

## **ReJesus: A Wild Messiah for a Missional Church**

Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch.  
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Review by: William L. Turner  
Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program  
Lexington Theological Seminary  
Lexington, Kentucky

A “wild Jesus?” Exactly, say these two native Australians whose earlier writings have helped to shape the ongoing theological conversation about “missional church” in recent years (*The Forgotten Ways, Exiles, The Shaping of Things to Come, Seeing God in the Ordinary*). In this later book they invite us to a fresh quest of the historical Jesus, the radical Messiah who, when more fully understood, provides the key to the renewal of his Church “in every age and in every possible situation” (42). Here is a call for the Church to recalibrate to Jesus and though this sounds like stating the obvious, these writers frame the discussion in creative and engaging ways.

Is the Church in need of renewal? “Now and always” is the answer of history, of early twenty-first century assessments, and of Frost and Hirsch. Despite the hand-wringing and dismay over the statistical decline of institutional Christianity in the western world, resistance to radical renewal – even one based on revisiting Jesus - remains surprisingly strong. To many, a reJesus project

seems naïve in the context of “the sensible Christian religion we now have” (65). *Traditionalists* may argue that the centuries have given the Church a rich doctrinal and liturgical heritage, one which continues to instruct and inspire thousands of believers. *Pragmatists* may also insist that, after two millennia, the Church exists sufficiently globalized, institutionalized, and capitalized to accomplish great good everywhere in the name of Christ. All of this, notwithstanding the maintenance of a certain status quo, would seem to make a reJesus venture hopelessly idealistic and, perhaps, unnecessary.

The major premise of this book strongly resists such notions. Indeed, the authors remind that long before the early church did any serious theological reflection on the nature of God, they “focused first on Jesus” (131). Thus, Christology is key to contemporary renewal; and for well-established churches **not** to revisit Jesus is to invite what some sociologists have described as the *routinization of charisma*. The result, painfully attested by ecclesiastical history, is that a vibrant understanding of faith’s origins soon devolves into codifying, ritualizing habits which – though intended to preserve original vitality – degenerate, over time, into languid souvenirs of the past. Here Frost and Hirsch recall Pascal’s critique of Christendom that “people . . . by means of the sacraments, excuse themselves from their duty to love God” (70). So, when external form is not matched by internal spiritual vigor, authenticity suffers and renewal becomes a necessity.

Rather than breaking completely new Christological ground, these writers call for a “radical traditionalism” which will recalibrate the Church’s missional and liturgical life to the radical (root) model of its founder. The process involves a fresh consideration of scripture, especially the Gospel accounts, not in the rationalistic, analytical style of the Hellenists, but in the reflective, devotional manner of the Hebrews (*lectio divina* comes to mind). We are urged to “pickle ourselves in the Gospels . . . prayerfully cycling through . . . and asking God to give us fresh insight into the remarkable person we find there” (162). Believing that God actively engages us in the scriptures, the authors remind us that in Hebraic thought, the knowledge of God lies at the nexus of thinking (*orthodoxy*) feeling (*orthopathy*) and acting (*orthopraxy*). It follows, then, that reading, pondering, and praying about the Jesus of the Gospels will move us toward the specific evidence of sound biblical understanding, namely, faithful obedience to God. In their Christocentric monotheism (the linchpin of their understanding of the Trinity) Frost and Hirsch follow Luther and others in seeing Jesus as the lens through which scripture is to be interpreted and, thus, the prism through which the nature of God is filtered. So instead of calling his disciples to worship him, Jesus is seen as calling for their faithful obedience to God.

Early in the book, the authors argue that reJesusing the Church will cause today’s believers to see three important things differently. God will be understood as *missio Dei*, the “sent and sending God” who comes to us in redemption and reclamation, and who subsequently calls us to missional

partnership (25). The Church will be seen as *participati Christi*, a community of Jesus followers who become catalysts for God's kingdom by participating in "the way of Jesus and his work in the world" (29). Finally, the world is viewed as being *imago Dei*, so that the Church's primary task, while not denying human frailty and sinfulness, is to enable people to understand that God's image lies deep in the souls of all humanity. The evangelistic/missionary task, framed by the authors as encompassing a greater respect for unbelievers, is "to assist people to use this knowledge for the salvation of their souls" (35).

Along the way of revisiting Jesus, Frost and Hirsch attempt to do the work of iconoclasts, holy vandals, in "defragging" some of the popular and traditional depictions of Jesus which have influenced and severely restricted our perceptions of the radical Messiah. They critique the work of several artistic renderings, along with various movie portrayals, all of which are seen to bend Jesus far away from full humanity.

The writers also sprinkle their chapters with thumbnail illustrations of persons whom they describe as "little Jesuses." These are historical figures who have inspired them (and who now inform and instruct the reader) by emulating the life and values of Jesus. Included are Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, Soren Kierkegaard, Father Damien, Fannie Lou Hamer, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Alan Walker, Mother Teresa, Riogoberta Menchu, and William Wilberforce. So, though their case for reJesusing the Church is far from tightly argued or orderly, Frost and Hirsch have written another book to inspire today's believers.

In Jesus, they insist, we will rediscover the Church's DNA. They do not urge us to ignore or dismiss the traditions developed over many years; but they are adamant that we challenge both today's institutional and consumer-driven models with the life and values found in the Jesus of the New Testament.

Having set aside many of the accrued notions of a bland and bloodless Jesus, these writers want us to revisit the first-century life of One who was "daring, radical, strange, wonderful, inexplicable, unstoppable, marvelous, unsettling, disturbing, caring, and powerful." (111). Here is the God-Man who defeats demons, challenges authority, excoriates hypocrisy, befriends outcasts, and lays down his life with conviction and trust.

This book is not top-heavy with obtuse theological language. Instead, the writers draw upon a cast of philosophers, historians, sociologists, novelists, filmmakers, and missiologists to present a lively discussion. Also, there is an attempt at theological balance here. Lest the reader assume that the disconnect between congregational life and the radical Jesus is experienced solely by mainline churches, Frost and Hirsch warn against the temptations toward rigidity within evangelical circles as well. It is sobering, they say, to remember those "fine, upright devoted religious people - people not unlike us - who were hell-bent on murdering Jesus" (73). It is the Church, in all its manifestations, which stands in need of spiritual recalibration.

These writers' call for a renewed emphasis on the kingdom, or reign, of God, is both credible and needed in today's theological climate. Frost and Hirsch do

not equate the Church with God's reign, thus resisting the temptation for churches to become ever more inwardly focused. Instead, the Church is seen as a microcosm of kingdom life and an outpost for mission. Understandably, mission is understood as the major result of a serious recalibration to Jesus, defined as "the outward impulse of God's people . . . to declare the lordship of Jesus in all and over all" (181). Kingdom people are viewed as spiritual catalysts who will infiltrate and flavor their society. Christians, like the earliest disciples, see themselves as "sent by Jesus into the villages of which they're part, to add value, to bring wisdom, to foster a better village. In short, to participate with the work of Christ all around us" (32). Because believers are urged to seek and join the operative presence of God's reign wherever it happens, it follows that we follow Jesus into feeding the hungry, healing the broken, advocating for the marginalized, seeking justice for the poor, and incarnating God's love for those who are in need of salvation. While the "unpacking" of such missional components is done selectively by these writers, there are two or three places (56-58; 172; 175) where summary charts of Jesus' life and activity are linked to attendant implications for the Christian and her/his congregation. Relevant examples of how these might look and work in contemporary culture are also given.

While there are significant strengths to this highly readable book, one weakness is the absence of a thoroughgoing biblical hermeneutic. More than once the reader is urged to "let the Bible read us," but a full explanation of this

Kierkegaardian notion is lacking. Frost and Hirsch are firm in their rejection of the form criticism of Bultmann and others, avowing “absolute confidence in the reliability of the Gospels” (162). What exactly is meant by that? One wonders whether or not textual criticism is set aside as well. A book which calls us back to basic biblical texts might be expected to give more attention to basic hermeneutical principles; surely a responsible reJesusing project should include that! Though the book’s major premise concerns a return to New Testament texts, the reader is left to guess at the tools of interpretation which these writers might use . . . and commend to their readers.

This reviewer found the connection between mission and worship helpful but without sufficient elaboration. The authors view worship as a subset of mission and, while they encourage individual, reflective worship, very little attention is given to the elements or the shape of corporate worship. Looking afresh at Jesus’ earliest followers, it may be true that instead of worshipping in a conventional sense, their worship “happens as they go” (181). However, this either minimizes or misses the significance of the liturgical tradition of temple and synagogue which was clearly valued by Jesus and his disciples, as well as the corporate model which evolved in the larger New Testament record. The missional Church, so strongly advocated by Frost and Hirsch, stands always in need of authentic community and vital worship. More attention to details and examples is badly needed here.

Church leaders and theological educators are among those who will find this book creative and insightful. It could be a useful resource for college or seminary courses in ecclesiology or missional life. Perhaps its greatest impact will be made in Sunday School classes, or other small-group settings, within local congregations. Using *ReJesus* as a guide, serious students will interface with a provocative and stimulating approach to New Testament understanding. In partnership with the Holy Spirit, this just might raise missional consciousness and energize redemptive activity by some of Jesus' 21<sup>st</sup>-century people.