

The Shaping of Things to Come ***Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch***

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Reviewer: Christopher C. Walker

Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch in *The Shaping of Things to Come* state their position right up front in the first section. They hope to ‘reawaken the latent apostolic imagination at the heart of the biblical faith and to exhort God’s people to courageous missional engagement for our time—living out the gospel *within* its cultural context rather than perpetuating an institutional commitment *apart from* its cultural context’ (p 1). A wholesale change in the way Christians are doing and being the church is advocated. They challenge the church to dismantle many of its institutional structures, not out of some liberal critique or anti-institutional bias, but because they deeply desire that the gospel of Jesus Christ be heard and responded to by post-modern people. They are very committed to the historic orthodox Christian faith.

It helps to recognise that Michael Frost is a Baptist but born of Irish Catholic stock and Alan Hirsch is a Church of Christ minister from a South African Jewish background. Hence they have an unusual ‘outsiders’ view, especially of the US and the UK. Both come from an evangelical church heritage and are critics of their own tradition, while being strongly within it. So they are evangelicals who want the gospel proclaimed and responded to but are convinced that the church in the West is failing. They are personally involved in new initiatives in ministry and leadership development.

Their belief is that ‘the planting of new, culturally diverse, missional communities is the best way forward for the church that views itself in a missional context’ (p 2). While they make some concessions to the established church with qualified comments such as ‘Perhaps an established church can plant a missional congregation within its broader church structures’, their real hope is with those who develop ‘alternative, experimental, new communities of faith’ (p 2). In fact, they even say that they have written this book primarily for such emerging communities of faith and their leaders. What they offer is not so much a ‘how to’ but more of a ‘why to’ book to encourage the emerging missional church.

It is a book that promotes a thoroughly missional approach to the church rather than an institutional one. The strength of the book is in what it affirms rather than what it criticises. As someone working within a mainstream church seeking to encourage both new ministries and the renewal of existing ones, I appreciate their cynicism about the capacity of the church to reinvent itself. Yet I am not willing to be as negative as they are about all but alternative communities of faith.

Hence I found their critique of Christendom less helpful than their emphasis on the missional church. Most church leaders are very aware that we now live in a post-Christendom context, if we ever really did have a Christendom context in Australia, though inevitably past traditions continue and are not easily changed. Tradition is stronger than Frost and Hirsch acknowledge and does have some strengths that should not be jettisoned. Their Protestant evangelical heritage shows here.

When they speak of the missional church and its qualities I resonate with what they say. The postmodern church does need to focus on the journey of faith and the experience of God. There is a desire for less structure and more direct involvement by people, though the reality is that people have limited time and society demands accountability, which requires structures. It is desirable to be flexible and less hierarchical. The church is to be about the sustaining of discipleship. The positive examples they give are to be affirmed as courageous and innovative ways of reaching people in their contexts.

The majority of the book deals with being missional by having an incarnational ecclesiology, a messianic spirituality and apostolic leadership.

The church does need to come to grips with being incarnational. It is an ongoing challenge to do so in ways appropriate to particular contexts. Nevertheless, I am not willing to make attractional and incarnational an either/or. It seems to me that there is a place for attraction while wanting to emphasise incarnating the gospel. When the authors spoke about different modes of churches, using the notions of centred sets and bounded sets, I appreciated the Australian illustration they used of wells in Outback Australia. A centred set has a strong centre but open borders, which is what missional churches should have. Their basic diagram of the church as having communion (in relationship with Christ), community (in relationship with one another) and commission (in relationship with the world) is useful. Similarly, their suggestions about approaches to ministry that incorporate exciting curiosity through storytelling, provoking a sense of wonder and awe, being extraordinarily loving, exploring how God is working and focusing on Jesus, while not new, are freshly put.

Since it comes from evangelicals, it is good to see their emphasis on recovering a messianic spirituality. In this regard they make much use of Jewish writer Martin Buber. They state that such a spirituality must be missional and evangelistic. They say, 'Who I am, or rather who I have become, in Jesus, *must* change the way I behave and determine to a great extent what I do' (p 148). One implication they draw in relation to the medium being the message is that seminaries need to consider the implicit message they convey and embrace much more of the action-reflection approach to learning. They point to the way Jesus developed disciples during his ministry and suggest the traditional model has been defective for disciple making and mission. I found their overlapping diagram about the interaction between God, church and the world to be a stimulating one that could have been dwelt on more.

In speaking of apostolic leadership, they make much use of Ephesians 4:1–16 and its description of a five-fold ministry of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. They make an interesting comparison with sociological analysis of leadership styles. In doing so, they rightly say that the church has traditionally focused on pastors and teachers but now needs to give attention to fostering apostles (entrepreneurs), prophets (questioners) and evangelists (recruiters). They draw on Thomas Kuhn's notion of paradigm shifts, offering some helpful ideas in relation to encouraging change in congregations. They also make use of Edward de Bono's six thinking hats.

They conclude with the desire that the church become a movement again, with Jesus at the centre, functioning as an organic reproducible and sustainable system. They list a range of skills of missional leaders that have been implicit throughout the book: entrepreneurial skills, ability to interpret and engage with popular culture, capacities to implement marketing-type strategies, skills in sociological research and in the

interpretation of general social trends, and innovative evangelistic communication skills, including a media awareness and leadership and team development skills (p 219).

The book is a valuable one for stimulating missional thinking, even if it did grate at times in its criticism of traditional churches and its implication that only the newer experimental forms of ministry were really worthwhile. It rightly emphasises that mission is at the heart of being and doing church and that leaders need to be better prepared to guide their people into incarnational ministry. Yet I am convinced that it is not only the experimental faith communities that are able to connect with the context of postmodern people. Nevertheless, mainstream churches in particular cannot simply hold on. They must change or else they will continue to decline and become increasingly irrelevant. The book is a challenge to them to prove that they can be more effective than Frost and Hirsch think. It will encourage others to take risks in mission for the sake of the gospel, reaching postmodern people in their cultural contexts.