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

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*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." Hirsh 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 Hirsh'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, Hirsh 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

as the key to solving every problem in River City.

Hirsh begins with his own journey as a frustrated missionary who turned to a new paradigm for a church plant in Australia where he perceived that 95% of the churches were competing to reach the small segment of the population that was NOT alienated from traditional church. The Elevation Café experiment only reinforced the conviction that the church needed and Hirsh wanted to move away from "being a vendor of religious goods and services"—but found it difficult to do so because he was encumbered by "forty years of church growth principles and practice." At the heart of that frustration was the inability to make disciples out of consumers, and that the "attraction" model of the church growth culture was unwilling or unable to move beyond the attraction/consumer paradigm: "Most efforts to change the church fail to deal with very assumptions on which Christendom is built and maintains itself. The change of thinking need in our day as far as the church and its mission are concerned must be radical indeed; that is, it must go the roots of the problem" [Pg 51]. Nearly one hundred and fifty pages of charts, diagrams, equations, and formulas later, Hirsh would reiterate that the "attractional church" [or at least the overwhelming majority of the 485,000 such churches in the United States] is suffering from "the guilt of failure" because only a few "remarkable churches" have succeed in making that model work. The rest limp along as failures for not having what it takes to compete with the Big Boys. Paradoxically, as he nears the end of the book he tips his hat to Saddleback and Willow Creek and suggests that he doesn't "wish to be heard as being unnecessarily critical of church growth or question the sincerity of those who operate by its lights." [Pg 215]

In the intervening pages, however, Hirsh pleads for a new model of the church that will embody [literally] the church of the first century and the church of China of the last sixty years.

#### *Copies of Captain Billy's Wiz Bang*

The market is flooded today with wiz-bang books about the "missional," "emergent" church and the post-modern world in which we find ourselves. After years of reading, these I am not certain anyone can be any more definitive about what is happening in the culture and the church than in 1989 when the world became officially post-modern. Hirsh is committed to a cluster of defining ideas: Jesus is Lord, making disciples, missional living, apostolic environment, organic systems, and real community [communitas] as the essential and intrinsically linked aspects of apostolic genius. Hirsh has his favorites among the

church/culture pundits and emergent leaders [oops, emergent doesn't have leaders, only facilitators and conveners], certainly. I was surprised by what I didn't see in the bibliography. *Shaped By God's Heart: the Passion and Practices of Missional Churches* by Milfred Minatrea, that pleads the same case, that the church must move from being mission minded to once again being missional, but does so without much of the convolution that detracts from Hirsh. The call of being missional is the clarion that Hirsh sounds as he points to the apostolic era and new apostolic era in China [and other totalitarian states of the 20<sup>th</sup> century].

#### *Swell and So's Your Old Man*

Perhaps the most off-putting aspect of this significant volume is that he contains its own fourteen page glossary. Indeed, new words have crept into our vocabulary – missional, emergent, etc. But Hirsh includes terms many terms that really should not need a definition to any person who is awake in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Others are terms that Hirsh has coined or familiar terms that he has given his own definition. His term "apostolic genius," "liminality," "communitas" [to be distinguished from that inferior grade of community that infects most attraction/consumer churches, by implication], and mDNA [again, his term for missional DNA, presuming that the reader might mistake organizational DNA in a church for actual deoxyribonucleic acid.] for example, only serve to make the book more difficult to read and decipher. Most surprising was the inclusion of Memes and Memplex in light how these Richard Dawkin's explanations for culture have been totally discredited in the scientific community since they made their initial splash.

#### *Does he Re-button His Knickerbockers Below the Knee?*

Of course, what Professor Hill in *The Music Man* was exposing was a trend on the part of young men to do whatever it takes to fit in with the prevailing culture when they leave the house. Perhaps no trend in the church of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and especially the last half of it, has been more disturbing than the "I found the keys to the Kingdom" culture. Peter, it seems, has dropped the keys – and every few years we have a new success story of a church that seemingly has found the keys. In the 60's it was about "returning to the 1<sup>st</sup> century church." Later, the church growth movement had its share of success stories and champions who held up the keys and jingled them. The purpose-driven church keeps finding more and more keys each year. These inevitably launch a rash of imitations and wannabes complete with the books, videos, study guide and celebrity driven tell all con-

ferences. And, even as Willow Creek has released REVEAL to the world with its first REVEAL conference, we can rightly fear that REVEAL could become yet another key to the kingdom.

One has to ask if the “emergent church” is not just another iteration of “I found the keys” for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially in light of one recent estimation that nearly two thirds of the churches that identify themselves as “emergent” admit that they are dressing themselves to fit in with the 21<sup>st</sup> century post-modern culture – and that they may not fully grasp all that it means to be missional or emergent. With five clearly identified streams of the emergent movement, we can only wonder what it means even to those who are identified by the label.

In light of that, the middle pages – the core of *Forgotten Ways* – are worthy of commendation and critique. Alan Hirsh earnestly wants the church to be like it was in the first century – apostolic, missional, experiencing true community, and seeing lives transformed. There is very much to commend his book, especially for the serious student who can take the time to decipher the charts, graphs, diagrams; who can translate the book and its own intimidating (rather than inviting) vocabulary and jargon; who can simplify what is at times a ponderous and overwritten middle two thirds of the book. The tone can be off-putting because one can almost hear keys jingling somewhere in the background.

But to his credit, Hirsh offers more than a polemic against the attractional church if we will take the time and effort—and it will take both!—to unpack it. It is at times like reading a whole blackboard of Einstein’s calculations leading up to  $E=mc^2$  [in that sense Sweet is correct, but his rhetoric is still exaggerated!]. There are profound assessments of traditional church structures buttressed with organizational theory. There is a consistent focus on the mission of the church – transformed lives that engage people and the culture. But it not an easy read. And its time may not yet have come.

What was missing, it seems, is the pastoral heart that can answer the question that four hundred thousand pastors are asking – how can we shepherd the sheep we have and instill in them a passion for Christ, a passion for their own personal mission, and see transformation without having to start all over. For what happened in China – that the church was transformed when it was stripped of everything but Jesus – does not seem to be the path on which the US church will find itself in the same way in the near future.

That prediction may prove to be wrong. We may soon lose the cultural war—even as we have lost several cultural battles –

and be totally marginalized. The same news magazine that declared 1976 to be “The Year of the Evangelical” and help identify evangelicalism at the center of the culture has now launched a wave of attacks on evangelicalism. And, when we realize that we have been marginalized, perhaps we will earnestly seek to return to a church that looks more like the first century church than we have ever seen. We may not take Hirsh seriously enough to read *The Forgotten Ways* until we realize that we have real serious trouble in River City.