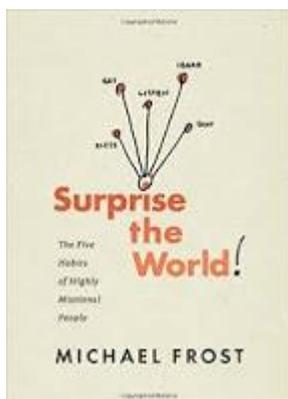


Book Summary: **Surprise the World** Michael Frost (2015)

This review was first published as a blog post in 2016.



"The Five Habits of Highly Missional People" is the subtitle of this useful little book by Michael Frost, an Australian Baptist theologian who is one of the leading voices in the missional church movement. He calls it *Surprise the World*, because in his view, it is the surprising words, actions, and attitudes that alert people in our community to the reign of God. He introduces five practices that if they are applied in an intentional way, will shape our daily lives as “questionable” – by which he means a life that provokes questions from others.

I came across this book when I was preaching from the book of Acts, where we see apostles like Peter and Paul impacting lives with the story of Jesus Christ. These narratives can sometimes come across as supernatural stories that have little connection with our twenty-first century existence. We feel guilty that we are not evangelising and bringing people to Christ in the ways portrayed in Acts, and we memorise pitiful little booklets of prefabricated presentations that we think we might one day get to use. While in reality, telling our work colleagues that they are wicked sinners or our recently-widowed neighbour that God has got a wonderful plan for their life feels fake and uncomfortable. Like the [Big Story](#), these five habits offer a different paradigm, one that is much more relevant and accessible.

First, Frost makes a useful distinction that I think is helpful to interpreters of the New Testament. He suggests that Acts and the epistles portray two different categories of evangelism. Paul and Silas were called and gifted to spread the message of Jesus through evangelistic preaching, which is not necessarily the call for everyone (see [Ephesians 4:11](#)). We have different talents and different contexts. Paul was a skilled evangelist, and so his approach to the people he met on his first-century missionary journeys is probably going to be different from ours. But there are factors that do apply to us, a group Michael Frost calls ‘missional believers’. Gifted evangelists, he says, are called to Bold Proclamation, while our missional believers’ role is to give Gracious Answers that build connections and evoke more questions. To live generous, hospitable, Spirit-led, Christ-like lives as missionaries in our own networks and relationships. Here’s that typology applied to [Colossians 4: 2 – 6](#):

Devote yourselves (missional believers), to prayer with an alert mind and a thankful heart. Pray for us, (gifted evangelists) too, that God will give us many opportunities to speak about his mysterious plan concerning Christ. That is why I am here in chains. Pray that I will proclaim this message as clearly as I should.

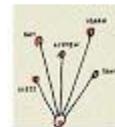
Be wise in the way you (missional believers) act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, and attractive, so that you (missional believers) will have the right response for everyone.

Bold explicit proclaimers of the gospel need clarity, and alertness to opportunities, but they rely on missional believers in the wider community to be watchful, wise and able to respond with grace. The five missional habits are designed to equip believers concerned for evangelism to play their part in that ministry. The five practices or habits spell out the word BELLS – together they make a sweet sound.

The first surprising habit is to **Bless Others**. Michael Frost defines blessing people as “anything that relieves their burden in life. Anything that helps them breathe more easily. Anything that lifts their spirit or alleviates their distress. It can be a small thing or large.” To

help us think about ways to do this he suggests ideas which tie in with Gary Chapman's love languages. Words of affirmation - send someone a note, an email, a text. Give them some encouragement. I used to lead High School peer support camps where everyone - staff and students - wrote words of affirmation for each other on paper butterflies, and you know I still have mine! Affirmation is oxygen. How about actions? serving? Kindness might mean lending a garden tool, babysitting to help out a family, bringing next door's wheelie bin down the drive, helping a colleague shift house. A third way might be gifts - not for birthday or Christmas, but spontaneous gift-giving. A work colleague used to buy tiny flower arrangements you can get for a few dollars, and occasionally leave one on my desk - "just because." A blessing. Quality time, words, actions, gifts - if we make them a habit, we build a culture of blessing.

Five Missional Habits



- BLESS: I will bless three people this week, at least one of whom is not a member of our church.
- EAT: I will eat with three people this week, at least one of whom is not a member of our church.
- LISTEN: I will spend at least one period of the week listening for the Spirit's voice.
- LEARN: I will spend at least one period of the week learning Christ.
- SENT: I will journal throughout the week about all the ways I alerted others to the reign of God through Christ.

Frost suggests resolving to bless three people each week, and to include one who is not a church member. He puts numbers on all of the five - but because the new covenant is about grace not law, I feel numbers are an unnecessarily legalistic burden. Yes, what gets measured is often what gets done, but Jesus said "*Walk with me and work with me— watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you*" ([Matthew 11: 29f](#)). But I have made a decision to bless others more intentionally - and develop a habit of generosity.

The next habit is one we all like - it is to **Eat with Others**.

Again Michael Frost's book puts some numbers on it, three times a week, but those specifics are an individual choice, like tithing. The goal is to be intentional about eating with people in the faith community, and with people who are not. Eating together is important for building a relationship in most cultures, and hospitality is a deeply-ingrained Biblical value. Jesus' last meal with friends became the core sacrament of our faith, and eating together is a key practice for Christian fellowship. The meal could be a nice dinner at home, but it could also be breakfast out or just a coffee and muffin. A lunch group or a pancake breakfast. Sitting across a table gives the opportunity for relaxed conversation and who knows where it might go?

The third habit is to **Listen to the Spirit**.

Spending time every week listening for the Spirit's voice is important for spiritual formation. We can't navigate our way through life, intentionally eating with and blessing others, and participating in Gods' mission, without relying on the Spirit's voice to guide us. There are myriad ways to do this - the ancient practice of [Examen](#) is one way - but this book just suggests a designated time, in a quiet space, with no distractions. Simply enjoy God's presence; some find a worship track helps, others may use mindfulness to focus awareness.

As you listen to the Spirit, he may do his work of conviction - not just wrong words and deeds but things you could have said or done and didn't. But more likely he will affirm and encourage you, like my fitness coach, who understands my limitations and gently pushes and stretches me, rather than bullying. "*Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly*" ([Matthew 11](#)). By spending time in prayerful listening we sense Christ's presence and love, and receive new strength, insight and encouragement.

The fourth habit is to **Learn Christ**- spending time each week learning the character and values of Christ. Remember that fad "[What would Jesus do?](#)" A hundred years before, there was a novel called [In His Steps](#) where a whole congregation decided to live by that maxim. The point of the exercise is that a lot of the time we don't pay much attention to what Jesus did when he was on earth. Even the [Alpha Course](#) which I love and support, spends little time on Jesus' earthly life. But if we're being sent into the world to live questionable lives, to arouse curiosity, to answer people's enquiries about the hope we have within, we need more than ever to understand what Jesus would do or say in any circumstance. And we can't do that without ongoing study of the biographies of Jesus written by those who knew Him best - the gospel writers. Many of us have done that before, but this time it would be with the focus of becoming Christ-like ourselves - generous, hospitable, Spirit-led, authentic followers of Jesus. Soaking mind and heart in the stories of Jesus.

The last habit is to know you are **Sent** and what means that is to begin identifying ourselves as missionaries, as sent ones. One of my favourite Bible verses is [John 20: 21](#) "*As the Father has sent me, so send I you.*" (The other is [John 10: 10](#) about abundant life and that's what others will see in us - evidence of God and his love for all people.) John 20 says the mission of Christ did not stop when he returned to the Father; He sent the Spirit to fill us and connect us and equip us to carry on his work. That's what it means to be the body of Christ. This habit encourages our awareness of that missionary task by getting us to journal - to reflect in writing - about ways we have been or could be alerting others to the reign of God in and around us. Neuroscience shows that the very act of writing taps into something powerful; [James Pennebaker](#) found students who wrote about something deep and important for a set number of minutes each day wound up physically and mentally healthier than a control group who wrote about the weather. You could make daily journal entries or just look back once a week to write about ways you've participated in God's presence and purpose.

Frost says each of these habits is designed to release a certain value. When we bless others we express God's kingdom value of generosity. When we eat with others we are practising hospitality. When we listen for God's Spirit we are practising being spirit-led. When we set aside time to learn Christ we become more Christ-like, and when we journal and reflect on the ways in which we are alerting others to God's kingdom we are acting as those who are sent.

In the book of Acts, gifted evangelists like Peter and Paul were called to proclaim the gospel and defend its integrity in a cultural milieu of emperor worship and polytheism. And ordinary believers in their thousands were called to infiltrate society with questionable lives and gracious answers. Their lifestyles and values were intriguing and attractive. They devoted themselves to acts of kindness - caring for the sick, feeding the poor, adopting unwanted babies, loving their enemies and blessing their persecutors. In the fourth century Emperor Julian became concerned that the Christians' acts of hospitality and philanthropy were winning over his subjects, and launched an offensive to get his officials to "out-love" the Christians with food programmes and hostels for travellers. But the program utterly failed, because couldn't motivate pagan priests or Roman officials to care for the poor. He failed to

realise that the Christians were filled with the Holy Spirit of love and motivated by God's grace in Christ.

Today too, those of us who are not called to be gifted evangelists can foster habits that draw us out of the church into the lives of our neighbours. I love this book so much I bought ten copies – thoroughly recommended.