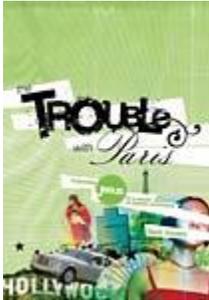A Review/Essay by Brian Rice On:

The Trouble With Paris:
Following Jesus in a World of Plastic Promises
by Mark Sayers

The first time I saw a high definition TV, it blew me away. My immediate, gut response is – that looks better than real life!!! I was looking at rain falling and drops of water on the grass and I had never seen such clarity and detail. I thought, "High Def is better than reality! Who wants to look at reality when you can look at the hyper-reality of High Def?" (If you were addicted to watching football before the advent of High Def, you are a goner. You'll never want to leave the TV now.) Hyper-Reality is better than reality! And that is the issue Mark Sayers explores in his wonderful new book, The Trouble With Paris.

This has been a good year for books. I have read a number of books that become my "favorite" book of the year, only to have another one come along and knock the current holder of the title from its spot.

==The Culturally Savvy Christian by Dick Staub; Jesus for President by Shane Claiborne, and The Reason for God by Tim Keller have had this role so far in 2008.==

Well, The Trouble With Paris by Mark Sayers is the current reigning champion of "favorite book of the year." Mark is the Director of Uber (check out www.uberlife.com.au) and pastor of Red East Church in Melbourne, Australia. He specializes in youth and young adult ministry, pop culture, and missional engagement with that culture.

Not only is there the excellent book, but there is also a DVD product and a DVD study guide to use as well. I highly recommend the book, but if you are more of a visual kind of person, get the DVD and study guide. It is also great to use for small group discussion.
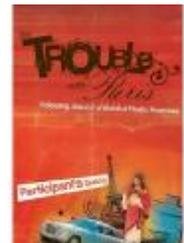
I have a few criteria for a really good book.

First, I learn some new ideas which stimulate my thinking process.

Second, I find myself engaging with the book. Lots of writings in the margins and the blank pages in the back of the book. Every page has my scribbling and notes.

Third, I start to make connections with other things I have read. I think about other authors and their ideas in light of what I am currently reading. In the case of this book, I spent lots of time writing and journaling in my journal. Fifteen pages worth of reflections.

Fourth, I enjoy the book. It is well written and creative.

Sayers scored high on each of these points. His book is relatively easy reading. It is written at a pop level, without the technical jargon that would make it inaccessible to the average reader. At the same time, it is thoughtful and provocative. Here are some of my "take-away" thoughts from The Trouble With Paris.

MISSIOLOGY:

In one sense, this book is popular sociology/anthropology and missiology in the service of exploring and understanding the culture. Don't let any of those words turn you off.

The work of missions has always been to go into a new culture and bring the gospel of Christ into that culture.

Sayers is all about missions. Sayers is engaged in the work of "discerning the times" in which we live. He stands in the tradition of the sons of Issachar. Sayers wants you to understand the culture in which you live and the influence the culture has on you. More importantly, he wants you to resist the culture and live in such a way as a follower of Christ that you offer a viable alternative to the "hyper-real" culture in which we live. (More on hyper-reality in just a minute.) In other words, Sayers wants you to be a missionary in a hyper-real world.

But the word missionary is loaded with negative connotations. It sounds archaic, dated, and at least a bit imperialistic. So the new word that is on the front burner for the evangelical and emergent church is the word **missional**. The spelling checker of Microsoft Word doesn't recognize the word **missional**. I type it and immediately the word is underlined in red. While there is a discussion about the meaning of the word, here is a generally accepted understanding. To be missional is to engage the surrounding culture with the Gospel. It is to be incarnational in the culture and not removed from that culture.

Missiology is the study of how to be missional. It includes the study of the culture in which one must be missional. It involves reflection on how to communicate and live the gospel in that culture.

(Check out www.missiology.org. In the left column, click on missions dictionary and it will bring up a pretty long list of words that are important in mission and brief definitions for those words.)

We know the old way of being missional in our culture no longer works. It no longer works because it was missions done in a paradigm of modernity, in a culture of Christendom. (Like the guy street preaching but NO ONE IS LISTENING.) Check out Rob Bell's Nooma video 009 Bullhorn for a great illustration of this.

The old no longer works. But . . .

. . . there are times when I think there are some emergents who are trying to be missional without being astutely missiological. They are trying to engage the culture, but they have not rightly understood the culture they are engaging. I think Sayers does a much better job in being missiological. He understands the North American culture (which is globalized and thus, everywhere). When I read Sayers, he helps me pinpoint what I have intuitively felt, but have not been able to clearly express about some weaknesses with some emergents. I'll get to these in this essay.

HYPER-REALITY:

Hyper-reality is the "meta-idea" of this book. It is the dominant theme that weaves through everything and binds all the supporting thoughts together.

Definition: Hyper-reality is the idea that we can have things that are even better then the real thing. Hyper-reality means that the real is not good enough. Instead, especially through the media, there is a better then real version that you can and should have. Hyper-reality is formed by the combination of a hyper-consumerist culture, the omnipresent mass media (with all its "hype") and rampant individualism.

It is probably easier to give a few illustrations.

High definition TV gives us images that are shaper, clearer, more detailed then real life. Look at your high definition TV and then go outside and look at reality. Which one looks better? (If you don't have a high definition TV, go immediately to Circuit City and buy one.)

The beauty and glamour magazines present **images of models** who look better on page then they do in real life as they are being shot by the photographers. After the picture is shot, computers are used to take away any imperfections and to improve on the beauty of the model.

Vacations are advertised on TV and what is presented is always "better" then the real. We just came back from a beach vacation with some family members. We went on line to look at condos and found one we liked. It looked great. We got there and while it was nice . . . it was not up to the standards of the hyper-real image that was presented. (By the way, the vacation in the picture was not our recent vacation spot.)

Pornography presents images of sexuality that suggest that women enjoy the sex acts they perform and that normal women and normal sexuality should involve those same acts.

How about the **CSI TV shows?** Talk about hyper-reality! Do you know there is now a condition called the CSI factor (or something like that) where real life jurors expect that criminal evidence and investigations to be like what they see on TV?

What about the ridiculous **Bachelor or Bachelorette TV shows**. Talk about hyper-reality. Most of the singles I know tell me how hard it is to find just one good person with whom to build a meaningful relationship. These shows parade out 15 or 20 hyper-real specimens (some call it the meat market) and the bachelor or bachelorette gets to experiment and play with the contestants to find the "ideal match."

And Sayers gives a funny illustration of hyper-reality. Did you ever notice that the hero on TV must get something vitally important off of a computer with only seconds to spare (and it always works). In hyper-reality, **computers always work** (they must be using Apples and not PC's)!

A FEW PROBLEMS OF HYPER-REALITY, BRIEFLY MENTIONED:

The problem with hyper-reality is this. The more we are exposed to hyper-reality, the more dissatisfied we are with regular reality. Regular reality is boring and unfulfilling. It is tame and trite.

Another problem with hyper-reality is that we become consumers of the experiences of others. After all, our own experiences are not so great, so we become voyeurs and vampires living off of the experiences of others. But even that becomes boring, so we are on the eternal pursuit of a different experience we can either have (or more likely) vicariously experience through watching someone else.

Still another problem is that "shopping" has become a way of life in hyper-reality. We are the quintessential shoppers, the consummate consumers. The handmaiden for all this is the advertising industry which exists to stimulate dissatisfaction with what you have and who you are and to promise you will be satisfied when you experience and consumer the product or the experience being marketed. And actually, experiences are the hottest consumer item today for young people.

What is insidious about this is that eventually, we too become products and not people. We become commodities to be consumed and experienced by others. In the hyper-real world, you must market yourself and to effectively market yourself, you need a radical makeover in the image that you market. Image supplants substance. Appearance is more important then depth.

In the hyper-real world, the focus is on the individual, on you and your wants, needs, and desires are supremely important. And the tragedy is that this growing emphasis on the individual means we are fragmented and disconnected more then ever, missing community and connectedness.

I can't begin to do justice to these problems. Sayers goes into each of them and more, at great length.

POSTMODERNISM OR ULTRAMODERNITY:
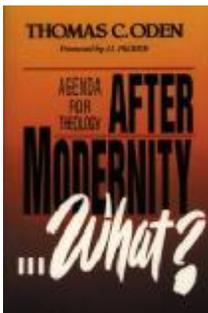
This is a complex issue and I'll cover it very briefly. We all know that postmodern simply means that which comes "after" modernity. But what exactly is it that comes "after" modernity? More important, how continuous or discontinuous is that which "comes after" modernity, with what "was" modernity?

This is not a question that is easily answered. It was Thomas Oden, in his book, After Modernity…What?, who first clued me in to the possibility that some of what comes "after" modernity is quite continuous with modernity but in a hyper or ultra form. In other words, it is modernity to the nth degree. Modernity magnified and intensified.

And it is on this point that I think some emergents may be misdiagnosing the culture around us. Here are a few questions to illustrate this possible misdiagnosis:

Are postmoderns more individualistic or less so than moderns? And to ask it in the reverse, are postmoderns more community minded or less? A number of emergents believe postmoderns are much more community oriented than individualistic. Sayers says the opposite. Postmoderns, in this case are ultramoderns. The individualism of modernity has not been replaced by community, it has been intensified in a hyper-real, ultra modern world.

Are postmoderns more consumerist or less so? A number of emergents believe postmoderns are less consumerist then their modern counterparts. Sayers says the opposite and in fact says that consumerism is the worldview of post/ultra modernism. What modernism launched, postmodernity has not replaced, but rather heightened to the extreme.

Are postmoderns more authentic or less? Again, to read emergent authors you would think that a whole new generation has authenticity as their highest value. According to Sayers, this would be a terrible misreading of culture. In a hyper-real world, image and hype about your image is everything. In the language of about 30 years ago, "Why am I afraid to tell you who I really am? Because if I tell you who I really am and you reject me, then I have nothing left (John Powell). So, better have an ongoing makeover of my image so you will want to experience me.
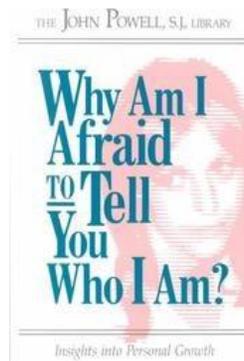
Are postmoderns more spiritual or less so? Postmoderns say they are more spiritual then their modern predecessors. Sayers will give a qualified "maybe" – but then turn around and wonder if their spirituality has been so morphed by hyper-reality, that it doesn't even qualify as spirituality. Or at best, it is a "hyper-faith." (More on this later because Sayers is brilliant with this idea.)

Are postmoderns more committed to justice? Well, I guess I'd say the jury is out on this one. But let me ask it this way. If a commitment to justice depends on the willingness of one to sacrificially take a stand and courageously choose alternative lifestyles that engage with the poor and oppressed, well, I'm probably a bit cynical and pessimistic on this one. Shane Claiborne has a lonely calling. He will be a voice crying in the wilderness. A cool voice, but a lonely one. I guess we'll just have to wait and see how many young postmoderns choose the lifestyle of justice and peace commitments that Shane has.

Are postmoderns really interested in Jesus? Some emergents say, absolutely. Sayers says no they aren't. They are interested in their folk religion versions of faith (hyper-faith).

I think that a number of emergent authors PROJECT on to the culture, their own preferences and beliefs, as well as assumptions of what they think postmoderns should be like. These authors (rightfully, I might add) value community, resist consumerism, want authenticity, spirituality, intimacy with Christ and justice. All very good stuff! But their mistake is thinking this is where the postmodern culture is at. The fact is that for large numbers of

postmoderns - they aren't there. They should be there. But they aren't.

These particular emergent authors have not well discerned the times and therefore, their engagement with the non-Christian, radically unchurched culture is based on misconceptions. I also tend to think their primary audience which they understand is the now un-churched, former fundamentalists or evangelical young adults who are disillusioned with the church of modernity. It is that audience who is interested in Jesus, authenticity, community and more.

WRAPPING THIS UP:
FIVE MORE GREAT REASONS TO READ The Trouble With Paris

ONE: The Quarter Life Crisis: One of the perils of hyper-reality is that the mid-life crisis is being accelerated and experienced by people in their late 20's. It is called the Quarter Life Crisis. Especially for middle-class young adults, their early twenties are times of excitement and promise. Guess what? By the time they are at the end of their twenties, disillusionment, disappointment, discouragement and despair are the new and unwanted experiences. The hyper-real culture has over-promised and massively under-delivered on the good life and they are left empty. And the ramifications are dangerous. (Do a Google search on the quarter life crisis and see the stuff that comes up.)

TWO: Hyper-faith Religion: This was a section of sheer brilliance on the part of Sayers. In hyper-reality, the preferred religion is hyper-faith. It is a hyper-faith that is "better" than the faith depicted in the Scriptures. It is a sexier, cooler faith, a much more fun faith, an enjoyable faith, a meet all my consumer needs faith, a what's in it for me and how much can I get out of it faith, a no suffering and no sacrifice needed faith. And the God of this faith is a very happy, likes to bless you richly and often kind of God. Sayers sees this as the dominant religious faith of today.

I could not help but think of Joel Olsteen . . . the premier, preeminent example of hyper-faith. (Sayers is much kinder and gracious then I am, he avoids mentioning any names.) For many years I just could not understand why people would listen to this hyper-prosperity stuff. But now I am starting to understand that it is hard for people who live in a hyper-real culture to listen to and want anything other than the kind of faith Joel is dispensing. My question is – what will happen to their faith when it turns out that it too overpromises (mis-promises) and under-delivers?

THREE: The unchristian Trinity: I can't begin to explain this, but he devotes a whole chapter to it. Again, Sayers is brilliant on this… sheer brilliance. I use a similar model but with different categories and Sayers has me thinking in new directions. Read chapter nine and think about Christianity in America. This is the new trinity in our midst. Amazing. Someone who is in the "emergent world" who actually explores the folk religion idea from the realm of missiology in a very understandable way.

FOUR: He is a fan of C.S. Lewis and is shaped by his reflections on heaven and eternity. Any friend and fan of Lewis is a friend of mine. I often surprise people when I tell them my favorite C.S. Lewis book is The Great Divorce. I have read it at least a dozen times. Sayers quotes from it and uses Lewis' ideas as he offers a realm of reality that is greater and more substantial than hyper-reality. Wonderful . . . delightful . . .

After you read The Trouble With Paris, run out and get The Great Divorce by Lewis.

FIVE: His final pages are a profound illustration of the coming kingdom of God. And of our longing for that future reality which is currently but only partially breaking into our existence. It is that reality for which we are created and hyper-reality is only a pale substitute for that far greater reality.

I can almost guarantee that this illustration will find its way into a number of sermons in the years ahead. I'm not quite sure how the "borrowers" are going to make it fit? I know, because I have already tried to figure out how to use it. **J**

I don't want to say anything else about that illustration. It is almost worth the price of the book. I felt tears of joy and hope welling up inside me. And I wish I could have been there with him and his friends at the time of this experience. After all, I am a child of my postmodern times and hungry for experiences.

Brian Rice

July 2008