

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

Book Review By:

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Summary

Alan Hirsch writes *The Forgotten Ways* with the intention of answering one very important question: “How did they do that?” Hirsch examines various “Jesus Movements,” such as the rapid growth of the early church and the underground Chinese church, to determine how they increased in number so rapidly under circumstances that seem unlikely to produce such a result. The text aims to discuss these influential factors of Christian growth and how the principles might be applied to the present church in hopes of achieving similar results.

Hirsch begins by providing a personal experience, which will serve as a comparison experience for the following principles. Through his own attempts and failures, Hirsch relays how theories and principles must be used in conjunction rather than sporadically if positive results are to be generated. The reader is now able to use this foundation as a starting point for discovering the theories presented as a possible solution to the stagnant or declining growth of the church.

Apostolic Genius, a phrase Hirsch created to refer to the extraordinary energy and force behind the various movements throughout history, is comprised of six

essential components.¹ Five of these components make up missional DNA, meaning they perform in ecclesiastical systems the same way DNA acts in biological systems. These components, therefore, are present in living cells, contain basic information for transmitted traits, are self-replicating, and carry fundamental information for healthy reproduction.² The five components include the missional-incarnational impulse, apostolic environment, disciple making, organic systems, and *communitas*. These five elements revolve around the sixth, which is the Christocentric concept that Jesus is Lord. The ultimate goal of carrying out these components is to develop a missional church, meaning that the church is defined and organized around the purpose of carrying out the mission of God.³

In order to create or reactivate the missional church, all of the six components must be carried out. First and foremost, the concept of Jesus as Lord must be the central belief of the church. Otherwise, the church will not be able to grasp or carry out the mission of God. The strategic element of the model is disciple making.⁴ The central command given to believers is to make disciples, ultimately leading to the “Christlikeness” that will produce a lasting missional church. The next element is the missional-incarnational impulse, or the practice of carrying out the mission of God and the Incarnation. The typical church outreach strategy is to be evangelistic and, thereby, attract individuals to the church. Conversely, the missional-incarnational concept

¹ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 77.

² *Ibid.*, 76.

³ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

emphasizes sending believers out to interact with the world through relationships and dependence on the power of God rather than the individual.⁵

The apostolic environment occurs when an apostle establishes apostolic ministry, which embeds the missional DNA into the community through apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic, pastoral, and teaching elements, thus creating an environment in which other ministry emerges.⁶ The idea that Apostolic Genius occurs through metabolic or exponential growth through living organisms makes up the organic systems component. Lastly, *communitas* refers to the bond that forms within a group that has experienced a common hardship or transition.⁷ The movements being examined contain these elements. As a result, Hirsch concludes that these factors are essential in reactivating the missional church to produce similar movements in the future.

Evaluation

Biblical and Theological Principles

Throughout the text, Hirsch includes numerous biblical references and Scripture passages to enhance and support the principles and theories being discussed. While few references are made in the first section of the text, the remainder of the book is filled with stories of characters from the New Testament church and examples of the ministry of Jesus and his disciples. Seeing as one of the main movements being discussed is that of the early church, it is only logical that the supporting material and analysis of the actions involved would include biblical endorsement.

⁵ Ibid., 128.

⁶ Ibid., 158.

⁷ Ibid., 221.

Concerning theological issues, Hirsch references several doctrines, including those of ecclesiology and creation. When discussing the central theme in *Apostolic Genius*, being Jesus is Lord, Hirsch concludes that the first and most important element in all of the great movements in history is the return to basic Christology. Knowing who Jesus is and what He did is essential to restoring the missional church. Examining the doctrine of Christ and its implications alters both the theology and worldview of the church.⁸ The early church's acceptance of this doctrine led to their refusal to accept Caesar's lordship over them. Likewise, the Chinese underground church refused to concede to communist rule that sought to dethrone Jesus as Lord.⁹

At times, however, some of the application points regarding theology may be questioned. For example, when discussing the apostolic environment, Hirsch mentions that the gift of the apostle is always listed first. He also refers to Ephesians 2:20 where Paul states that the church is a result of the foundation of the apostles. The goal is to emphasize the importance of the apostle in creating an environment where ministry can thrive. Yet Hirsch goes on to say that the gift of being an apostle is the most important of the ministries of the church.¹⁰ This assertion may be overstepping the bounds intended by Scripture. While apostles were foundational in building the church, it is rather bold of Hirsch to claim that this gift is more important than the others. The Bible teaches that the members are to work together to form the body of Christ, implying that no one person is more important than another.¹¹ Granted, some gifts and roles are more

⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 157.

¹¹ Bob Deffinbaugh, "Thinking Straight About Spiritual Gifts," (Richardson, TX: Biblical Studies Press, 2007), Internet; available from www.bible.org, 4.

publicly demonstrated than others. But to assert that one gift in particular is the *most* important seems to require stretching the bounds of certain doctrines, which opens the avenue of debate in terms of isogesis versus exegesis.

While the principles proposed by Hirsch are innovative and useful for ministry, other similar occurrences of debatable theology may cause some to begin to question the principles addressed, as well. Regardless of theology, many of the concepts seem logical for enhancing ministry and reactivating the missions-oriented church.

Missiological Contributions

The missiological contributions of the text abound. Filled with illustrations, charts, and diagrams, the ideas are thoroughly explained, and numerous examples follow the basic ideas presented. One of the most challenging and encouraging statements concerns the state of the current church in relation to the early church. Using the cultural distance scale employed throughout the text, the church in the current postmodern period has achieved the same range as that of the early church.¹² Attaining a missional movement, therefore, would seem feasible. This conclusion should both encourage and challenge the church to leave its comfort zone and take action.

The increase in house and cell churches also resembles those observed in great historical movements. A study by the Barna Group in 2006 concluded that an eight percent increase in the number of people attending house churches has occurred in the past decade. One out of five adults claim to attend a house church at least once per

¹² Hirsch, 62.

month.¹³ With the opportunity to have more people involved yet maintain a small group atmosphere, churches have been given the perfect occasion to practice Hirsch's idea of missional and incarnational action. Networking also is a major emphasis of Hirsch's model, and the house church layout allows for a great deal of networking to occur.

The increase in networking and house church involvement leads to another concept Hirsch advocates, known as the liquid church. The liquid church, a term used by Peter Ward, refers to a church that is "responsive to the increasing fluid dimension of our culture."¹⁴ In contrast, the solid church is parallel to the institutional church, which Hirsch often discourages as a possibility for producing missional movements. Hirsch claims that the liquid church is comparable to the New Testament concept of church because it is missional and responsive to its cultural context. The liquid church also has the ability to form a community of Christian comradery, worship, and mission as opposed to the static institutional model of the church, and it tends to be more accommodating and receptive to change.¹⁵ While it is possible that the church as an institution is able to be reactivated for mission-oriented service, Hirsch ultimately believes that radical change would need to take place. Since many of the present institutions cannot be replicated, producing new church starts would be difficult or impossible.

Numerous other missiological insights exist throughout the text, such as the concept of early church growth through the "pay it forward" methodology. Hirsch

¹³ The Barna Research Group. "House Church Involvement is Growing," (Ventura, CA: Barna, 2006), Internet; available from <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateNarrow&BarnaUpdateID=241>, 1.

¹⁴ Hirsch, 197.

¹⁵ Ibid., 199.

maintains that exponential growth as seen in the great historical movements must have occurred through a process where one person tells a few people, who then tell a few people, and so on. The process continues, and the overall effect is incomprehensible.¹⁶

While this concept has been encouraged throughout the past decades, few have applied it to the early church growth occurrences. Similar concepts, ideas and principles are presented throughout the text, proving that the reactivation of the missional church is a realistic option for those who are willing to pursue it.

Conclusion

The Forgotten Ways ultimately aspires to motivate believers to refocus on the mission of God in order to bring about dramatic change and exponential evangelistic growth. Hirsch asserts that the church is able to reactivate its mission if only it will access and trigger the Apostolic Genius that lies underneath. The model presented offers a basic foundation needed for allowing this process to occur. However, a question arises for existing churches that are unable to conform in order to achieve this model. Are they to be ineffective or simply work in a different aspect? The concepts do seem to be universal in that they can be applied to all types of churches, but only if the members are receptive. Granted, some churches will be organized in a manner that is more conducive to the approach, and the church must be willing to fully commit to the principles being applied. But regardless of whether or not the church chooses to accept the model as a whole or in part, the missiological implications are helpful for improving the personal and corporate growth of the church. Believers are called to help fulfill the mission of God, and Hirsch provides a valuable resource for beginning the process.

¹⁶ Ibid., 208.

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