

# Surprise the World!

*The Five  
Habits  
of Highly  
Missional  
People*

**MICHAEL FROST**

Michael Frost has done it again, as he continues to raise the temperature for missional living. In *Surprise the World: The Five Habits of Highly Missional People*, Frost gives us a memorable strategy that we each can put into practice every day. You'll want to get multiple copies to share with your team to ensure that each one of us is prepared to live on mission to help even more people find their way back to God.

DAVE FERGUSON

Lead pastor of Community Christian Church

Even after people read multiple books, they often ask, "So what does being missional really look like?" One of my answers is to go practice Mike Frost's BELLS. Mike has simplified the way of Jesus for our world today. Grab some friends, commit, and watch the kingdom become tangible.

HUGH HALTER

Author of *Brimstone, Flesh*, and *The Tangible Kingdom*

*Surprise the World* is Mike Frost's missional genius made accessible for the average person. So many lives will change as a result, as people hear about and follow Jesus.

DAN KIMBALL

Pastor, Vintage Faith Church

Michael Frost's insights have made him a leading voice in the missional church movement. The habits commended in *Surprise the World* will only cement Michael's place as an original thinker who envisions and serves those of us who are pastors and leaders in churches. I will enthusiastically commend this book to the churches for whom I am bishop, and I will make use of it to train Holy Trinity Church, where I am pastor.

**BISHOP TODD HUNTER**

The Anglican Church in North America

A core part of the gospel is that Jesus came from the comfort of heaven to a dark and broken world in order to rescue humankind. If we're to see another awakening in America, Christ followers will need to be intentional about obeying the Great Commission to "go and make disciples." In *Surprise the World*, Michael Frost does an excellent job of explaining how to intentionally establish habits to share God's love with the people around us.

**GERARD LONG**

Founder, Awakening to Love Ministries

Christians should be different: We should challenge convention and stand out from culture. Too often we stand out for the wrong reasons. In *Surprise the World* Michael Frost challenges us to lead lives that cause the world to question how we love and serve so well. This book is a timely wake-up call for believers and a concise and helpful encouragement to those seeking to live on-mission in their communities. Mike is the real deal and so is this book!

ED STETZER

[www.edstetzer.com](http://www.edstetzer.com)

In this brief but powerful book, Michael suggests simple, missional practices that can be applied in any context. He maps a way forward that demonstrates how small gatherings of friends can help one another live into these practices. If every follower of Jesus developed a lifestyle that included these five habits, I'm convinced that a great spiritual awakening would take place in the neighborhoods, towns, and cities of our world.

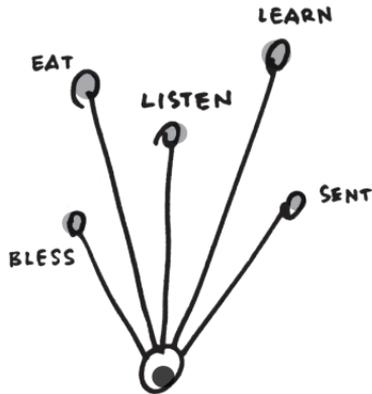
AL ENGLER

Mission director, Nav Neighbors

Eminently doable, entirely practical, and exceptionally effective! In *Surprise the World*, renowned missiologist Michael Frost creates a compelling vision of what happens when a group of Jesus followers put into practice five proven habits of missional living. You want to see your community reached with the Good News? Get your church to read this outstanding book!

FELICITY DALE

Author of *An Army of Ordinary People*



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**MICHAEL FROST**

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# INTRODUCTION



I really didn't set out to create an international movement. When I came up with the BELLS model described in this book, I thought it was just a simple idea our church could adopt to foster missional habits in our lives. I had no idea that churches right across the world—the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and goodness knows where else—would embrace it. But now it seems that everywhere I go I meet folks who tell me they are living out these five simple habits in an attempt to better fulfill the mission of God.

I partly blame my good friend Alan Hirsch. He regularly mentions BELLS in his lectures and seminars as an example of how churches can encourage missional living within their members. Although I have outlined the model in a couple of my earlier books, I have tended to be more coy about BELLS, preferring to encourage

churches to create their own homegrown approach to missional living rather than expecting them to simply adopt our model.

But when recently the folks at the Exponential church-planting movement asked me to write a manual on how to do BELLS, I figured it was time to abandon my diffidence and go ahead and fly the flag. So the book you're holding was originally an e-book posted on the Exponential site. I was delighted when NavPress then expressed interest in offering it in a paper-and-ink format, and set about expanding the simple format into a more detailed explanation of the BELLS habits and how they can work in fostering a missional lifestyle. I suspect the reason why people have embraced BELLS so quickly is that it's such a simple, easy-to-adopt set of habits that do unleash essential missional values: engagement with neighbors, connection with each other, a deeper experience of God's leading, a stronger understanding of the gospel, and a framework for identifying ourselves as missionaries. (I include a tracking sheet for these habits in the final chapter of the book.)

I'm not suggesting that BELLS is a magic bullet or anything like that. But it is a really handy tool for mobilizing Christians up, in, and out into mission. That is,

*up* into deeper connection with the Triune God; *in* to a stronger sense of community with other believers; and *out* into the neighborhood.

The fact is that we all recognize the need to live generous, hospitable, Spirit-led, Christlike lives as missionaries to our own neighborhoods. We want to live our faith out in the open for all to see.

Unfortunately, some of us grew up in churches that expected something less from us. For a start, we were often told we are all evangelists, and we were expected to memorize prefabricated gospel presentations and to go forth and share that presentation with anyone who would listen. For a lot of us this was a mortifying prospect. For a variety of reasons (temperament, lack of knowledge, lack of relationship), we felt inadequate to do so, and we ended up feeling guilty about our lack of evangelistic zeal. Often, those who were confident enough to do it were so obnoxious in their approach that they turned unbelievers away in droves.

Even when we felt released from the burden of having to be gung-ho evangelists, we still got the impression that all we had to do was befriend our neighbors and colleagues and invite them to church to hear the preaching of the Word.

I have no doubt that some people have become Christians by being buttonholed by a wild-eyed evangelist with a tract or by being invited to church by a Christian neighbor. But I think both approaches are unfair to us. The former places too high a set of expectations on us—after all, not everyone is a gifted evangelist. But the latter reduces us to church marketers whose primary role is to advertise the church's benefits.

Surely there is a way we can see the church as “an army of ordinary people,”<sup>1</sup> sent out to announce and demonstrate the reign of God through Christ, without expecting ourselves to be something we're not or something less than we should be.

That's where BELLS comes in. I believe the key is to equip believers to see themselves as “sent ones,” to foster a series of missional habits that shape our lives and values, and to propel us into the world confidently and filled with hope. These are the five habits of highly missional people.



## Living “Questionable” Lives

*Before we get to the five habits themselves, allow me to sketch the background.* Evangelistic mission works effectively when we are living generous, hospitable, Spirit-led, Christlike lives as missionaries to our own neighborhoods—*and* when the gifted evangelists in our midst join us in sharing Christ with our neighbors. That’s not just good evangelism strategy. That’s the biblical model.

### **A Twofold Approach to Evangelism**

With all the best intentions in the world, some people will tell you that every Christian is an evangelist and bears the responsibility to share Christ with others.

I certainly agree with the latter part of that contention (that we bear responsibility to share our love for Jesus with others). But I fear that the first part of that statement (that every Christian is an evangelist) is unhelpful.

Are we really all evangelists? Certainly the vast majority of Christians I know don't feel much like evangelists. It's as if we're being told that—even though we don't believe we're evangelists, and don't perform very effectively when we act like evangelists—we are nonetheless, deep down in our bones, really truly evangelists who just need to step into our true identities and fulfill our calling to share Christ with others. Is this fair, and more importantly, is it true?

Contrary to the myth that every believer is an evangelist, the apostle Paul assumes a twofold approach to the ministry of evangelism.

- First, he affirms the gifting of the evangelist—interestingly, not the gift of *evangelism* but the evangelist herself is the gift (see Ephesians 4:11).
- Second, he writes as though all believers are to be evangelistic in their general orientation.

Paul clearly places himself in the first category, seeing his ministry not only as that of an apostle but also as that of an evangelist. But it doesn't appear that he believes *all* Christians bear the responsibility for the kind of bold proclamation to which he is called. Note his description of this twofold approach in his letter to the Colossians:

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

COLOSSIANS 4:2-6

For evangelists, Paul asks for opportunities to share Christ and for the courage to proclaim the gospel clearly (verses 3-4). But he doesn't suggest the Colossians pray as much for themselves. Rather, evangelistic believers

are to pray for the evangelists' ministry, to be wise in their conduct toward outsiders, and to look for opportunities to answer outsiders' questions when they arise (verses 2, 5-6). When it comes to the spoken aspect of their ministries, evangelists are to proclaim, and believers are to give answers.

Type of Minister	Priorities	Type of Spoken Ministry
Gifted Evangelists	Clarity in the Gospel; Alertness for Opportunities	Bold Proclamation
Evangelistic Believers	Prayer, Watchfulness, Wise Socializing	Gracious Answers

*Paul's twofold approach to evangelism in the church*

I think Paul assumed that the number of gifted evangelists wouldn't be great. It seems clear that he thinks the gifted evangelists can be local (like Timothy—see 2 Timothy 4:5) or translocal (like himself). He seems also to have assumed that some gifted evangelists would occupy a leadership function in local churches (see Ephesians 4:11), building up the church to be increasingly evangelistic.

While evangelism is an essential gifting for all churches,

it isn't a gifting given to every believer. Believers, as noted, were to pray like crazy and to conduct themselves, in word and deed, in such a way as to provoke unbelievers to question their beliefs and enter into an evangelistic dialogue. On this Peter is in agreement with Paul:

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

1 PETER 3:15-16

In other words, the biblical model is for leaders to (1) identify, equip, and mobilize gifted evangelists (who then take a leadership responsibility for the church's evangelism) and (2) inspire all believers to *live questionable lives*. If all believers are leading the kinds of lives that evoke questions from their friends, then opportunities for sharing faith abound, and chances for the gifted evangelists to boldly proclaim are increased. In brief, our task is to surprise the world!

Some evangelists have taken me to task for teaching this biblical model. They fear I am letting people off the hook when it comes to evangelism. I have been told by more than one gifted evangelist that telling people they're not required to create opportunities for bold evangelistic proclamation means that people will never tell others about Jesus. I disagree. I think gifted evangelistic *leaders* bear the responsibility to *equip* their congregations to be able to tell others about Jesus, but the opportunities for faith sharing will emerge *from questioning unbelievers*. Gifted evangelistic leaders should be training their congregations to speak about Jesus conversationally when questioned about how they deal with suffering, or why they spend their vacation serving the poor, or why they've opened their home to refugees, or why they're fasting during Lent, or why they've made career choices that allow them to contribute to the greater social good.

The fact is, gifted evangelists telling the rest of us that we should behave like gifted evangelists has a debilitating effect. We look at confident, articulate, theologically trained evangelists preaching in our churches, and we hear their stories of sharing the gospel on the back of a napkin in a restaurant or a plane, and then we hear

them tell us that we, too, can (and indeed, should) do what they do—and we freeze! We know we can't do what they do.

But I don't hear Paul telling his congregations to preach in the Areopagus like he did. He doesn't berate them for not creating opportunities for bold, clear proclamation. He *does* want them to talk about Jesus, but as we've seen, he assumes it should be in the context of wise socializing, prompted by the questions of others.

### **Taking Over the Empire**

This twofold approach literally transformed the Roman Empire. While evangelists and apologists such as Peter and Paul were proclaiming the gospel and defending its integrity in an era of polytheism and pagan superstition, hundreds of thousands of ordinary believers were infiltrating every part of society and living the kind of questionable lives that evoked curiosity about the Christian message. They surprised the empire with their unlikely lifestyle.

These ordinary believers devoted themselves to sacrificial acts of kindness. They loved their enemies and

forgave their persecutors. They cared for the poor and fed the hungry. In the brutality of life under Roman rule, they were the most stunningly different people anyone had ever seen. Indeed, their influence was so surprising that the fourth-century emperor Julian (AD 331–363) feared they might take over the empire. Referring to Christians as “Galileans” and Christianity as “atheism” (because of their denial of the existence of pagan gods) and believing their religion to be a sickness, he penned this directive to his officials:

We must pay special attention to this point, and by this means effect a cure. For when it came about that the poor were neglected and overlooked by the [pagan] priests, then I think the impious Galileans observed this fact and devoted themselves to philanthropy. And they have gained ascendancy in the worst of their deeds through the credit they win for such practices. For just as those who entice children with a cake, and by throwing it to them two or three times induce them to follow them, and then, when they are far away from their friends cast them on board a ship and sell them

as slaves . . . by the same method, I say, the Galileans also begin with their so-called love-feast, or hospitality, or service of tables—for they have many ways of carrying it out and hence call it by many names—and the result is that they have led very many into atheism [i.e., Christianity].<sup>1</sup>

Julian was concerned that the Christians’ acts of hospitality and philanthropy were winning too many of his subjects. He decided to launch an offensive against them by mobilizing his officials and the pagan priesthood to *out-love* the Christians. He decreed that a system of food distribution be started and that hostels be built for poor travelers:

Why do we not observe that it is their benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead and the pretended holiness of their lives that have done most to increase atheism? I believe that we ought really and truly to practice every one of these virtues. . . . For it is disgraceful that when . . . the impious Galileans support not only their own poor but

ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps not surprisingly, Julian's new social program utterly failed. He couldn't motivate pagan priests or Roman officials to care that much for the poor. He failed to realize that the Christians were filled with the Holy Spirit of love and motivated by his grace. The message they shared—that God loved the world—was patently absurd to the average Roman; the pagan gods cared nothing for humankind. And yet in the miserable world of the Roman Empire, the Christians not only proclaimed the mercy of God but also demonstrated it. They not only fed the poor; they welcomed all comers, regardless of their socioeconomic status. The nobleman embraced the slave. Moreover, Christians opened their fellowship to anyone irrespective of ethnicity, and they promoted social relations between the sexes and within families. They were literally the most surprising alternative society, and their conduct raised an insatiable curiosity among the average Roman.

You can see how the proclamation of gifted evangelists would have been far more effective among a society of people living such questionable lives. I think this is

what Paul referred to as “adorning” the gospel—or in more contemporary language, making the gospel attractive. He uses this phrase when exhorting Titus to teach sound doctrine:

You, however, must teach what is appropriate to sound doctrine. Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance.

Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. Then they can urge the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God.

Similarly, encourage the young men to be self-controlled. In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you

may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us.

Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them, and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive.

TITUS 2:1-10

Note the way Paul concludes this list of rules (verse 10). He does not tell Titus to teach his congregation of slaves and free, young and old, to conduct themselves in this manner in order to win God's mercy—that mercy is offered freely in God our Savior. Instead, Paul insists that Christians live this way in order to “make the teaching of the church attractive.”

Nothing would be more questionable in the first century than a slave who loved his master, or a self-controlled young man, or an old woman who didn't engage in slander. In other words, this was Paul's recipe for a questionable life in his time. Our challenge is to find what similarly questionable lives look like in the twenty-first century.

## **What Kind of Life Will Evoke Questions?**

There’s an old communication theory that goes like this: When predictability is high, impact is low. In other words, when the audience thinks they know what you’re going to say, and you go ahead and say it, it makes very little impact. On the other hand, when an audience is surprised or intrigued, they will think long and hard about what they’ve heard.

The same goes for Christian outreach. Remember that one of the primary acts of the evangelistic believer is the arousal of curiosity among unbelievers, leading to questions and faith sharing. Acts of philanthropy by Christians today are relatively commonplace, so they don’t surprise the world. If we hear that a Christian business owner has donated money to a cause, or that a church has opened a feeding program or a hospice, we aren’t intrigued. Such things are expected. I’m not suggesting Christian philanthropy shouldn’t continue as an expression of the grace offered to us in Christ, but it doesn’t evoke questions the way it might have in the fourth century.

Neither does living a fine, upstanding, middle-class lifestyle in the suburbs, for what it’s worth. Again, I’m

not saying we ought not to live our lives this way. But if we're trying to live questionable lives, then cutting the lawn, saying hi to the neighbors, washing our car, walking the dog, and driving to the office every day is hardly an intriguing lifestyle.

To fulfill the evangelistic mandate that Paul and Peter and the gospel present us with, we need to be propelled *outward*, into the lives of our neighbors, but also *upward*, into deeper intimacy with Jesus. This isn't merely an individual challenge; indeed, Paul seems to suggest that we fulfill our evangelistic mandate collectively, as we also move *inward* into a self-consciously Christian community, acknowledging the evangelists we've been gifted with and the responsibility to live questionable lives that we've been vested with. We need to become a godly, intriguing, socially adventurous, joyous presence in the lives of others.

This won't be a matter of simply doing somewhat surprising but occasional things. I believe we need to develop a new set of rhythms, or habits, that foster a missional lifestyle that intrigues others. And I think the five habits I'm about to unpack will help you to do that.

- *Reflect on the rhythms of your life. Which of them are motivated primarily by your faith?*
- *Of those, which do you think would qualify as “questionable”—practices that the non-Christians in your life would find surprising or intriguing?*