

4-1-2009

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

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### Recommended Citation

Penfold, G. E. (2009). Book Review of *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* by Alan Hirsch. *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*, 20(1), 163-167. Retrieved from <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/jascg/vol20/iss1/13>

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

**Reviewed by Gordon E. Penfold**

*Hirsch, Alan, The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church, Grand Rapids, Brazos Press, 2006. 295 pp. \$19.99.*

*The Forgotten Ways* is a monumental work with a threefold thrust. First, Alan Hirsch examines two of the largest Jesus movements in history—the early church movement and the contemporary underground church movement in China. He asks why it is that we see such significant movement in those two contexts and we see so little in the way of Jesus movements in the rest of the world and particularly in the West? Second, the author calls the church to move away from the institutionalized ministry of “Christendom” that began with Constantine’s Edict of Milan in AD 333 (58). Finally, he challenges the church to rediscover its original DNA, which Hirsch calls Apostolic Genius, to become once again an organic, missional movement.

Alan Hirsch brings a unique perspective to this book. While in seminary he served a “fringe” group in downtown Melbourne, Australia. After graduation he became a leader in the South Melbourne Restoration Community (SMRC) where he brought together this fringe group with an established church. God shaped him and sharpened his missional focus during his 15 years at SMRC. Hirsch currently leads FORGE, a transdenominational mission training agency.

*The Forgotten Ways* is a call to the church of the West to return to their missional roots. This occurs when churches begin to recognize their missional DNA (mDNA) (283) that is embedded in each believer and each church. Chapter 1 begins with the words,

Imagine there was a power that lies hidden at the very heart of God’s people. Suppose this power was built into



the initiating “stem cell” of the church by the Holy Spirit but was somehow buried and lost through centuries of neglect and disuse. Imagine that if rediscovered, this hidden power could unleash remarkable energies that could propel Christianity well into the twenty-second century—a missional equivalent to unlocking the power of the atom. Is this not something that we who love God, his people, and his cause would give just about anything to recover? I now believe that the idea of latent inbuilt missional potencies is not a mere fantasy; in fact 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 a clearly identifiable phenomenon that has energized history’s most outstanding Jesus movements (15).

The book is divided into two sections. Section 1 describes the faith journey of Alan Hirsch. His journey included the work in downtown Melbourne to his ministry at SMRC. SMRC was a church on the cutting edge of mission that grew complacent and content. The reawakening of SMRC to mission was the key that helped form Hirsch’s view of ministry.

In Section 2 Hirsch develops the concept of Apostolic Genius. “Loaded into the term Apostolic Genius is the full aggregation of all the elements of mDNA that together form a constellation, as it were, each shedding light on the other” (78). Hirsch illustrates the concept with a pointed star (79). At the center of Apostolic Genius is recognition that “Jesus is Lord.” That is, the Lord Jesus must be the absolute center of any movement of significance. Connected to the center are five essential elements of mDNA. These elements are briefly described below:

- Disciple Making: “It is the essential task of discipleship to embody the message of Jesus, the Founder (102).
- Missional-Incarnational Impulse: Missional—“It is an essential aspect of Christianity’s capacity to spread itself and cross cultural boundaries . . . . The incarnational side of the equation relates to the embedding and deepening of the gospel and church into host cultures. It means that to relate to and influence the host groups, it will need to do it from within its cultural forms and expressions. This is linked directly to the Incarnation of God in Jesus” (285).
- Apostolic Environment: “There is a catalytic influence that weaves its way through the seemingly chaotic network of churches and believers. There is no substantial word for this catalytic social power other than . . . *apostolic*” (151).

- Organic Systems: “The church . . . organizes itself as a living organism that reflects more how God structured life itself, as opposed to a machine, which is the artificial, inorganic alternative to a living system” (180).
- *Communitas*, Not Community: *Communitas* is described a Christian community’s ability “to overcome their instincts to ‘huddle and cuddle’” (277). Churches living like this live on the edge of danger and adventure in order to accomplish the mission of God.

Hirsch’s purpose is quite clear. First, he is challenging the church in the West to recognize that mechanistic structures with “top down” leadership established in Christendom no longer work as we “shift from the modern to the postmodern, or from solid modernity to liquid modernity” (16). His description of stifling denominational structure is riveting:

Without apostolic ministry the church either forgets its high calling or fails to implement it successfully. Sadly, in declining denominational systems, such people are commonly “frozen out” or exiled because they disturb the equilibrium of a system in stasis. This “loss” of the apostolic influencer accounts for one of the major reasons for mainstream denominational decline. If we really want missional church, then we must have a missional leadership system to drive it—it’s that simple (152).

Second, the author argues that the answer to the decline in the West is the recognition of the Apostolic Genius, a missional system that he develops in the book. Hirsch argues that the dynamics of early church and the modern house church movement in China represent this Apostolic Genius. Both are grassroots movements light on structure and heavy on mission. The author’s passion is to see an awakening of the church to its primal missional roots. “This book is written in the hope that the church in the West can, by the power of the Holy Spirit, arouse and reengage that amazing power that lies within us” (17).

Hirsch gives a fair and passionate view of the missional church and has done a brilliant job of calling the Christian church of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century back to its missionary roots. However, he does demonstrate a bent toward the fringe movements of the church. The penchant and passion for the fringe reflects his own background working with SMRC and at times seem to color his view of the other segments of the church. There have been significant movements among other classes and groups that would not be considered “fringe” by his definition of the word. The



New Testament church focused on many different people groups, both "fringe" and mainstream. For example, Jesus ministered to the lepers while Acts 6:7 tells us that "a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith." Both fringe and mainstream! Lydia was a wealthy woman (Acts 16:14) while many slaves also were redeemed. Two contrasts today could be Redeemer Presbyterian Church in wealthy New York City and Duane and Miriam Mansveld to the street people of Montreal. The Moravians, the Student Volunteer Movement and Campus Crusade are missionary movements toward the center. In our fragmented world perhaps we should consider every people group that is outside of Christ a "fringe" group in need of a clear proclamation of the Gospel! We need movements in every stratum of society, not just on the fringes. Unfortunately, churches are often blind to anyone different from those on the "inside" of their particular ministry. The author very clearly and forcefully points out our blind spots!

This volume has numerous strengths. First, the book is a huge contribution to those who wish to see the Church in the West rise after years of decline. Hirsch's call to the church to leave behind mechanical structures of Christendom that inhibit growth is compelling. His missional-incarnational impulse is right on target! I also find it interesting that Hirsch longs to see the same type of people (Jesus) movements that fueled the Missionary movement as well as that of Donald McGavran and the Church Growth Movement.

A second strength of the book is a very perceptive warning. Movements may begin well. However, left to natural processes each will suffer the mediocrity and complacency that developed in South Melbourne Restoration Community. The author's call to the church of the West to recognize its precipitous position and retool its ministry is significant and timely!

I also feel Hirsch's description of Christendom is the most succinct I have read. He describes Constantine's Christendom in four ways:

- It is attractational, not missional.
- A shift from ministry focus to building focus
- An institutionally regulated clergy
- Sacraments administered by the institution (276-77)

Hirsch's call to return the church to the people and for the church to "go" is refreshing. However, I did find it interesting that every ministry the author mentioned uses some sort of building!

Hirsch's description of the Apostolic Genius (supported by mDNA) is quite compelling. However as I examined his descrip-

tion of the structure of his proposed system I found myself struggling to put all the pieces together. The structure he describes is not simple, but extremely complex and cumbersome. I do concur that "top down" leadership is not effective. Denominational leadership can kill a movement (as happened with the Methodist movement in the mid 1800's). I feel that Hirsch's call for organic leadership is overwhelmed by the complexity of his structure.

Another concern is the keystone phrase of Apostolic Genius, "Jesus is Lord." I am not sure that that statement covers enough ground. The early church (I cannot speak for the underground movement in China) understood a great deal more than "Jesus is Lord." The early church grew in "the apostles' doctrine" (Acts 2:24), "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). The book of Romans is a full exposé of the Gospel. Acts 8:4 states that "those who were scattered went everywhere preaching *the word*" (emphasis mine). Perhaps a more appropriate centerpiece would be "the faith once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). I do appreciate the author's notion of the proclamation of the Gospel in the Emerging Missional Church (EMC). Proclamation was an indispensable facet of the early church. This is a feature often lacking in Emerging Church movements as distinct from the Emerging Missional Church.

Do I recommend *The Forgotten Ways*? Yes . . . but with a warning. If you read it, be prepared to be challenged. Pastors, Christian educators and missiologists will be forced to reexamine their own ecclesiology and missiology. *The Forgotten Ways* is not a simple book to read, but one that is filled with ideas that necessarily challenge the status quo.

I was so challenged by the reading of this book that I am working my way back through the New Testament to examine afresh how the early church functioned. I have been surprised at how much my own thinking has slipped towards status quo.

I believe that Jesus' command in John 4:35 is a fitting way to close. "Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!"