

Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

School of Theology

Book Assessment

Incarnational Agents

by

John R. Cheyne

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by

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Incarnational Agents

Incarnational Agents, by John R. Cheyne, who was appointed as a Southern Baptist missionary to Rhodesia in 1954, and later helped open Southern Baptist missions work in Ethiopia, offers a concise title which mirrors a uniquely Christian theme. But the title promises more than the book delivers.

Cheyne champions transformational ministries engaged in by Christian agents incarnated by the Spirit of Christ.

Theologically, Cheyne is on solid ground as he seeks to promote incarnationalizing the gospel such that all people everywhere may first see it and experience it action, then embrace it by faith.

He rightly says Scripture teaches that humanity has a responsibility toward all of God's creation, and insightfully points out that to whatever extent one fails to be his or her brother's or sister's keeper, he or she participates in becoming his brother's or sister's killer. His denouncement of a "rice Christian" kind of social gospel should help ministers maintain a more wholistic (to the whole person) gospel proclamation, and his descriptions of the three types of evangelism (presence, proclamation, and persuasion) are informative. Cheyne

demonstrates a commitment to a biblical theology, reminding that humanity's bondage is primarily symptomatic of the wider effect of sin and separation from God, arguing that separation from God is willful and self-inflicted, and positing that the world shall not be freed from the bondage of sin simply by dealing with the physical symptoms. Moreover, his assertion that people imprisoned by poverty and superstition may all too eagerly reach out for the hope offered for spiritual release, only to become disillusioned when the agent fails to translate the spiritual truth into tangible expressions of compassion, is spoken as one with experience. He urges his readers to follow the example of Jesus, who fed multitudes on more than one occasion, discerning that it was better to express agape compassion in the crisis of human hurt, than to guard against the potential for misunderstanding. Cheyne's commitment both to evangelism and to social responsibility strike a balance reminiscent of the Incarnation paradigm. Additionally, he carefully points out that evangelism takes place best when the target community is treated not as a project, but as a people possessing dignity and respect.

Cheyne does an excellent job of defining many terms for his readers, familiarizing his audience with value systems from other cultures (via charts), and suggesting some concepts of communication that may help one become a more effective incarnational agent. His routine references to personal freedom

of choice are warmly welcomed, as is his description of the incarnational agent (earthen vessel, servant, soul winner, enabler, catalyst, resource agent, fraternal worker, and church planter). His discussions of John 4:1-26, the Samaritan woman text, and John 5:1-14, the crippled man at the pool of Bethesda text, are intelligently done. His church ministry assessment, and personal skills and gifts inventory are extensive but helpful, but his denominational population break down in and around Johannesburg, South Africa, while informative and numerically impressive, seems to be somewhat of an impractical addition to the book. In the estimation of the present writer, this illustrates one of the major weaknesses of Cheyne's book: It becomes far too scientific and pedantic. What began as a noble theme, incarnational agents, turns out being measuring, calculating, weighing, recording, interviewing, counting, researching, consulting, surveying, developing project statements, asking dichotomous questions, analyzing, and studying. Christians certainly are commanded to count the cost and plan ahead; however, Cheyne's technical suggestions absolutely overwhelm the average reader. Given the choice between deciphering and executing Cheyne's steps to develop projects or translating hieroglyphics off a cave wall, many would choose the latter! Nevertheless, his categorizing of the four basic resources is helpful, as is his assertion that goals are

intermediate steps that lead to the attainment of an objective. As shortcuts, some may be interested in copying or adapting Cheyne's many questionnaires, surveys, or charts. They can be helpful if they do not become ends in themselves; however, once again, Cheyne shows a passion for "the paper trail," almost to the point of being ridiculous. His health pyramid drawing is useful for understanding the present disproportion, his population statistics in the appendix section is informative, and his inclusion of the 1983 Wheaton statement definitive. More surveys and evaluation instruments appear toward the back of the book, along with a thorough bibliography conveniently categorized by topic; then, addresses of various periodicals and other sources of information provide the reader with concrete information for pursuing further studies and involvement. Cheyne's scholarship is sound, and is reflected in that only two typographical errors were found (p. 123, 199). In summary, Cheyne's book begins strongly, supported by sound theology, but ends pedantically, propped up by evaluative processes. The present writer finds it difficult to justify the book's price tag.