



A Conversation with Alan Hirsch and Cameron Roxburgh

In preparation for the Church & Mission Dialogue Conference – "Hinge" – the EFC staff participated in a conversation with Alan Hirsch and Cameron Roxburgh, lead players in Forge Missional Training Network who will be key participants in the Hinge Conference. Their conversation, including their questioning of one another at the end, is posted to whet the appetite for others to engage in the conversation. To find out how you can participate and to register for Hinge, go to www.theefc.ca/hinge.

Q: The Hinge Conference is all about understanding the changes taking place in our ministry context that prod us to make changes in our paradigms and practices related to "Church and Mission." How would you describe the most significant changes?

Alan: We find ourselves in a genuinely missional or missionary context where the church must adopt cross-culture missionary methodology in order to engage meaningfully with the culture. We no longer operate in the context where the Christian church is the predominant religious institution in society. This necessitates a major shift in our way of thinking about the church and about theology.

Cam: We need to recognize too that the rate of change is phenomenal right now. And it's happening within the church as well. I'm excited and optimistic about the unrest that many people are experiencing (Mark Buchanan calls it a "holy unrest within God's people"). Many people are coming to the point where they're tired of following a mamby-pamby Jesus, where everything is nice and suburban; instead they want to follow the radical call of Jesus. What we're seeing is the grey moving more towards either black or white; the in-between just doesn't seem viable anymore. This feels difficult, awkward and scary at first, but as we look behind us it will become clearer that this is a kind of refining that we can get excited about.

Alan: Technological shifts are also precipitating change inside and outside the church. The digital revolution democratizes knowledge and changes the social patterns of society: just see what the printing press did in the time of the Renaissance and Reformation. In the same way the broadcasting era changed how we operated. Now the digital era will have a massive effect on society and the church.

After all, people can literally download what's preaching in this age; they don't have to go to church for sermons. This calls into question some of our basic tools. Think of what the Canadian philosopher, Marshall McLuhan taught us: we invent our tools and then they invent us.

Q: The Hinge Conference has a program flow to it that starts by paying attention to theology, then to missiology and then ecclesiology. Why do you think this order in the conversation is important?

Cam: It's crucial to work our thinking in this order because we unfortunately have done things backwards. We ask, what works in the church? Then we ask, how do we attract people to grow? And then, in effect, how do we reinvent God to fit our image? Regardless of how we live, we bear witness to the God we believe in. We must get our theology right, from a Trinitarian perspective and also Christological. Alan will be talking about the radical Jesus, for instance.

When it comes to missiology, we flow out of our understanding of who is God to ask the question, what is God up to? And therefore, in relation to ecclesiology, what does he invite us into? Some say, we give the people what they want and that's how we grow the church; this is exactly the wrong way to go about it.

Alan: This way of thinking has kind of sneaked up on us. In effect, we now have a church God, not the God of the resurrection. We are, therefore, forced to recover our basics and go back to theology, with Christology as the doorway. We need to go back to the fundamental message of God so that we can re-imagine how to be God's people. We must always return to the basic story – it's recalibration that's needed so desperately.

Q: Let's take a closer look at the major themes within the areas of theology, in particular. What requires major emphasis, do you think?

Cam: When it comes to theology, we'll want to ask especially, who is God and who is Jesus Christ. Then, in missiological terms, we'll understand that God is a sending God. If we begin to read Scripture through this lens, the text will look quite different to us.

Alan: What we know about the Trinity we know through Jesus, and so we have a Christological doorway into understanding the Trinity. In getting back to core renewal basics, we need to re-emphasize that no one comes to the Father except through Jesus. We'd do well to rediscover our founder and what his role is.

Cam: Evangelicals have emphasized the cross, resurrection and return of Jesus and under-emphasized other elements of who Jesus is, especially in relation to who Jesus is before his incarnation. This is not to understate the importance of the incarnation of Jesus; this is our model for contextual engagement.

Another thing Evangelicals tend to underemphasize is the life of Jesus. He is our exemplar for the Christian life; we must recover this theme because this is where discipleship – becoming more and more like Jesus – is located.

Alan: We need a thorough, robust Christology that emphasizes more than just a salvific understanding of Christ. Often the pre-existence of Christ is acknowledged, but it hasn't saturated our imaginations; yet it's a central element of the revelation of God in Jesus. Thus we have lost the impact of the Incarnation on our theological perspectives as well as on our missiology. Another point to be made is that Christology is critical to our understanding the Kingdom message. We need to understand Christ as Lord of creation and truly an agent of creation.

Q: *Another dynamic that we've incorporated into the Hinge Conference program is the movement from cultural context, to mindsets within the church and then to practices within the church. How does our understanding of cultural context and various theological foundations lead us to changing our practices?*

Cam: Because we usually start by trying to find out how to grow a church, we get programs that work elsewhere and follow their pattern without doing our contextual work. We need to ask, first of all, what is the God who sends and who is working in Jesus doing in my neighbourhood?

Alan: Missiology is our commission in the world. Our understanding of our mission gives us the tools to engage with the world and then to develop ecclesiastical forms that are appropriate to our missiological task. Too often we've frontloaded ecclesiology and everything else becomes subservient to it.

Cam: We start with the theological question: what is the nature of the God we believe in? Here we emphasize the life, not just the death, of Jesus. Then we ask the missiological question: what's God doing? This leads us to the ecclesiological question, the one that impacts most on our practices: what does God invite us to join him in?

Alan: There are two parts to the question about the church, one related to the nature of the church: who are we as the people of God? This identity is common to all expressions of the church. Then we ask about which forms of church are most relevant to our missiological task. This is much more open-ended; there are as many varieties in forms as there are varieties in culture.

Q: *What examples do you have of an open-ended approach to church forms? What could that look like?*

Cam: For my grandparents' generation meeting on Sunday morning was crucial. Now, based on cultural changes and a renewed understanding of ourselves as missional people, we sometimes find that our neighbourhood/missional callings come into conflict with the need to gather with God's people. Take a family in my church as an example: the young girls are at an age where soccer has become very meaningful to them, and in BC this means playing on Sunday mornings. At the same time, they take very seriously that their soccer club is their primary missional venue. Why would we not begin to gather at another time in order to make it work for them?

Alan: Further to Cam's illustration, I'd like to ask, is it possible for the church, the *ecclesia*, to manifest itself where people are, in this case the Sunday morning soccer group?

Cam: Maybe I'm old-fashioned enough to say that there is a place for the people of God gathering for worship apart from that as well. It's both/and.

Alan: I believe in both/and, and affirm current forms of church too. I don't want to appear exclusive. I also want to raise the question, though, about gathering outside of the formal church setting in other forms of worship that suit the context.

Cam: Yes, but there are times when I want to gather with other believers for edification.

Alan: It's a given that we need to have a place to gather for edification and worship, but do we need two contexts for this? I'm thinking that we need to avoid any false distinction between those who are like us and those who aren't; we need to seriously engage in the incarnational approach to ecclesial forms.

Q: A final word from you, Alan, on the importance of the questions we're asking at the Hinge Conference.

Alan: In framing the conversation for the Conference, the questions we've talked about are the critical questions for the church as we engage the 21st century. These are the ones that will define and direct us. It seems that the renewal of the church depends on how we think about these things; otherwise we're trapped in the dictates of the past. It is incumbent on us to make decisions about the significance of this discussion – it's not just some fad that we're talking about. After all, we're talking about the revival of the church and of Christianity itself in the West.

Alan Hirsch and Cameron Roxburgh