Over the past few decades we have witnessed a struggle between two alternative broad models of Church and Leadership. On one hand the ‘mainstream’ has valued Church in organizational terms and seen Leaders as managers of resources and processes using power and techniques to control and direct the work of a central place in the society. The other model is an ‘organic’ church on the margins of society with an aversion to organizational structures and systems in its model of church, leadership is conducted in creativity rather than control, with leaders identifying as ‘posts’ or ‘prophets’ rather than pragmatic managers. Many church leaders have grappled with finding a satisfactory and satisfying position between these poles for themselves and the churches they lead. This struggle has occurred in the context of an apparent cultural shift away from Modernity to Post-Modernity.

Mark Sayers is one of those who have helped us to recognize and reflect on the implications of Post-Modernity. He is a qualified and respected preacher and author. In Christian circles he has been something of a champion and pioneer of the new way of doing church and leadership in the Post-Modernity approach. Statements such as the following are quite common.

“…I lived out the conviction that the post-modern world had changed everything. Through my leadership I would attempt to embody the organic values in a variety of missionally focused and innovative projects. Yet something was amiss. The organic values were not delivering the desired world that they had seemingly promised. After a decade of sowing, planting and seeding, there was little showing. We were recognized for our revolution-in-spirit, our imagination, absurdity and creativity, but we didn’t have the structures and the leadership to sustain, cultivate and grow it over the long haul. In essence we knew what we did not want to be—a modern, mainstream, contemporary church—but conversely we also did not know what we wanted to be. Instead of growing disciples, we were giving people permission to grow in or for their faith. We had heroically reached toward what we saw was the chaotic postmodern culture, yet ironically instead of us reaching it, it’s chaos had seemingly swept us away.

“Christian fundamentalism receivers the Christian mainstream to sustain its own identity, it must define itself against… Those who believe that Christianity can be saved as it needed saving and made relevant to the modern world by removing its structures, traditions and dogma ultimately place the work of salvation in their own hands. When religious groups transplant it provided a mediating structure—a community that generates and transmits moral values. Without this mediating structure, all that is left is the fodder of the individual and the state. Interestingly, Sayers writes that rather than the decline of active Christian faith leading to the demise of marriage and family, ‘deconstruction of insights into human relationships created an open space for the rejection of Christian faith to take hold’

Unsatisfied with the outcomes of the post-modern path, Sayers does not propose a return to modernist models of Church or Leadership. He is convinced that both models are flawed because they emerged from a ‘progressive’ worldview. Instead Sayers points to a third way. Drawing on the biblical story of Jonah, Sayers calls us to surrender to God, discarding the path of intellectual obedience—‘shifting from deception to devotion’ as Jon Tomlin puts it in the Foreword. ‘Work calls the leadership out of the hands of the alpha male and the creative genius, and rigidly restores to the crucified hands of the risen Lord.’ The key to leadership is not managerial skill or creative doing, but discipleship. Again Sayers offers a number of statements that invite deep reflection. Here is one example.

“As leaders, influencers, and creative, we all have dreams. Would we be satisfied if God made those dreams come true but we received no personal revelation? Biblical leadership is so much more than just leading people. The biblical leader is a symbol who lives at the intersection of God’s breaking into history and into life. The leader can never be distant from God. His word is the word.”

“When leaders die pushing their own agendas and realize that leadership is the act of dying to self, those around them are profoundly transformed. Skepticism leadership opens a space for God to flow into.

“Vocally, when the leader discovers that they can do nothing in their own power, a new kind of power emasculates from their life—they gain spiritual authority.”

“Instead of worrying about moving from the mechanical values to the organic values, we simply began a culture of personal, unshared work of who we think we are in the world. Our leadership was about following the leader. In all this the individual’s rights and desires are unimportant, the biblical leader lives as a slave to Christ, looking to his guidance rather than personal preference in order to make decisions. In a society of the spectacle, which reduces everyone and everything to the superficial, the biblical leader cultivates an inner world, born out of communion with the living God. The biblical leader’s words, actions, attitudes and behaviours are a witness to Jesus’ victory over the cross and his resurrection life in the daily situations of the workplace.”

Sayers courageously describes how he came to be understanding through the breakdown of his own mental health and some confronting spiritual practice. It would have been good if he had said more about how this ‘third way’ is working out in practice. But this is a work in progress for him and hopefully there will be a sequel when his thinking and practice have developed further.

This is a provocative, challenging and soul-searching book and I am thankful that finds with an ear of hope. Sayers writes that we are now entering a paradigm shift that will engulf the church around the world, in the church and outside of it, there is a group of people that remain largely unnamed. They are unnamed, ignored by the challenging classes because they see nothing new to get on with the job. They are founding for-profit planting churches, creating new ministries, starting new businesses, advocating for causes. The culture of deconstruction that has come to dominate the church no longer helps them. It hindered them. They are ‘rebounds’ partners with God in the rebuilding of his creation.”

These are the pioneers who will lead us beyond just managing, critiquing or deconstructing the church and into the fruitful future God has for us as we act on the call of Jesus—deserving ourselves, taking up our crosses and following him, the Lord who is building his Church.