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## Book Review of *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* by Alan Hirsch

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## Book Reviews

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### The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church

Reviewed by Kenneth E. Bickel

*Hirsch, Alan. The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church. Brazos Press, 2006. ISBN 10:1-58743-164-5. 295pp.*

Alan Hirsch asserts that "there are primal forces that lie latent in every Jesus Community and in every true believer," forces that have "energized history's most outstanding Jesus movements...." (15) This belief impels him to call for those who yearn to be part of an outstanding Jesus movement to recognize that the contemporary model of Christianity (especially in western societies) faces a daunting challenge. The challenge exists because of "the dramatic changes in worldview that have been taking place in general culture over the last 50 years or so." (16)

The author firmly believes that these dramatic changes ought to drive missional Christians to the conclusion that institutionalized churches (including those that are dedicated to the attractional model of evangelism) will not do well in penetrating the hostile culture for Christ in a meaningful way. He joins a chorus of other authors (Kimball and Kinnaman to name two) by claiming that in the post-Christian west, the non-Christian population, generally speaking, holds a favorable interest in God, spirituality, Jesus, and prayer but reports "a high degree of alienation" toward the church. (34)

Hirsch would describe the institutional church as an entity that arose early in the 4<sup>th</sup> century after Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. He favorably quotes Rodney Stark (a respected sociologist of religion) who maintains that this so-called triumph of Christianity destroyed its most attractive and dynamic aspects, turning a high-intensity, grassroots movement into an arrogant institution controlled by an elite body of self-serving men. (60) On page 64 of the book, Hirsch provides a table showing the differences

between the Christian movement prior to 313 AD and the Christendom model following that date. In the table he describes the institutional church as characterized by an importance given to buildings; a leadership that is professional in nature; authority that is hierarchical and top-down; and a leadership that operates primarily in the pastor-teacher mode.

Hirsch does not dismiss the institutional church completely but believes that an organization like he describes is not well suited to penetrate a culture such as exists in western societies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. His appeal is that we re-discover "the forgotten ways," by which he speaks of the Apostolic Genius along with the elements of this Apostolic Genius, which he collectively refers to as mDNA (short for *missional* DNA). He describes the Apostolic Genius as, "that life force that pulsed through the New Testament church and in other expressions of apostolic Jesus movements throughout history." (77) He delineates the components of mDNA as: (1) disciple making; (2) missional-incarnational impulse; (3) apostolic environment; (4) organic systems; and (5) *communitas*, not community. All of these components form a constellation that surround the central theology of this kind of movement, namely, "Jesus is Lord". The components not only link vitally to that central theology but each sheds light on the others. (78-79)

Hirsch devotes the next six chapters of the book (which, along with the conclusion and a glossary of key terms, completes the book) to this central theology and the 5 essential components of mDNA. A very brief representation of these 6 themes follows:

- "Jesus is Lord" expresses a Christocentric monotheism and a distillation of the essential message to be preached. Hirsch asserts that this simple Christology is essential for a Jesus movement that will spread rapidly and organically. He says: "Freed from the philosophical density of the academy and from dependence on the professional cleric, the gospel becomes profoundly 'sneezable.'" He goes on to explain: "We know from the study of ideas that they spread in patterns very similar to that of viral epidemics. We also know that in order to really take hold and become an 'epidemic,' they have to be easily transferred." (86)

It would be incomplete to claim that this theology is thus spotlighted simply for the sake of rapid transmission. It is intended as well to carry the very understandable message that Christians are His servants and "the task of our lives is to bring *every* aspect of our lives, communal and individual, under this One God...." (90,

emphasis his) That emphasizes the falseness of any separation professing Christians establish between the sacred and the secular. That Jesus is Lord of all proclaims a non-dualistic spirituality. (96)

- The author asserts that the ability to generate authentic followers of Jesus (i.e. disciple-making, his first essential component of mDNA) is the "single most crucial factor that will in the end determine the quality of the whole...." (102) He also contends that, as a whole, Christianity has "lowered the bar for participation in the Christian community to the lowest common denominator" (104) with its emphasis to welcome as many seekers as possible. By contrast, he favorably quotes Neil Cole of Church Multiplication Associates (which Hirsch cites often as a good example of a movement which embodies mDNA): "We want to lower the bar of how church is done and raise the bar of what it means to be a disciple." (104)

The author would contend that choosing to be involved in a movement dedicated to living out mDNA is tantamount to choosing to be a serious follower of Jesus Christ. People who seek to be more or less passive (or at least comfortable) Christians will not desire to live with the missional responsibilities expected by the culture of such a movement. Add to those responsibilities a healthy instruction in biblical truth and about the disciplines that lead to personal growth, and genuine disciples will surely be the result.

- The second essential component of mDNA is a missional-incarnational impulse. This combination of words is intended to describe "the practical outworking of the mission of God (the *mission Dei*) and the Incarnation." (128, emphasis is his) It refers to a commitment "to seed and embed the gospel in different groups' cultures and societies and to thus sow the seeds of rapid multiplication." It is a *sending* model of being missional, not an *attractional* one.

Hirsch asserts that the attractional model is generally unable to reach lost people beyond any significant cultural barriers (131), whereas the spontaneous energy of a mDNA movement is better equipped to do that. This would be so because there is less institutional centrality with a movement not attached to a building, or holding to a commitment to draw large groups together for common experiences in that building. It is also be-

cause the incarnational aspect of this impulse would result in greater degrees of proximity and presence related to the people among whom the mini-church's (reviewer's label) of the movement are seeking to reach. (133-134)

- The third essential component of mDNA describes an apostolic environment. This is the term Hirsch assigns to the "powerful form of catalytic influence that weaves its way through the seemingly chaotic network of churches and believers" that describes a mDNA movement. (150) He is quick to assert that such an environment will not occur apart from "a certain category of leadership, namely, that of the apostolic person." (151) He further clarifies his belief that such leadership "is going to take more than the traditional pastor-teacher mode of leadership..." (153) and that a mDNA movement will have "all the hallmarks of an emergent people movement with little or no centralized structures, no 'ordained' or professional ministry class, and on official 'church' buildings."

Thus, the apostolic environment must have leadership that is gifted in and passionate about evangelism, and must be comfortable with casting off the restraints of the typical institutionalized local church. Hirsch suggests that there are three primary functions of apostolic ministry: (1) to embed mDNA through pioneering new ground for the gospel and the church (i.e., to advance the gospel into new missional contexts while embedding mDNA into the new churches that emerge in those places); (2) to guard mDNA through the application and integration of apostolic theology (i.e., assuming the responsibility of ensuring that the churches remain true to the gospel and its ethos); and (3) to create the environment in which the other ministries emerge (i.e., any ministries started by the movement flow out of the apostolic energy). (154-158)

- The fourth essential component of mDNA addresses the need for organic systems. Hirsch explains that a mDNA movement must organize itself "as a living organism that reflects more how God has structured life itself...;" one where "the inner structures and systems...enable metabolic growth (growth that takes place exponentially and organically)." (180) He wisely acknowledges that "all living systems require some form of structure in order to maintain and perpetuate their existence," but insists that they must be simple, reproducible and internal

rather than external. (186)

To accomplish this, the movement must form itself around a network structure. (196) He favorably draws from Dee Hock in presenting keys to developing networked organization. These keys provide a more concrete description of what is meant by an organic system:

- The organization must be adaptable and responsive to changing conditions while preserving overall cohesion and unity of purpose.
  - The trick is to find the delicate balance that allows the system to avoid turf fights and backstabbing on the one hand, and authoritarian micromanagement on the other.
  - The organization must cultivate equity, autonomy, and individual opportunity.
  - The organization's governing structure must distribute power and function to the lowest level possible.
  - The governing structure must not be a chain of command, but rather a framework for dialogue, deliberation, and coordination among equals. (203)
- The last essential component of mDNA represents a call for *communitas*, not community. To gain a full understanding of *communitas* Hirsch begins by introducing and defining another term, *liminality*. He explains that *liminality* "applies to that situation where people find themselves in an in-between, marginal state in relation to the surrounding society, a place that could involve significant danger and disorientation, but not necessarily so." (220) Then, *communitas* "describes that unique experience of *togetherness* that only really happens among a group of people inspired by the vision of a better world who actually attempt to do something about it." (221)

Thus, when a group of Christians are inspired to stretch outside their comfort zones for the cause of taking Christ to a world that is not seeking Him, there is disequilibrium created by their efforts. When the group experiences that disequilibrium and willingly continues in it because of their vision and commitment to mission, they will experience a closer bonding and mutual support than what would be realized by mere community. Community represents "the settled experience of a group of people that exists for its own benefit and for the 'insiders'." *Communitas* represents "the journey of a

group of people that find each other only in a common pursuit of a vision and of a mission that lies beyond itself." (236) When an incarnational church engages in missional effort, *communitas* will be the result.

#### Reviewer's Observations

- Hirsch demonstrates a superb concern for a coming (and already here) generation of people who, even if they have favorable views toward Jesus Christ, are not impressed with the Christian church. His concern for lost people, and especially for those people who might lie significantly outside of many local church's cultural spectrums, is admirable and compelling.
- Readers will appreciate Hirsch's commitment to keeping "Jesus is Lord" (but see my fear related to this below) at the heart of any endeavor that would seek to demonstrate mDNA. Likewise, his emphasis on disciple-making as the single most crucial factor that will in the end determine the quality of the whole is commendable. Further, his call for a missional-incarnation impulse stands on good theological ground and expresses the kind of commitment that churches should exude. His concept—*communitas*, not community—is appealing and engaging.
- Hirsch's dissatisfaction with the institutionalization of the church is fair since that phenomenon often works against missionality and flexibility. Where power in the church is vested simply by institutional position and is not gained by godly influence, lethargy toward the unsaved is probable.
- I personally agree with Hirsch's observations that the typical church of western society is too caught up in building projects. I suspect that contemporary, outside-the-box thinking could result in more funds being devoted to actual ministry than to the creation of splendid edifices.
- While paying lip-service to the need for some institutional structure within churches and also the need for established churches to exist, it seems that the true essence of his passion is that the great majority of typically organized churches of today are ineffective and should be replaced with movements that better reflect fit the model he is proposing. I suspect that his analysis of the present cultural scene in western societies is too narrow and does not take into consideration what the scene might

look like in 20 years.

- Hirsch's assertions and implications that the "forgotten ways" of the first 3 centuries of Christianity represent God's timeless methodology for how the church should expand its influence stands on weak revelatory ground. What has been described in the New Testament and in church history regarding the spread of Christianity during that time should stir us and please us, but should not be construed as establishing a prescribed methodology for all cultures and all eras.
- Likewise, his pointing to the spread of Christianity via house churches in China and the dynamic growth of the Methodist movement in Great Britain as examples that should define how we do church today in our own locations ignores too many variables that constituted the shaping of the special environments where those movements occurred. To present these extraordinary movements that took place in specific contexts as norms for how Christianity should spread in 21<sup>st</sup> century western societies is not compelling. Something special that is described does not constitute an adequate model to be prescribed universally.
- With some of the provided examples of an effective mDNA movement, Hirsch's references to multiplied churches are, in my estimation, not references to churches but to something like discipleship groups. I suspect that these groups don't regularly try to carry through with the full range of responsibilities that can be identified in the New Testament. These discipleship groups are undoubtedly attractive to some, but the limited range of age-graded ministries they can provide would not be attractive to many, and with good reason.
- These small organic groups might well have initial energy, but I suspect that he idealizes the long-term energetic, missional participation of those involved with the group, especially with no practical accountability to others outside of the group. I have personally received testimony of such reality from individuals who were seeking to be objective and fair about their experience with a cell-based model of church.
- Likewise, the small organic groups that arise from a mDNA movement might thrive for a time, but the flexible nature of their structures (or lack of structure) does not bode well for the endurance of the group. To be sure, with an organic movement the endurance of a group

might not be a high value, but I think consistency of a religious experience is important within an age of frenetic change, especially when that group carries the name "church".

- I find myself a bit concerned about having a central theology stated as briefly as "Jesus in Lord". While I don't believe that an extensive systematic theology is appropriate for an organic movement, I am a bit wary of uniting around that simple statement. My most concrete reason for that wariness is because I have personally had both Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses tell me that they are in full agreement with that sentiment. I find those experiences telling.
- One small but I think meaningful observation: I doubt that those advocating an organic movement of church life have grappled adequately with all the pitfalls of a highly litigious society.
- Finally, I would like to believe that a healthy organized church, under the right leadership, could incorporate enough of the ideals expressed in *The Forgotten Ways* to sponsor a missional movement that would benefit from the financial stability, leadership and accountability of a more enduring central organization.

All that being said, I feel I have been enriched by many of the concepts and exhortations found in this book. I would recommend this book for those who wish to grapple seriously with the full range of the responsibilities a local church should assume. I believe that such grappling would yield the most fruit when carried out in a context where a group of diverse but open-minded individuals could discuss Hirsch's ideas at length. His thoughts are too good to be ignored but innovative church strategy is too important to be settled quickly.

### **The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating The Missional Church**

Reviewed By Darren Cronshaw

*Hirsch, Alan. The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating The Missional Church. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006*

*The Forgotten Ways* explores what Alan Hirsch maintains are the basic elements of what makes a missional movement. He starts with an analysis of the early church and the church in China—groups without legality, buildings, professional leadership, seeker-sensitive services or much in the way of Scripture—and asks how did they foster their phenomenal growth? The answer, he says, lies not in anything that can be packaged as a new program. Rather it stems from what he terms Apostolic Genius which is latent within the people of God and made up of six inter-relating elements of missional-DNA (mDNA):

1. Jesus is Lord—The early church and believers in China distilled the message down to this simple confession (or sneezable virus) that recognized the claims of the one God over all of life. To counter the sacred/secular dichotomy, Hirsch contends: 'Following the impulses of biblical monotheism rather than setting up some sacred spaces, our task is to make all aspects and dimensions of life sacred—family, work, play, conflict, etc.—and not to limit the presence of God to spooky religious zones' (p.95).
2. Disciple Making—Contrary to consumeristic patterns of faith, Hirsch reminds us that the lifelong task of a disciple is becoming like Jesus and embodying his message (like little Jesus in our communities). Rather than expecting to think our way into new ways of acting as if we only need to know the right things, Hirsch calls believers to action and obedience, quoting, among others, TS