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# The Road Trip That Changed The World

by Mark Sayers (Moody:2012)

A book review by Jack De Vries

I am not a good interpreter of culture. At times I wish I was like the men of Issachar, who, according to the Bible,

*“understood the times and knew what Israel should do.”<sup>1</sup>*

I know how to exegete Scripture; I’ve had good teachers. But I don’t know how to exegete culture; I’ve had few teachers. For this reason I have thankful for people like Melbourne pastor and author Mark Sayers who helps me understand the times in which we live – our secular western world – and what we should do. For this reason, I believe, Sayers’ latest book, *The Road Trip*, is a must read for all church leaders, in fact, all Christ followers. I concur with Alan Hirsch’s assessment of this book: “With this work, Mark rightly takes his place as a major prophetic voice to the contemporary Western church today.”

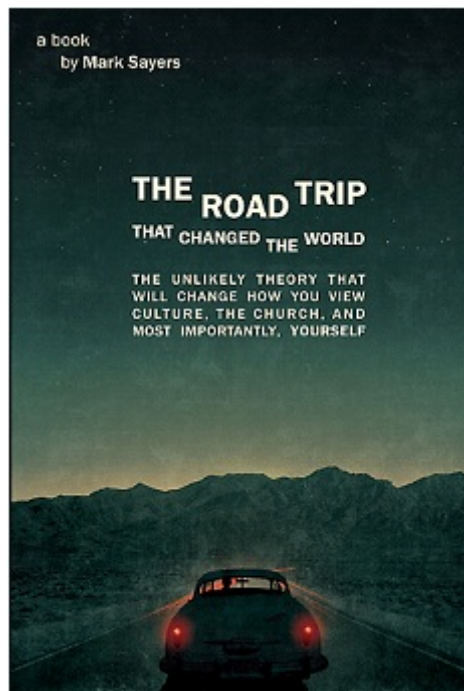
*The Road Trip that Changed the World* draws its title and chief topic from the classic American novel *On The Road* by Jack Kerouac. Sayers examines how Kerouac’s novel incited a generation to leave the ideals of home, family, and place and instead to chase the

dream of the road, the hope of whatever lays just beyond the horizon. I have never read Kerouac’s novel, and probably never will. Sayers in no way endorses the book. In fact, he notes: “The discerning reader should be made aware that *On the Road* contains strong adult content, and it would be wise to approach it with appropriate caution.” (276, Chapter 3, footnote 1)

The frightening fact, however, is that Kerouac’s novel, as Sayers retells it, is an accurate descriptor of our modern western world, the culture we find ourselves in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The first two-thirds of the book is devoted to an examination of the shift in western culture, a shift typified in Kerouac’s novel. This secularisation of society has many markings. Secularism, “like a cosmic steamroller ... had flattened the world, removed the transcendent, and compressed the sacred into a

few hours a week, only accessed by the truly devoted.” (77) Jack Kerouac, drawn by the lure of the road, was on a search for meaning in the secular world. “Jack would attempt to carve out a life of meaning within a culture that saw life as immanent.” (77) Society stopped looking to clergy, the Church and the Holy Spirit for guidance. The mystical, the spiritual, and the religious in such a world-view are deemed irrelevant and marginalized.” (75) The modern man would only believe what he could see and feel.



<sup>1</sup>1 Chronicles 12:32

While Sayers' book springboards from Kerouac's novel, he also refers to Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian Muslim, who wrote his book *Milestones* at the same time as Kerouac's novel, between 1947 and 1948. Qutb's observation of the American church was telling. To his surprise Qutb discovered that the American church was not based around devotion and worship, but rather entertainment: "If the church is a place for worship in the entire Christian world, in America it is for everything but worship. You will find it difficult to differentiate between it and any other place." (25) Qutb's observation is a commentary on the shape that the Church in the West would take in the ensuing decades up to the present day – a shift from devotion to entertainment, from discipleship to self-actualization. Yes, church has changed: church goers have become less participants and more consumers of a spectacle, not disciples but spectators. (28)

Now you might find Sayers' critique unsettling, and you might want to dismiss this book, noting that Kerouac and Qutb wrote out of the American cultural context. But remember that Sayers writes as an Australian, as a pastor, as an informed scholar, and a believer deeply concerned about the growing secularization, not just of the world, but also the church. He writes about his own home, Melbourne, a city rated as the world's most livable city, while Australia is rated the world's best medium-size country. "Yet in his city only 2 percent of eighteen-to thirty-five-year olds are actively engaged in faith.... the power of secularism in Australis [is] not so much because the government represses faith, but because life here is just so comfortable." (218)

Or as Mark Driscoll noted in his visit down under: life here is little bit too much like heaven. Sayers writes: "Only a wholehearted following of a transcendent God can create devotion in the comfortable West." (218)

Throughout his book, Sayers discusses the problem of a truly immanent worldview and the need for a transcendent worldview. By immanent Sayers means "a culture which sees faith as something personal and divorced from everyday life, which sees reality as limited to nature and matter....it believes that reality is enclosed within nature and that there is nothing outside of it." (79) In contrast, "Christian faith believes in the transcendent, that there are key elements of life beyond nature....Historical Christianity can be described as a faith which believes in a transcendent God who is beyond and exists apart from the cosmos and nature." (79) In chapter six Sayers gives a good overview how our world moved from a transcendent worldview to an immanent worldview.

Sayers go on in his book to describe the problem of having an immanent worldview. He writes: "To live with a truly immanent worldview is a horrible prospect, an existential nightmare of which the only solution seems to be suicide.... But we in the West have intuitively created devices and distractions that stop us from asking the big questions about our worldview and all of its implications." (103) Men see and use women as objects, and run from responsibility. We become obsessed with stuff. In the words of philosophers Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, "we look for 'whoosh' moments, those times when our favorite team scores a goal, the apex of the concert, the

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Faith, spirituality, and religion are tolerated if they stay in the confines of the private sphere, be it home, the religious school, or a place of worship. But our economic, social, recreational, political, physical, and educational lives tend to be lived in the public square. Thus the person of the road, whether believer or unbeliever, lives the whole of or at least a majority of their everyday life as a practical atheist. That is, although they may in their minds believe in God, they act for large parts of their waking life as if He does not exist. (72)

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perfect meal.” (110) Truth is reduced into that which makes me feel good. “The Christian imagination encouraged us to view our desires, particularly our physical desires, with suspicion.

But in the contemporary imagination, we must not rid ourselves of sin; we must rid ourselves of that which prevents our realizations of our desires....sin is vaporized for the person of the road. Sin is denying yourself your desires.” (128) Borrowing from religious historian Philip Jenkins, Sayers points out that “the way the West has reshaped Christian faith is paralleled by the way that it has reshaped marriage...: relationship with God is retained, but the autonomy of the individual remains.” (139-140) For many Christians in the West, faith has become a *defacto* faith.

In part two of *The Road Trip* Sayers maps out the road home. This journey follows the contours of Abraham, the father of all believers (see Romans 4:11-12, 16; Galatians 3:7). Sayers begins by identifying our God-given role, a role God had given to Adam and Eve, the role of being a “*Shomer*”. The word *shomer* comes from Genesis 2:15 where we are told that “the LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and *take care* of it.” (emphasis mine) “Adam and Eve were not just charged with guardianship of the world, but were commanded to go forth and multiply, to work the soil, to exercise their role as image-bearers of God, creating as He creates. The *Shomer* cultivates that which is in his care.” (174) With the fall, humankind was expelled from the garden. “They find themselves wandering, lost, east of Eden. Like us today, they are not just geographically lost, but also lost to their true calling.” (174)

Sayers sees the story of Abraham as “a lesson in how to take up the mantle of the *Shomer*.” His retelling of the Abraham story is

very insightful, and made me appreciate the biblical account of Abraham’s life anew. And “whereas Abraham shows us how God began to teach humanity how to live again as the *Shomer*, Christ’s life, as the new Adam, is our ultimate model of how to live as the *Shomer*.”

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“*The need of the hour is not for a church that is relevant.... we need a Church, and we need believers who are deep.*” (267)

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But our God-given role in life is not just that of a *Shomer*. With Christ’s coming and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, our role is also that of a *Shaliah*. As Sayers writes: “God’s breath upon Adam was part of his commissioning as the *Shomer*, Christ’s breath upon the disciples is also a commissioning. This breath comes with a responsibility. The disciples, those who follow, will become apostles, those who are sent. The Hebrew term for an apostle is *Shaliah*. A *Shaliah* is a *Shomer* with a mission.” (185) As Christians we are “no longer just *Shomer* charged with stewardship of the world [we] inhabit, [we] are given a new task, called to partner with God in the repairing of the world, in the uniting of heaven and earth.” (186) “The apostles represent God’s reengineering of humanity. In the garden of Eden, humankind’s sin had torn apart the three key relationships of the cosmos. God to humans, human to human, and human to creation. The apostles are sent out in the world as messengers, announcing that Christ’s death on the Cross has reconciled these three relationships. We too are sent. The details of our lives will differ, but our core calling is to go into the world, announcing through word and deed that God has repaired these three relationships.” (187) This is our God-given vocation in the world.

In the final chapters of the book Sayers gets very practical, applying the truths of what it means to be apostles in our world today. He addressing the problems of modern-day idolatry and how “only a wholehearted following of a transcendent God can create devotion in the comfortable West.” (218)

This will affect the way we worship, our relationships, and how we live as, what Sayers calls, “cosmic chiropractors” (250). In the ordinary throes of life, “community, accountability, and correction are fundamental to faith: without them our wills rather than Christ will dominate.” (230) I found these final chapters worth reading and rereading – just to allow the insights to sink in. As Sayers concludes: “The need of the hour is not for a church that is relevant.... we need a Church, and we need believers who are deep.” (267)

In the last chapter Sayers tells the story of Takashi Nagai, a Christian who lived the horror and died as a result of the atomic holocaust which fell upon Nagasaki and the end of World War II. I never heard this story before, and one that took me off guard. It moved my soul. For Sayers the life of Takashi Nagai exemplified one who lived his life according to our God-given role. If you have never heard this story – this alone is worth reading this book. You will not be unmoved! It made me ask of myself: “Is my journey in life mapped out by our God-given role?”

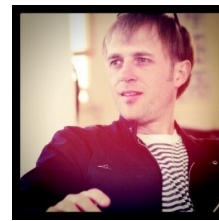
The sub-title of *The Road Trip That Changed The World* is “*the unlikely theory that will change how you view culture, the Church, and most importantly, yourself.*” Sayers delivered precisely what he set out to do. He changed the way I viewed culture. He grew my understanding of the Church. And he unravelled new thoughts about myself. The choice before me is now crystal clear: “... to immerse [myself] in the story of a God who came to earth to die for the world. A God who calls us to follow a different road, a road which is tough, a road which does not always let us get what we want, a road of sacrifice and pain, a road that ends with a Cross. A Cross which enables us to see that the world is luminously alive. That it pulsates with the sacred, that each atom, every creature, bears the fingerprints of its creator....Then we will be deep people, on a mission to deepen the

world, reservoirs of living water in the secular desert, revealing the glory of God.” (268-9)




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#### About the Author:



**Mark Sayers** is Director of Uber ([www.uberlife.com.au](http://www.uberlife.com.au)), a ministry that specializes in issues of youth and young adult discipleship. He is also pastor of Red East Church in Melbourne, Australia, an emerging church specifically reaching the young adult demographic. He is a highly sought after speaker and thinker in the areas of Generation Y, pop culture and mission.