” In many ways, his discussion of the role of Christians in the workplace is on-target and helpful, but what he describes as a “paradigm shift” would be seen more accurately as a “pendulum swing.” Rather than the church moving away from a focus on local congregations to a focus on the “church” in the workplace, what is needed is a healthy balance and *integration* between the two. In the end, embracing the church in the workplace while denying the importance of involvement in local congregations is neither biblical nor healthy for the Kingdom. However exciting and valid the new Christian emphasis on workplace worship, service and fellowship may be, it is stunning that Wagner can discuss a shift away from focus on the local church without adding a single word of caution.

Another trend Wagner posits is a change from emphasis on “the expansion of the church to the transformation of society.” In describing this shift, he expresses no

concern that less emphasis is placed on the church’s expansion. Without a shred of biblical warrant, he explains that the church’s failure to transform society is due to our failure to set “workplace apostles in their proper place.” On the heels of this “revelation,” Wagner discusses an alleged change from a tolerance for the kingdom of Satan to an invasion of it. Here Wagner places his emphasis on “strategic-level spiritual warfare,” explaining that the persistence of evil in the world is due to the failure of denominational Christians (or “spiritual pacifists,” as he pejoratively labels them) to engage in struggles with the principalities and powers. He offers no coherent biblical basis for the idea.

Wagner’s argument improves to some degree as he discusses a trend “from heavy doctrinal load to a lighter doctrinal load.” It is true that such a trend is evident in the church, and though his embrace of Open Theology and his suggestion that the doctrine of the Trinity is not an essential Christian belief will dismay some readers, Wagner makes an effective case for greater tolerance of ambiguity in terms of doctrine.

Finally, Wagner appropriately recognizes the trend away “from Reformed Sanctification to Wesleyan Holiness.” This chapter is well done and it includes an important discussion of the apostles’ humility that helps to define his overall project: the facilitation of apostolic ministry in today’s church.

On balance, however, Wagner’s book is more of the same one-note samba to which we have become accustomed. It is an unnecessarily divisive advocacy of an extreme position on apostolic ministry. Nevertheless, Pentecostal and

charismatic Christians need to reach an understanding of apostolic ministry that will bring us together. Even Wagner would have to agree that such unity is the essential apostolic task and this reviewer, at the risk of being called a “spiritual pacifist,” invites him to return to irenic dialogue.