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

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(including a missional fitness tool and APEPT analysis) is accessible at www.theforgottenways.org.

The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church

Reviewed by J.D. Payne

Alan Hirsch, The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006, pgs. 295.

The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church is Alan Hirsch's second most significant publication. His first work, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* was co-authored with Michael Frost. Hirsch, who also teaches adjunctively for Fuller Theological Seminary, is originally from Australia and is the founding director of Forge Mission Training Network.

The book is divided into two primary sections. Section One is entitled "The Making of a Missionary," and provides a brief account of Hirsch's journey into the world of church planting. It is this section that sets the stage for the second section of the book. By the time the reader completes section one, he or she has a good understanding of the missionary methods that Hirsch found to work well and not so well in his Australian context. This first section is critical to the overall book in that it not only provides a glimpse into Hirsch's church and denominational life, but also is used as illustrative material in the second half of the book.

The second section is entitled, "A Journey to the Heart of Apostolic Genius," and it is here that Hirsch notes that the "rubber hits the road" (24). This latter section is the heart of the book where Hirsch attempts to describe the apostolic nature of the Church and the D.N.A. that causes the church to be a missional body of believers.

Overall, I was very pleased with the contents of this work. Though there are a few matters of concern, which I will address below, I found Hirsch's work to be challenging and inspiring as he seeks to assist the reader in being apostolic in his or her mis-

sionary work in the western world.

The Purpose

Hirsch's main argument is that for the most part, the Church in the western world has forgotten that it has everything necessary to be effectively on mission in the world. He writes, "there are primal forces that lie latent in every Jesus community and in every true believer. Not only does such a thing exist, but it is clearly identifiable phenomenon that has energized history's most outstanding Jesus movements" (15). The "central task" of the book is to examine such movements and to identify the elements that comprise those movements (20). According to Hirsch, "Apostolic Genius" is the "unique energy and force that imbues phenomenal Jesus movements in history" (274) and the object of the book is to examine this genius and "try to interpret it for our own missional context and situation in the West" (20).

Out of a desire to articulate the "absolutely irreducible components" of the Apostolic Genius, the second section of the book primarily revolves around describing what Hirsch believes are six interdependent characteristics that has been observed primarily in the Apostolic Church, the contemporary underground Chinese Church, and have been a part of all significant "Jesus movements" throughout history. These characteristics are to be taken as *prescriptive* matter rather than simply a description of common historical threads found in such movements (26). This Apostolic Genius consists of a theological center surrounded by five elements that he describes as "missional DNA." or mDNA for short:

Theological Center:

- Jesus is Lord – "At the center and circumference of every significant Jesus movement there exists a very simple confession" (24).

Missional DNA:

- Disciple Making – "Disciple making is an irreplaceable core task of the church and needs to be structured into every church's basic formula (24).
- Missional-Incarnational Impulse – Just as the church is called to scatter the gospel seed, it is also to relate to and influence the host group "from within its cultural forms and expressions" (285).
- Apostolic Environment – The need to have an atmosphere that encourages and supports the functioning of the apostolic role. Apostolic ministry describes the function, not an

office (153). According to Hirsch, "the apostolic person's calling is essentially the extension of Christianity. As such, he or she calls the church to its essential calling and helps guide it into its destiny as a missionary people with a transformative message for the world" (152).

- Organic Systems – The need for the church to define itself primarily in organic terms as found in the scriptures, rather than "mechanistic and institutional conceptions" (181) that become difficult to reproduce over time.
- *Communitas*, not Community – A way of life that describes the "unique experience of *togetherness*" that comes from a mission that "calls the church to shake off its collective securities and to plunge into the world of action" (277).

Strengths

I greatly appreciate Hirsch's work on a variety of levels. The strengths of this work far outweigh the limitations. Though the strengths are numerous, for the sake of space, I have chosen to comment on the following nine. First, the author is making an attempt to address the challenges of being on mission in the post-Christianized situations whereby the Church in the West is primarily finding Herself in the early twenty-first century. He recognizes that being a missional church is not primarily defined by using an attractional form of evangelism, but requires the local church to take the gospel into the highways and hedges and marketplaces of the world.

Second, Hirsch challenges the status quo and the philosophy that all the Church needs to do to reach the peoples living in the West is simply more of what she is presently doing (37). He makes the statement that possibly "in America the current 'market appeal' of the contemporary church growth model *might* be up to 35 percent (as opposed to 12 percent in Australia) (37). Though clearly stating that he is "not trying to be anarchic and anti-institutional for the sake of it" (185), he rightly raises some significant concerns with many of the present cultural expectations revolving around consumerism and marketing approaches to church growth, and contemporary approaches to leadership training which isolates people in classroom and removes them from the field for several years.

Third, Hirsch clearly recognizes that there is a functional difference between apostolic leaders and pastoral leaders. While encouraging and affirming the latter, he does a good job calling the Church to make certain that She is making room for those who will be on the front lines of church multiplication in the West.

Fourth, though this work is well written, well organized, and easy to read, Hirsch manages to make several profound statements while keeping his argument simple because he shows that the "Apostolic Genius" is a simple paradigm. He does a noble task reminding us that in a day and age when the western Church has become in many locations extremely rigid, too bureaucratic, and resistant to healthy change, that the biblical requirements for being on mission are very simple and highly reproducible from people group to people group.

Fifth, Hirsch challenges the western Church to consider looking outside of Her geographical locations to the missionary practices across the globe, considering what can be learned from others and contextualized to the West.

Sixth, though this book is a scholarly work, Hirsch writes not from the perspective of an academic but rather that of a practitioner. He is to be commended for keeping his feet in the field and sharing about his journey. Closely tied to this strength is the fact that he is quick to discuss his failures and struggles. His model is a good challenge to us all that we must stay in the trenches while we train others. His writing style is very honest and transparent.

Seventh, though I believe his wording is too extreme, he makes the excellent point that "all great missionary movements begin at the fringes of the church, among the poor and the marginalized, and seldom, if ever, at the center" (30). With the majority Church of the West being heavily influenced by materialism and consumerism, Hirsch calls the Church out of Her comfort zone to a place of risk and significant dependency on the Lord.

Eighth, Hirsch strongly advocates that the heart of renewal in the Church is "the primitive, unencumbered Christology of the NT church" (99). He reminds his readers "In order to recover Apostolic Genius we must learn what it means to *recalibrate*, to go back to the basic "formula" of the church—we need to constantly go back to our Founder and reset our faith and communal life on him" (99).

Finally, though Hirsch is an advocate for church multiplication, he correctly recognizes the need for healthy leadership and discipleship. He writes:

If this is not already obvious by now, let me say it more explicitly: the quality of the church's leadership is directly proportional to the quality of discipleship. If we fail in the area of making disciples, we should not be surprised if we fail in the area of leadership development. I think many of the problems that the church faces

in trying to cultivate missional leadership for the challenges of the twenty-first century would be resourced if we were to focus the solution to the problem on something prior to leadership development per se, namely, that of discipleship first. Discipleship is primary; leadership is always secondary. And leadership, to be genuinely Christian, must always reflect Christlikeness and therefore. . . discipleship (119).

Limitations

Though the strengths of this work far outweigh the limitations, nevertheless, there are a few matters that I believe need to be addressed. First, I am not comfortable with the language the author uses when he discusses the fact that the Church only needs to look within Herself to rediscover the Apostolic Genius. Though I am not saying that Hirsch is attempting to be theologically deviant, such language conjures up thoughts of a quasi-New Age, self-help paradigm, or that there is a secondary force empowering believers apart from the Holy Spirit and the gospel, and needs to be simply rediscovered, rather than the need for biblical repentance and re-structuring our institutions. For example, he writes:

This story highlights the central assumption in this book and gives a hint to why it has been called *The Forgotten Ways*: namely, that all God's people carry within themselves the same potencies that energized the early Christian movement and that are currently manifest in the underground Chinese church. Apostolic Genius (the primal missional potencies of the gospel and of God's people) lies dormant in you, me, and every local church that seeks to follow Jesus faithfully in any time. We have quite simply forgotten how to access and trigger it. This book is written to help us identify its constituent elements and to help us to (re)activate it so that we might once again truly be a truly transformative Jesus movement in the West" (22).

So I come to believe that every church, indeed every Christian, if truly birthed in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, has the full coding of mDNA and therefore has direct access to the power of Apostolic Genius. It is *there*, only the more institutional forms have simply forgotten or suppressed it, because its primal and uncontrollable nature represents danger to the institution it-

self—it is so different and uncontainable (77).

My great hope for the church is that in actual fact Apostolic Genius is not something that we have to impose on the church, as if it were something alien to us, but rather is something that already exists in us. It *is* us! It is our truest expression as Jesus's [sic] people. And because this is so, we simply need to awaken and cultivate it. I am completely convinced that Apostolic Genius is as available to us today as it is for our remarkable Chinese brothers and sisters. It is the common heritage of the whole people of God, and it is a direct link to our own destiny as we face the daunting challenges of the twenty-first century. (244)

Second, even though I realize that Hirsch is attempting to be provocative with his work, he appears to polarize the church between those in the "attractional-evangelism" camp and those in the missional camp. For example, statements such as "it is the evangelistic-attractional mode that is keeping us from experiencing that authentic impulse that reverberates through authentic apostolic movements" (129), lead the reader to believe that a church must be either attractional or missional, but not both. In developing a missiology, especially for western cultures that have had a gospel and local church presence for centuries, one must show the necessity of both while emphasizing the apostolic mode. Even the Apostle Paul recognized the presence of unbelievers in a worship gathering of the church (1 Cor 14).

Third, Hirsch does not address how the necessary incarnational lifestyle as represented by Jesus (133) is reconciled to the fact that the Apostle Paul many times spent only a short period of time planting some churches (e.g., Thessalonica). Though I am a strong advocate of an incarnational model and an apostolic model (and agree with Hirsch on the necessity of these approaches), I wished Hirsch had attempted to explain these two seemingly different approaches to being missional.

Fourth, Hirsch makes a significant theological statement that he believes is a formula for "engaging in mission in a post-Christian culture." He writes, "*Christology determines missiology, and missiology determines ecclesiology* (142). Though I agree with this statement to a point, it is a dangerous hermeneutic to follow if taken at face value. Hirsch should have provided more explanation here. I recognize that Hirsch is writing in contradistinction to a church context that has redefined biblical ecclesiology to include many cultural preferences as "necessities" for the local church to exist as a local church, and thereby hindering the rapid

dissemination of the gospel and church multiplication. However, a reaction to cultural abuses of the biblical texts is a poor reason to advocate a hermeneutic that also potentially leads to a distortion of the biblical prescriptions for a local church.

I agree with Hirsch that the Scriptures do give an ecclesiology that is fluid and easily contextualized to all peoples, at all times, in all locations (143). A healthier way to understand ecclesiology, however, is to allow the biblical parameters to establish the boundaries for both our missiology and our ecclesiology (and of course, our Christology). Instead of allowing our missiology to "inform" (143) (a word which Hirsch does not explain) the nature, functions, and forms of the church, as missionaries we must have a biblical ecclesiology *first* and then allow the context to guide us in making disciples and teaching them to obey all that Christ commanded. Yes, the flavor (e.g., forms) of the church must come from the context, but that flavor is only to exist within the proper biblical parameters. Following Hirsch's hermeneutic as written can easily lead the biblically uninformed to a post-modern understanding of the local church whereby the local context defines the local church for the sake of being missional.

Fifth, as already noted, I greatly commend Hirsch on calling us back to the necessity of Apostolic Genius. However, I wish he had provided some exegetical support for his discussion of the apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic, pastoral, and teaching/didactic ministries in the local church. Rather, than simply providing reference to Ephesians 4:11-12 and some good diagrams explaining his point (158, 171), it would have been helpful to address these ministries from the biblical texts. Since his argument for the apostolic is a radical argument to some readers, a thoroughly biblical foundation is necessary.

Finally, I believe his argument against the limitations of contemporary church growth theory in the western world would have been stronger had he challenged us to return to our roots by reminding us that the Church Growth Movement was birthed in India, with McGavran who argued until his death that the paramount task of the Church is the multiplication of churches among the receptive peoples of the world. Hirsch unfairly lumps all contemporary church growth approaches into a single attractional model for western churches. Though I agree the dominant paradigm has been attractional and consumeristic to the exclusion of the apostolic, not all churches have followed this path. Granted, there is a great deal of truth to Hirsch's point, but it is not the whole truth, even among church growth supporters in the United States.

Conclusion

I strongly encourage the reader of this review, especially those concerned about reaching the West, to read Hirsch's book. He makes numerous outstanding points and clearly articulates in written format what many of us have been thinking over the past decade. The book is well written and has several excellent diagrams and charts to assist in understanding the concepts. This excellent work is challenging yet encouraging, critical yet gracious, and informative yet practical. Hirsch is a voice we need to listen to and learn from when it comes to missions in America.

Trouble in River City: A Review of *The Forgotten Ways*

Reviewed by Bob Wenz

Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006, pgs. 295.

When Professor Harold Hill in *The Music Man* questioned the citizenry of a turn-of-the-century town if they "got trouble right here in River City," he was looking for telltale signs of trouble among their wayward sons: Do they hide copies of *Captain Billy's Wiz-Bang* in the corn crib? Do they re-button their knickerbockers below their knees? Have certain words crept into their vocabulary – words like "swell" and "so's your old man."?

In slightly different versions, those question came into this professor's mind as I read Alan Hirsch's *The Forgotten Ways*. Do we have trouble in our River City? Are we reading and quoting from strange new wiz-bang books? Are we dressing differently to relate to our gang or our fit in with our culture?

Bill Easum is quite right in noting that it is a "fascinating and unique examination of two the greatest apostolic movements in history [the early church and China] and their potential impact upon the Western church at the dawn of the twenty-first century." Hirsch has done more than that, of course. The remarkable history of church in China in the sixty years since Mao's long march, together with the apostolic age, serve as the backdrop for Hirsch's semi-auto biographical exploration of apostolic genius. In his forward, Leonard Sweet made the sweeping statement that in his examination of the apostolic age and the China miracle, Hirsch had discovered the "formula that unlocks the secrets of the ecclesial universe like Einstein's simple formula $E=mc^2$ unlocked the secrets of the physical universe." Together with that over-the-top endorsement came the statement that this is a book that is "good enough to read to the end of time." I had images of Professor Hill hyping his marching band of 76 trombones