

REVISITING
'FAITHFUL
PRESENCE'

TO CHANGE the WORLD
FIVE YEARS LATER

EDITED BY COLLIN HANSEN

Revisiting 'Faithful Presence': *To Change the World* Five Years Later
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Edited by Collin Hansen
Cover design and typesetting by Ryan Leichty

Published by The Gospel Coalition
2065 Half Day Road
Deerfield, Illinois 60015

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Introduction

CLOUDY WITH A 100
PERCENT CHANCE
OF STORMS

COLLIN HANSEN

THIS YEAR MARKS FIVE years since James Davison Hunter published his landmark book *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*.¹ In many ways the book has been influential beyond

¹ James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford, 2010).

its numerical readership in advocating “faithful presence,”² warning against *ressentiment*,³ and exploring the particular influence of densely networked elites in shaping our shared culture.⁴ The disproportionate effect of the book on changing the opinion and action of evangelical professors, pastors, and non-profit executives supports a key argument from Hunter, the Labrosse-Levinson distinguished professor of religion, culture, and social theory at the University of Virginia and executive director of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. Change may come imperceptibly, slowly at first. But eventually, as the tastemakers of any given culture have their way, the rest of us barely remember to imagine the world as it was.

Five years, then, is hardly long enough to reach any firm conclusions about whether events will confirm Hunter’s thesis. Hunter sharply criticizes popular political voices from Chuck Colson⁵ to Jim Wallis,⁶ but evangelicals have hard-

2 “Only by being fully present to God as a worshipping community and as adoring followers can we be faithfully present in the world.” For more see Hunter, *To Change the World*, 243–248.

3 “[Nietzsche’s] definition of this French word included what we in the English-speaking world mean by resentment, but it also involves a combination of anger, envy, hate, rage, and revenge as the motive of political action. *Ressentiment* is, then, a form of political psychology.” Hunter, *To Change the World*, 107.

4 See Hunter, *To Change the World*, 37–38.

5 See Hunter, *To Change the World*, 6–8.

6 See Hunter, *To Change the World*, 144–145.

ly responded to his book by going “silent for a season”⁷ as advised. Evangelicals still seem to prefer populist outrage to long-term strategic placement and cooperation. Evangelicals continue to invest enormous emotional and financial capital in the political process. In this sense, at least, Hunter has hardly been tried. He’s been found wanting by never being found at all.

But in another sense, evangelicals’ experiences of American culture have changed dramatically in five years, particularly in how they relate to government on sexual ethics and religious freedom. The context of the later George W. Bush administration feels quite different from what we expect now and going forward. Five years ago many evangelicals heard Hunter as a call to seek “faithful presence” in the elite sectors of society. Now many wonder if they could even gain access. And even when they can, do we believe evangelicals could remain faithful under such pressure? Would they even be allowed to practice their faith according to a biblically formed conscience?

Two evangelicals, then, could look back on the last five years and reach diametrically opposed conclusions about Hunter’s book, even though both perspectives can be found therein.

7 “It is not likely to happen, but *it may be that the healthiest course of action for Christians, on this count, is to be silent for a season and learn how to enact their faith in public through acts of shalom rather than to try again to represent it publicly through law, policy, and political mobilization.* This would not mean civil privatism but rather a season to learn how to engage the world in public differently and better.” [italics original] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 281.

(1) Look at how our culture has deteriorated for Christians. That's why we need "faithfully present" Christians in education, in law, and in media to effect cultural change. Christians have neglected the influence of elites to their own peril.

(2) Look at how our culture has deteriorated for Christians. I don't see how Christians can be permitted to exercise public faith in education, law, and media in good conscience. Plus, the church is being rotted from the inside because Christians have allowed those influences to disciple our youth. Rather than "faithful presence" in the world we need "strategic attentiveness" to our own house.

Hunter's book, then, acts as a litmus test: should we double-down on the "faithful presence" strategy in light of how we've seen elites in the numerical minority turn institutions to their advantage? Or does preoccupation with elite culture distract us from Paul's "foolishness of God" example in 1 Corinthians 1:18–30? To be "silent for a season" sounds like the worst negligence when you see the federal government give millions of dollars to aid Planned Parenthood's murderous agenda. And what is a better example of loving our neighbor than saving helpless babies from murder? But to be "silent for a season" sounds like the only rational option when you see Donald Trump, even for a limited time, leading the polls among evangelical Republicans.

The world needs the love of Christ and the example of God's people as urgently as ever. But evangelicals, mired in social media wars among themselves and plagued by *ressentiment* on both Left and Right, do not appear up to the task.

CLIMATE VS. WEATHER

Hunter and I met in his office this fall to talk about the weather. Or, rather, he played the role of cultural climatologist to my meteorologist. He talked about the long-term trends of Western civilization. I reported on the issues of the day. Those issues have their origins in decades, even centuries of thought and learned behavior. So I sought help from him to read the climate based on my readings of our recent cultural storms. I can see the clouds; he could help me predict their long-range potency.

Hunter, 60, published another seminal work, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Control the Family, Art, Education, Law, and Politics in America*, in 1992. Not until the late 1990s, however, did he begin to understand that in this book he had described a great rupture in world history, the end of one era and the beginning of the next. We have witnessed the end of Western civilization, which was built on reason (Athens) and revelation (Jerusalem), the work of Plato and Paul. And whether we recognize it or not, we're seeing the dawn of the age of Nietzsche—history without meaning, the quest for pitiable comfort. "We don't realize how pagan we've become," Hunter told me.

I asked him to come down from the clouds and help us understand. "What makes you stay up and worry?" I inquired.

"Capitalism is the most global, the most powerful institution in human history," Hunter explained. "But markets like anything else in creation give expression to the fall. And without a moral system markets are only nihilistic."

Whether or not you agree with Hunter, and Greg Forster does not in the next chapter of this eBook, we must not miss the significance of September 11, 2001. In their effort to up-end world order, Islamic terrorists targeted the most visible symbols of capitalism. In response the most powerful political leader in the world urged patriotic Americans to respond by shopping and traveling. The response tells you what keeps our political leaders up at night, too.

Hunter hardly seemed fazed by the biggest weather development of our culture since 2001, the *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision earlier this year that legalized same-sex marriage across the United States. So why didn't the decision register with him as significant? Because in his mind the decision had been foreordained at least 35 years ago. The justice who wrote the decision, Anthony Kennedy, might be the most influential public theologian and philosopher for our era. He's not an innovator, but he has codified into constitutional law on marriage and abortion the momentous cultural shift toward expressive individualism.⁸ And he was appointed by President Ronald Reagan, the greatest electoral achievement of the Religious Right. No amount of political strategy and investment can overcome a cultural revolution that has swept away the old order.

SURPRISINGLY SANGUINE

It's easy to think Hunter must be pessimistic about any Christian efforts to change the world, given the sharp cri-

⁸ See Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985).

tiques of his book. But he's surprisingly sanguine about our opportunity as Christians to grow the grass on which a better civilization might be built as an alternative to the age of Nietzsche. The God who is present and faithful to every generation gives us eyes to see a more beautiful world. And in Christ he grants us peace that isn't from this world. We don't live from election cycle to cycle. We're engaged in the work of a century, at least.

"This book is not at all about withdrawal," Hunter insists. "It's all about engagement. But I don't conflate the public with the political."

The essays of this eBook seek to highlight the most insightful aspects of *To Change the World* even as several of the contributors offer substantial critique. The process has sharpened my own thinking about why the book struck me as so important five years ago. Here I offer one insight for each year, along with one major concern in my last point.

(1) Courage and conviction are not enough, as Hunter shows in his analysis of historical culture change. Yes, following Jesus necessarily means we'll be hated, at least by some (John 15:18–25).⁹ But courage and conviction without cooperation and compromise accomplish little in the realm of common grace, where we're called to love our neighbors in word and deed.

(2) Populism doesn't change cultures. And neither does heroic individualism. Hunter famously cites the example of Jews and gays as minorities that exercise outsized influence

9 For more on how Jesus prepares Christians for facing enemies of the gospel, see Collin Hansen, *Blind Spots: Becoming a Courageous, Compassionate, and Commissioned Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

on government, media, education, and the arts.¹⁰ What does change culture, then? Dense networks of people working in overlapping fields. So don't misunderstand the example of the civil rights movement. Heroic individuals like Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. were assisted by high-placed allies in government and media. The same is true of the marching masses.

(3) When evangelicals perceive cultural declension, revival becomes a popular topic.¹¹ But it's much less popular to recruit allies to build institutions and structures for the long haul. And yet history suggests that revivals leave a lasting legacy on earth when they change social structures and not just hearts. Such was the case with the work of William Wilberforce and the revived Clapham Sect when they abolished slavery in early 19th-century England.

(4) Politics trumps all in Christian cultural engagement. But it shouldn't. Because we've defined our discipleship in relation to the state, the world knows Christians by our politics. And history shows that churches characterized by partisan politics fall with the fortunes of their patron parties. However it happened, religious liberty has been recast as a position of self-interest, rather than a constitutional guarantee. So Kim Davis in Kentucky reinforces the perception of Christians as exercising the self-righteous privileges of discrimination. Our neighbors can't connect our principled stand with love for them. Yet our fallen world also provides

¹⁰ See Hunter, *To Change the World*, 20–21.

¹¹ For more on how God has worked with unexpected power in the past, see Collin Hansen and John Woodbridge, *A God-Sized Vision: Revival Stories that Stretch and Stir* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010).

opportunities to show the way of grace and forgiveness, as in the case of the Charleston Nine this year.

(5) All three modes of cultural engagement identified by Hunter—purity from, defensive against, and relevant to¹²—reflect some biblical truth on their own. But the example of Jesus, rather than the contrast with each other or previous generations, must fuel our imaginations. The more we compliment ourselves for not making the mistakes of our fathers, the more likely we are to be judged by our sons and daughters as missing the point of Jesus.¹³

Assessing the ministry of Jesus, *To Change the World* favors two dimensions of the atonement over all others: his example and triumph over the forces of evil. But that's not the only or even the primary way God is present to us and faithful to his promises. Without the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers by faith and the satisfaction of God's wrath against sin (Rom. 3:21–26; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 John 2:2; 4:10), we remain enemies of God under judgment. Those who love God and love their neighbors know how much they've been forgiven (Luke 7:47). Hunter's appeal to the common good would have been stronger with more sustained emphasis on this dimension of Christ's work.¹⁴

¹² See Hunter, *To Change the World*, 213–219.

¹³ This is a main point of my book *Blind Spots*, which was influenced by Hunter.

¹⁴ For such a case see Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* (New York: Dutton, 2012).

NOT JUST FOR ELITES

In so much discussion over Hunter's book, his main application has barely registered: the local church offers Christians the faithful presence of God and the means to support their mission in every sphere of creation. Essays I and II of Hunter's book have seven chapters, matching the biblical number for completeness. But Essay III has only six chapters. That's because, Hunter told me, he intended for the church to write that chapter in her practice. Healthy spiritual formation, as Hunter argues in the book, comes in community culture. As the pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Charlottesville, Greg Thompson earned his PhD under Hunter at the University of Virginia. He's seeking to implement this vision of "missionary churches for a secular age" with the twin goals of forming faithful Christians and unleashing them as creative institution-builders in all cultural spheres.

Even so, many think Hunter is an elitist fixated on infiltration of high society. They miss this key role he assigns to the church. He's hopeful about churches that see their communities as parishes of networked families. Such dense cultures learn and love in ways that overflow to their neighbors and result in praise to God. At the same time, Hunter insists his work applies equally well to your local school as it does to Washington, D.C. These schools change as teachers work with parents, administrators cooperate with local government officials, and religious leaders consult with business owners. All are elites in their own spheres. All have power to enact change, but they can accomplish a great deal more together than they can separately.

Hunter's book has mostly reached elites during the last five years. But he challenges all Christians to deploy whatever status and wealth they have been entrusted by God as they carry one another's burdens. He does not offer a path to influence so much as the mode of faithfulness in our secular age.

"Status is about exclusion," Hunter told me, "and that's repugnant to the gospel." He continued, "Jesus chose a common fisherman, Peter, and he also chose as his chief theologian Paul, one of the greatest minds of all time."

Whether you're more like Peter or Paul, God can work with each one of us to change our little corner of the world. And maybe even more. The weather may be cloudy with a 100 percent chance of storms. But the long-range forecast tells us the clouds come with God himself (Rev. 1:7).



The essays of this eBook reflect diverse approaches to Hunter's work. Greg Forster offers an extensive overview of Hunter's context and contributes substantial critique on two aspects in particular. The other essays contribute shorter takes on key aspects of Hunter's thesis. None should be regarded as attempting exhaustive engagement with Hunter's mammoth analysis of culture and history. Nevertheless each opens a window into how thinkers and practitioners of various backgrounds have grappled with their calling since 2010 when the book released.

TO LOVE THE WORLD:
THE IRONY, TRAGEDY,
AND POSSIBILITY
OF *TO CHANGE
THE WORLD*

GREG FORSTER

MOST PEOPLE READ JAMES Davison Hunter's *To Change the World* with the wrong question in mind. This book is not asking the question, "What should Christians do about the culture today?" It does not tell us what to do next. It puts us in a position to think clearly about what to do next.

This book is a unique and astonishing gift to the church. In spite of several tragic flaws that urgently need correction—we'll get to those later—the book as a whole is not just

brilliant but incredibly timely. It came at just the moment when the church most needed it.

As the secularizing and oppressive political dynamic Hunter described has unfolded in the past five years, the American church's view of its cultural situation has been revolutionized. We are beginning to think clearly about our situation in a way we did not before. This revolution has not been exclusively due to Hunter's *To Change the World*, of course, but it is hard to think of a book that excels or even equals its catalytic power.

The realization we are coming to might be distilled as this: Christian influence on culture occurs not primarily by human design (although human designs are involved) but by God's invisible and supernatural use of the suffering perseverance of his people in their positions of public stewardship in all domains of culture. This insight is not fully present in *To Change the World*, particularly because the book is concerned with describing natural sociological forces and does not anticipate supernatural activity. But *To Change the World* was indispensable in our realization of this insight.

Thus, the failure of "faithful presence" to provide a path forward for the church does not detract from the book's importance. Perhaps the most striking sign of Hunter's influence is the pathetic weakness of current attempts to revive the Christian Right. With historic religion and traditional morality both under attack by militant secularizers who flagrantly twist the law and "rig the language game" (as Peter Epps puts it), conditions for the emergence of a new Moral Majority would seem to be almost perfect. Not long ago I published a handwringing article predicting exactly this

development and foreboding the damage it would do before it finally collapsed.

I was mistaken. The new Christian Right is already collapsing even as it launches. It is making an enormous effort to sell its product, but customers aren't buying. Apparently, Christian leaders have seen through the advertisements and will not be taken in by the same hustle again. More than any other single individual, Hunter deserves thanks.

At this point it is natural to ask, "So, what comes next?" But the whole point of *To Change the World* is that we need to resist jumping straight to that question. There are several other questions we must ask first. One of them is, "What came before?"

HOW IS FAITH EVEN POSSIBLE IN OUR TIME?

The importance of *To Change the World* was crystallized for me when I heard Stephen Grabill remark that "Hunter awoke us from our dogmatic slumbers." That statement invokes an important history.

To Change the World must be read in light of a great world-historical problem: if the social order does not enforce a faith by law, is it even possible for religion to influence our way of life? Hunter himself, starting in the subtitle and the very first paragraph of the book, insists on this historical context for his argument. As he says in his second sentence, the question animating the book is, "How is religious faith possible in the late modern world?" We must answer that before we even begin to think about the question, "What should Christians do about the culture today?"

Modern anxieties about “culture” date back to about the mid-18th century, when great minds began to see that the Enlightenment’s social project was failing. Though the early moderns had not intended it, religious diversity in modern cultural structures permits, and in some ways encourages, a decay of publicly shared commitments to metaphysics and morals. One of the most devastating diagnoses of the problem came from David Hume, a great skeptic who set out to slay Enlightenment rationalism. His attack on the practical value of reason sent shockwaves through the intelligentsia of Europe.

But Hume did not slay rationalism. He awoke a sleeping giant to its defense.

Immanuel Kant wrote that Hume “awoke me from my dogmatic slumbers.” Hume forced Kant to see the threat to metaphysics and morals that lay at the heart of modernity. Kant was unwilling to abandon modern commitments like religious freedom, constitutional democracy, and economic development. But the pluralism and fragmentation permitted by these structures undermined the very beliefs upon which those structures rested. Somehow, a way had to be found to sustain belief in transcendent things without going back to the injustices of aristocracy and enforced religious orthodoxy.

Kant’s solution was an ingenious new idea: Through a combination of public activities, including philosophy, art, politics, science, and more, people of diverse faiths could be brought to a shared and public commitment to the old morals and metaphysics—without the return of the old injustices. He called this combination of edifying public activities “cul-

ture,” and he spent the rest of his career mapping out what it meant and how he thought it could be done.

We have been fighting about culture ever since.

THE MIRACLE OF CULTURE

Given the ubiquitous importance of the concept today, it is striking to realize that nobody ever used the word “culture” in the sense we now give it before the rise of the modern social order. The Athenians did not talk about defending their culture when they made Socrates drink poison. Nor did the Genevans talk about defending their culture when they burnt Servetus alive. They talked about their gods.

The concept of culture emerged to fill the gap between religion and social order in the modern world. Before modernity, from the earliest civilizations right down to the last dying gasps of the medieval order, every society believed that the only way to hold a social order together was through an enforced religious orthodoxy. They didn’t think it would be possible to sustain a stable society with a gap between religion and social order; hence they had no concept of “culture” to fill that gap.

We moderns—all of us—are involved in a great and glorious effort, now almost three centuries old, to have our cake and eat it, too. We want to distinguish religion from social order and still have a moral and stable social order. We want religious freedom *and* public morals, democracy *and* justice that transcends popular passions and interests, an entrepreneurial economy *and* identity and roots, equal dignity for women *and* stable families.

That is, we want a miracle. We want something that is naturally impossible—that human beings should control their own behavior voluntarily rather than being controlled from without by an enforced religious orthodoxy. Such behavior can be sustained for a while, sometimes for a surprisingly long while, by mere self-restraint. But in the long run it requires something deeper: not self-restraint but death to self.

You will not find the power of death to self in human nature. But you will find it in a source above human nature.

Kant was a rationalist. He believed in God and morality, but he did not have much time for miracles. So it is ironic that his effort to save the modern world through “culture” turns out to require a miracle. Kant’s methods can’t solve Kant’s problem; natural reason does not, by itself, produce a sustainable social order. When it is detached from revealed religion that transcends culture, the ideal of culture leads first to racism and nationalism, then to relativism and nihilistic despair.

That is why Kant’s heirs have abandoned the project. Secular people today view culture as something that divides us into radically hostile factions, not something that unites us and produces a stable social order. Only religious believers still think culture can provide a mediating space where it is possible to forge a shared moral order among diverse people. And that is not an accident.

That is the answer—at least it is my answer—to the question that animates *To Change the World*. How is a religious way of life possible in advanced modernity? Only by supernatural power. “With man it is not possible, but. . . .”

AWAKENING FROM OUR SLUMBERS

In *To Change the World*, Hunter is not our Kant, come to show us how to build culture. He is our Hume, our skeptic, above all a skeptic of rationalism. He has come to awaken us from our dogmatic slumbers.

We have been telling ourselves, in various ways, that all these sublime paradoxes—freedom and moral order, democracy and transcendent justice, and so on—are not paradoxical at all. They are the most natural thing in the world. It is our society's current problems that are unnatural, abnormal, the result of a previous generation's failure of "eternal vigilance." Thus the train can be put back on its tracks through a straightforward program. By electing politicians who will restore moral laws, or by expanding the technocratic and redistributionist state, or by creating a counterculture of righteous social life contained within the church, we can correct the problem and restore the natural order.

These cheap and easy answers are the dogmatic slumbers from which we are awakening. Human nature provides no tracks for this train. Nothing is more unnatural, more abnormal, than to give people freedom and see them use it to build moral order; to give people democracy and see them vote for justice; to give people stewardship over their own property and see them create economic flourishing; to permit diverse expressions of what it means to be masculine or feminine, and nonetheless find men and women realizing they need one another as life partners.

Such things have sometimes happened. But when they have happened, they have never been ordinary. They are miracles in our midst.

We have become too comfortable in the world we are trying to change. We have lost the sense that a strong and moral culture is a miracle. In the presence of this miracle, we should be struck dumb with awe and wonder. In its absence, we should be humble and not demand it as an entitlement, any more than we demand as an entitlement the power to walk on water or raise the dead.

HOW CULTURE DOESN'T WORK

In the first section of the book, Hunter lays out the conventional Christian understanding of culture that he has come to demolish. He summarizes it in three erroneous propositions. First, cultural change is a downstream result of personal change; we work relationally with our neighbors “one on one” to cultivate personal transformation, and eventually culture is transformed as a cumulative result of many individual transformations. Second, cultural change is the result of our designs and efforts; where the church is losing influence within culture we are consistently told that the problem is we aren't trying hard enough. Third, cultural transformation is democratic; institutions of power and influence are forced to change “from the bottom up,” as the result of widespread “one on one” persuasion among the masses.

These three errors have a single cause: rationalism. We think culture changes “one on one” as we use reasoning to persuade people to our “worldview,” which we think we can reduce to a series of propositional sentences; once people assent to this propositional content, culture will change as a natural result. We think culture can be changed by design and effort because we think culture responds strongly and

predictably to the power of ideas simply as such. We think cultural change is democratic because it occurs by reasoning, a process that is in principle open to all regardless of social station. (Hunter calls this rationalism “Hegelianism” because Hegel is famously associated with the idea that history—especially the history of changes in social order—is the gradual unfolding of an inevitable process of human enlightenment and discovery.)

The force of Hunter’s critique of rationalism becomes clear in one of his most striking examples. Fully 83 percent of Americans believe God created the human race, either by special creation or by guiding natural forces. It follows that, on the conventional view of culture, a religious understanding of human origins has achieved as close to total victory as might reasonably be expected. Yet this understanding does not in fact dominate our culture; far from it.

HOW CULTURE DOES WORK

Against the conventional view, Hunter offers eleven propositions—seven about what culture is and four about how it changes. He then draws a rough map of current Christian efforts to change culture. The map shows the inadequacy of our approaches in light of his revisionist understanding of culture.

Hunter’s eleven propositions defy easy summary, and anyone who wants to understand *To Change the World* must read this section with special care. That said, the propositions might be summarized thus: Culture is a messy and somewhat incoherent system of beliefs about what is true and good that is deeply buried in our way of life (far too deep to be fully surfaced through rational thought) by a historical

process of interaction between ideas and networks of individuals and institutions. This process involves unequal distribution of cultural power (i.e., the power to embed beliefs about what is true and good into our way of life) among individuals and institutions. Large-scale changes in culture are produced when individuals and institutions relatively high on the scale of cultural power—but not at the very top, where conformity is most strongly enforced—form extensively overlapping networks. If these networks are willing to fight for the change they seek, they can mobilize their power to force those at the very top to accommodate it.

Christians (or anyone else) who want to affect culture must therefore pursue excellence in a wide variety of cultural activities. We need excellence in order to perform cultural tasks in places that have high levels of cultural power. And we need to be active in a wide variety of cultural activities in order to build dense, overlapping networks across many domains; only such broad-based networks are capable of mobilizing cultural power in a way that challenges the status quo. However, as Hunter shows, Christian leaders are not investing available resources in a broad spectrum of cultural activities, and Christians are concentrated in lowbrow, grassroots, “practical everyday” modes of cultural production on the periphery of cultural power, where the highest levels of excellence are typically not demanded.

Here, Hunter introduces a new explanation for the inadequacy of existing efforts, in addition to rationalism. He argues that Christianity is essentially democratic in character, because it affirms the equal intrinsic dignity of all people, as against the world’s natural elitism. While this is good in itself, “the populism that is inherent to authentic Christian

witness is often transformed into an oppressive egalitarianism that will suffer no distinctions between higher and lower or better and worse.”¹⁵

This problem will be familiar to readers of Aristotle’s *Politics* or Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. Just as aristocratic institutions tend to encourage arrogant paternalism in the aristocrats, which ultimately destroys the aristocracy, democratic institutions tend to encourage resentful envy among the populace, which ultimately destroys the democracy. Aristocracies can only survive if they teach their snotty young aristocrats that the common man’s plea for justice and mercy is to be taken seriously; democracies can only survive if they teach their snotty young democrats that the superiority of exceptional talent and virtue is to be taken seriously.

Hunter makes one critical misstep in this section. He chooses to treat political and economic systems as distinct from culture, rather than as parts of culture. This is obviously wrong; the way we define and enforce public justice and exchange our labor and possessions is one of the most important ways in which beliefs about the true and the good get deeply buried into our way of life. Hunter himself seems to be aware of this (“of course, such distinctions are finally unsatisfactory”¹⁶), yet he inexplicably makes this false distinction a central pillar of his analysis. This will cause him major headaches later on.

¹⁵ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 94.

¹⁶ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 80.

THE POLITICIZATION OF ALL OF LIFE

The second part of the book, which contains its greatest triumphs and its worst flaws, is about power. One of the most alarming phenomena in our world is the slow but steady politicization of everything. Nothing seems to stop it. Hunter was not the first to explain why this is happening; Shakespeare depicts the process and its causes in *The Merchant of Venice*. But Hunter is the first to get the explanation into a lot of Christians' heads today, including mine. This is one of the most important contributions of *To Change the World*.

Religious freedom and the modern institutions associated with it—especially constitutional democracy and an entrepreneurial economy—are pluralistic. They assume society will be made up of people with diverse religious, metaphysical, and moral views. The early pioneers of religious freedom believed that even in such an environment, it would be relatively simple to maintain public consensus on the basic moral commitments necessary for social order.

They were mistaken. As modernity has developed, we have less and less that actually holds us together. At a superficial level we do agree on the moral basics—don't kill, don't steal, keep your promises, help your neighbor. But these are abstractions. What counts as murder? What counts as stealing?

With less and less spontaneous cultural unity, we rely more upon power to hold society together. And political power is (in the short term) the easiest form of power to use for this purpose. Hence, "especially since the New Deal," we have seen an increasing tendency for every area of human life to come under political control. "Law increases as cultural

consensus decreases.”¹⁷ Nothing is public or shared except the political.

OH, YEAH? I’LL TEACH YOU TO CALL ME RESENTFUL!

If political power is the easiest form of power to use, mobilizing *ressentiment* is the easiest way to get political power. *Ressentiment* is not merely resentment, but “anger, envy, hate, rage, and revenge as the motive of political action.”¹⁸ You gain power by cultivating grievances; everyone proclaims himself a powerless victim of the powerful, in order to gain power. Identifying enemies who have done us wrong and need to be punished becomes *the* political activity.

Hence we are caught in a double bind. Everything public becomes political, and everything political becomes a nightmare of hatred and injustice.

Christian attempts to influence culture have been characterized by the same trends. Lacking the ability to bring people together spontaneously and organically—indeed, often lacking even the awareness of such an alternative—we have turned to politics as the natural and (effectively) sole method of changing the world. And we have partaken of the methods of *ressentiment* to do so.

Hunter analyzes three Christian political movements—the Christian Right, the Christian Left, and the anti-political “neo-Anabaptists.” The Christian Right mobilizes *ressentiment* to “take back” America from the secular Left and enact moral laws; the Christian Left mobilizes *ressenti-*

¹⁷ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 102.

¹⁸ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 107.

ment to “take back” America from the Christian Right and expand the technocratic state; the neo-Anabaptists mobilize *ressentiment* to “take back” traditional social order from what it conceives of as the demonic forces of modernity.

In all three cases, the church has no public witness other than its political witness. Nothing is public except the political. And in all three cases, the church maintains its identity and mission by identifying convenient scapegoat figures and demonizing them.

ARE POLITICS AND ECONOMICS DEMONIC?

Hunter then goes on to advocate two things. One is that the church should drop out of politics and stay out until we have learned to do politics better—just like we learn to play hockey better by sitting in the penalty box. Dropping out of politics is in any event impossible, since God has made human beings as political creatures; one would think the collapse of the neo-Anabaptists into *ressentiment* would have been enough to teach this lesson.

In words that would have brought nods of approval from Machiavelli, Hobbes, Carl Schmitt, and (especially) Thrasymachus, Hunter declares that “politics is invariably about power—not only power, but finally about power.”¹⁹ This is theologically, philosophically, and empirically unsustainable. The prophetic witness against unjust kings and the apostolic description of the (pagan!) emperor as “God’s minister to you for your good” clearly rule out the Hunter/Thrasymachus view. As Plato shows in the *Republic*, all political action nec-

¹⁹ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 172.

essarily presupposes that politics is ultimately about justice rather than power; that is the only thing that makes it “political” action in the first place. This is the only reason political action is morally accountable. If politics is ultimately about power, “justice” simply means the interests of the powerful—and if that were true, we would not even have a concept of justice, or of politics. As Augustine said, following Cicero who followed Plato, if justice were not the defining feature of political action we would make no distinction between kings and criminals.

Hunter’s analysis of political action is deeply materialistic. Materialism is the view that there is no reality higher than that of material objects and forces, and if Christianity is true any materialistic analysis must be false. But because Hunter has chosen to treat politics as if it were not a part of culture, his description of it cannot avoid materialism. He defines politics solely in terms of coercion; justice may come in, but only superficially. His treatment of economics elsewhere in the book, such as it is, is equally materialistic and therefore equally false. He thinks economics is about money, and the higher meaning of our stewardship and cooperative labor is peripheral.

Hunter also tries to justify his position biblically, but he does not treat the Bible as if it were God’s Word. He does not expect the Bible to act constructively by the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit. Instead, he goes to the Bible only to find support for sociological theories that he constructs and brings to the text. Not surprisingly, he finds that the Bible supports his sociology on every point.

His recommendation that the church abstain from politics is balanced with boilerplate statements that sometimes

political action is acceptable. But these are hard to square with his insistence that all political and economic systems are demonic (“the ‘kingdoms of this world’ referred to in Luke 4:5 include politics and economics”²⁰) and our participation in political systems in particular can never be done in Christ’s name or as part of the kingdom of God. If so, Christians cannot participate in them, because everything Christians do must be done in Christ’s name and in obedience to the kingdom of God.

Hunter does not want to denounce Martin Luther King Jr. as evil. As the logic of his materialistic political philosophy draws him inexorably toward that conclusion, he searches frantically for an escape hatch, and the results are not impressive. He says the right things, but he cannot square them with his larger philosophy.

WE CAN BE POLITICAL WITHOUT BEING PARTISAN

Hunter needed to draw on a concept of politics that distinguishes the basic moral premises of a civil community and its constitution (in our case, the equal dignity of all human beings and their rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness) from the contest for power among parties and ideologies. As Ross Douthat has said, the church must be political without being partisan.²¹ We must rebuild a vocab-

20 Hunter, *To Change the World*, 193.

21 Ross Douthat and Collin Hansen, “How to Be Political But Not Partisan,” podcast audio, The Gospel Coalition, accessed September 29, 2015, <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/how-to-be-political-but-not-partisan>.

ulary that allows us to “be political” in the sense of speaking to the *polis*, the civil order, and its basic moral commitments without taking sides in partisan disputes. We must affirm moral commitments that transcend partisan and ideological divisions, and hold political and economic leaders (along with everybody else) accountable to them.

Hunter’s ill-considered first proposal has unfortunately drawn attention away from his second proposal. He urges the church to help our culture decouple the public from the political. This is an absolutely critical mission for the church today. As Hunter says, the right functioning of the political sphere of life depends on the right functioning of public activities that are not political. Hunter is right that “there are no political solutions to the problems most people care about.”

Only through non-political public activities can a better way of life be made plausible and legitimate within our culture. Only such a restoration of the non-political public square can halt the politicization of all life. And working for such a restoration is the only way the church can escape captivity to *ressentiment*.

The church can mobilize to help create profitable businesses in economically distressed areas, creating opportunity for the image of God in impoverished people to shine forth in the dignity of work and the moral virtue of economic productivity. (Although doing so will require the church to overcome the economic naiveté displayed, for example, in *To Change the World*’s description of the auto dealership business.²²) The church can expose the brutality and inhumanity

22 Hunter, *To Change the World*, 267.

practiced in exploitative industries. It can help people rebuild marriages and recover from addictions, and explain in the public square how and why these recoveries are possible. It can create cultural products that reflect the good, the true, and the beautiful.

It can do all this while, at the same time, creating new ways to engage in politics that prioritize justice over power.

THE PROBLEMS BEHIND THE PROBLEMS

Once we see that cultural power is, and must always be, unequally distributed, and that efforts to use it are so prone to tragic abuse and *ressentiment*, Christians might well respond: "In that case, to hell (literally) with culture!" Hence we might naturally expect the third part of the book to begin plotting what solutions to these challenges would look like.

This is the key error of most readers of *To Change the World*. They read the third section expecting answers and are frustrated at the vagueness of what they find. But the third section of the book does not primarily offer solutions (although some gestures are made in that direction). Instead, it maps out the more fundamental reasons why we face these challenges—the deep problems in social structure that produce the more openly manifested problems described in the first two sections.

One of these deep problems is what Hunter calls "difference." The fact of social pluralism creates a competition for power between groups. Where difference undermines cultural consensus, conflicts are harder to resolve, and greater opportunities for *ressentiment* arise. Shylock's famous speech about the relations between Christians and Jews begins with

the compassion of a shared human nature: “If you prick us, do we not bleed?” But it ends in vicious division: “And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that.”

Under the surface of these conflicts is a desire to recapture the certainty and stable identity that was taken for granted in earlier social orders. In an environment where only one religion is permitted and alternatives are brutally suppressed, “plausibility structures” in daily life make the dominant religion seem unshakably certain. We may rightly give thanks that questions of religious truth are no longer settled by force, and that we no longer take God and faith for granted as we once did. Yet where there is religious freedom, “the confidence borne from beliefs that are taken for granted typically gives way to belief plagued by ambivalence and uncertainty. The uncertainty is not a matter of insufficient will or deficient commitment but a natural social psychological reaction to weakened plausibility structures.”²³ In this environment, the church cannot play “its historic role as defender of social order,” and “pressures of assimilation to the world” become extremely strong.²⁴

The other problem is “dissolution.” In a pluralistic social environment, no one is sure what words really mean. We may all agree murder is wrong, but what does that mean? What is justice? What is truth? In the exchange between Shylock and Portia, Shakespeare provides a terrifying glimpse of this dissolution in action; an innocent man’s mutilation and death hang in the balance, and they cannot even

23 Hunter, *To Change the World*, 293.

24 Hunter, *To Change the World*, 204.

talk to each other. In such an environment, “the only thing that is irrefutable, the only thing left to connect words to the world, are will and power”²⁵—as Portia demonstrates in her merciless resolution of the case. In addition to pluralism and the breakdown of plausibility structures, Hunter attributes dissolution to naïve uses of new communications technology.

Hunter identifies three inadequate responses to these conditions. Greg Thompson has helpfully described these approaches as the domination, fortification, and accommodation paradigms.²⁶ The domination paradigm of the Christian Right thinks the problem is merely secularization; it doesn’t see the challenges of pluralism and dissolution, and ends up unintentionally retreating into a frustrated “parallel universe” of alternative institutions. The fortification paradigm of the neo-Anabaptists and others also withdraws into this parallel universe, but intentionally so, dreaming of a “utopian enclave”; this project ends in self-referential nullity—“the church has no obligation other than to be itself.”²⁷ Meanwhile, the accommodation paradigm of the Christian Left and also, more broadly, of what used to be called seeker-sensitive and emergent churches, can neither sustain the integrity of the faith nor offer clarity to a confused culture.

25 Hunter, *To Change the World*, 204.

26 Greg Thompson, “The Church in Our Time: Nurturing Congregations of Faithful Presence.” Accessed September 30, 2015, http://denverinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/The-Church-In-Our-Time-A-New-City-Commons-White-Paper_4.pdf.

27 Hunter, *To Change the World*, 218–219.

NOT 'FAITHFUL PRESENCE' BUT
'FAITHFUL PRESENCE WITHIN'

Hunter cannot lay all these challenges on the table and then say nothing about solutions. However, as he emphasizes repeatedly, the solutions don't yet exist. They will require at least a generation for the church to develop, and even then only as the result of painstaking labor by many people, not all of whom will agree about everything. "Faithful presence within the culture" is not so much a solution as a placeholder phrase to stand in for the solutions that neither Hunter nor anyone else has really developed.

In "faithful presence within the culture," note the critically important word "within." This is the only word that matters. There is nothing particularly distinctive about calling Christians to be faithful, or to be culturally present. All three of the inadequate approaches do the same. Where Hunter suggests something genuinely different is when he calls upon us to conceive ourselves as *within* the culture.

All three of the inadequate approaches conceive of the church as something that stands upon an Archimedean point, outside the culture, holding a lever with which to move it. Archimedes said that with a lever long enough he could move the whole world, if only he could find a place to stand. But there was no place for him to stand outside the world, and there is no place for us to stand outside the culture.

Human beings are cultural creatures. To be human is to be embedded in a dense web of relationships that (to a great extent, although not fully) define our identity as individuals. God made us that way, made us to be formed by our

cultures—that is, by our relationships with those around us. Thus the church is never outside culture, simply because human beings are never outside culture. The church always exists already within the culture.

While Hunter, like the rest of us, does not have solutions at hand, he identifies several elements that a solution would need to contain. The most important of these is moral formation; the church must learn to make disciples, not just make converts. Such disciples must know how to enact God's blessings for the world through neighbor-love in all their vocational tasks, especially by serving the poor and vulnerable, while also maintaining an appropriate state of tension with the world around them rather than simply assimilating. Even an appropriate state of tension will be needed within the church, as we learn to work together amid our differences. And this program of discipleship will have the greatest cultural effect when undertaken by those who are in, or able to enter, positions of cultural power.

In all this, Hunter does little more than reiterate what has already been said for many years by figures as diverse as Dallas Willard and David Wells. The fact that these basic elements of discipleship are so unfamiliar to most Christian audiences speaks volumes about the distance we still have to go in educating our people and reforming the church.

AFFIRMATION AND ANTITHESIS

An important idea in this section is the need to maintain what Hunter calls “affirmation and antithesis” toward our

culture, moving back and forth from one to the other.²⁸ Affirmation is just what it sounds like—affirming the goodness of things in the culture that are genuinely good, and maintaining a sense that the activities we undertake within our culture are meaningful and ought to be a source of profound satisfaction when done rightly. Antithesis is standing against or subverting what is wrong in the culture, never out of hostility to the culture as such, but in order to correct what the culture does wrong.

Hunter rightly says we must begin with affirmation. Only after we have helped people see the rightness of what is right can we help them see the wrongness of what is wrong. And only after we have identified ourselves as members of our culture who love it and want to serve it will we have standing to do so.

Yet, curiously, Hunter's description of faithful presence within the culture involves little affirmation. It seems to be almost exclusively a campaign of subversion and even of sabotage. It brings to mind the old story of the Greeks building a great cultural artifact and persuading the Trojans to take it inside the walls of their citadel of power—so they can be destroyed by the Greeks hiding inside.

This is another result of Hunter's decision to treat political and economic systems as non-cultural. He is unable to create genuine attachment to the culture. His anxieties about political and economic evils may be submerged, but they are never far below the surface. A church that does not really accept, and proudly preach, the moral goodness (not just the material benefits) of political and economic systems will be

²⁸ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 231.

unable to inspire hope or perseverance in its own followers' cultural lives. It will also be unable to convict the world of its sin where the ideals implicit in these systems are violated.

First we must say: "Constitutional democracy and the modern, entrepreneurial economy emerged from the belief that all people have dignity as stewards of the world and must work together across all boundaries of race, class, religion, and language to collaborate in enacting justice and neighborly love. These systems are morally superior, by far, to the racism, tribalism, paternalism, and oppression that defined all previous political and economic systems." Only after we have said this will we have standing to say to the oppressors and scoundrels: "So just what do you think you're doing when you cheat and exploit people?"

This is exactly how Martin Luther King Jr. operated. Read the section of "I Have a Dream" devoted to the Declaration of Independence, or his comments on the expansion of economic opportunity in "What Is Your Life's Blueprint?" King was able to stand strong against America's injustices because, and only because, he was a patriotic American who really saw, and really loved, what was so gloriously right in the American experiment.

He loved his country enough to fight it. We must do the same.

THE TROJAN HORSE

Another major challenge arises when we try to think through what this subversion approach to cultural influence would require in practice. The very Trojan Horse that Hunter wants to use to get inside the walls of the culture has a way of turning

the Greeks inside into Trojans. Hunter himself stresses the extreme strength of the forces pulling us toward accommodation. These forces will be strongest among those seeking and holding positions of cultural power.

If our approach to culture begins with antithesis and focuses on sneaking our people into the centers of power for the sake of subversion, it's not clear how believers can live as Christians while they are in the process of sneaking in. Faith compels us not only to orthodoxy but also to orthopraxis. Those who conform to the world's ways in order to get into centers of cultural power will not have much spiritual integrity left to use that power rightly when they get there. But those who do not conform will have difficulty (to say the least) getting into those centers of power.

Hunter says all the right things about the importance of moral formation and the evils of elitism. However, his account does not much address the special challenges to moral formation and the especially strong temptations to elitism that will be faced by those seeking positions of cultural power. The danger of elitism is somewhat mitigated by Greg Thompson's "scalable" treatment of cultural power (i.e., instead of separating the sheep who have cultural power from the goats who have none, recognize that all people have some sphere within which they have cultural power, and some have larger spheres than others). Thompson's "The Church in Our Time," a correction of Hunter's submerged elitist tendencies, is required reading. Even so, the specter of conformity to the world remains.

One particularly acute problem is sexuality and the family, a subject about which *To Change the World* says little. Sexually immoral Christians will always fail as culture-changers

in the present environment of pagan sexuality. There is really no hope of moral formation without a clear and well-defined understanding of right sexuality and disciplined practice in living it out. A church that doesn't have a transcendent view of marriage and doesn't know how to help people channel their sexual desires either into marriage or into celibacy will be culturally lost before it begins.

And, as everyone from Plato to Tocqueville has recognized, you cannot say anything about the family without becoming deeply implicated in political and economic systems. The family is the primary mediating structure between individuals and the social order. If you are determined not to say anything about politics and economics you will quickly find you can say nothing about the family, and therefore nothing about sexuality. You have made moral formation impossible.

Another acute problem is elitism and our mission to serve the poor, the vulnerable and the oppressed. How can we set up young people to get inside centers of cultural power without their becoming paternalistic elitists? Nothing will create conflict with the powers at the top of the cultural ladder more quickly than real service to the poor. But if our people wait until they're on the inside before they start serving those at the bottom, they will forget the humanity of those at the bottom. They will "serve" the poor paternalistically, through dehumanizing systems of control.

Moral formation must be grounded not only in the Holy Spirit, Scripture, and the faith community, but also in a moral (not materialistic) affirmation of what is good in culture. That is, it must be grounded not only in God but also in God's purposes in the world, his economy of all things. This includes recognizing that God is already at work in the world

outside the church—even in democratic and entrepreneurial systems. At the same time, moral formation cannot be limited to the “creation and consummation” theological elements that we might expect centers of cultural power to welcome; it must include the “fall and redemption” theological elements that will get us crucified.

We cannot let worldly advancement be too important to us. We must be willing to die to worldly advancement. If necessary, we must sometimes fight our way into centers of cultural power by serving the poor and the vulnerable—and serving human needs generally—better than the existing powers do. That is another way to climb the cultural ladder.

IRONY

To Change the World has an irony at its center. This central irony gives rise to several interdependent flaws of analysis. To learn from this book we must become aware of this irony and the deficient categories of thought it imposes.

The irony is that Hunter, the great critic of rationalism, has not fully overcome rationalism. He writes about the naiveté of thinking we can change culture simply by persuading people to adopt our “worldview,” a set of rational propositions. But Hunter himself has a naively hierarchical view of the forces of cultural change, with thinkers at the top and doers at the bottom. Academics are the generals in his culture change army, artists are the colonels, and businesspeople are the buck privates. On this view, Steve Jobs and Bill Gates made a disastrous mistake dropping out of college; if they really wanted to change the world, they should have become sociologists.

There are indeed hierarchies of cultural power, but intellectuals are not at the top. That is the prejudice of naïve Enlightenment modernism. The hierarchies exist within each field of endeavor—academia, art, business, and so on—but not across them. Scholars and business leaders both have knowledge, and they must learn from each other.

The book's inadequate approach to Scripture is related to Hunter's ironic rationalism. Liberal theology overestimates the power and importance of our reason. Reason is involved in validating the authenticity of Scripture as God's Word and understanding what it says, but reason must also be receptive to Scripture rather than simply forming proposals to be affirmed or negated by Scripture. As Gerry Breshears puts it, we must not only interrogate Scripture but allow Scripture to interrogate us.

The book's inadequate safeguards against conformity and elitism are related to Hunter's ironic rationalism. The idea that a highly rational elite class should take control of the lives of the poor—for the poor's own good, of course—is at the heart of the evil world-system the church must challenge today. And moral formation must begin with an understanding that the body is as important to life as the mind; any approach to moral formation that does not put sexuality at the center is simply out of court.

Above all, the book's false distinction between politics, economics, and culture—and its consequent materialistic understanding of political and economic systems—is related to Hunter's ironic rationalism. Politics and economics are the most democratic, and hence the least rationalistic, of all spheres of cultural activity. They are the least responsive to leadership from professional intellectuals; hence the intellec-

tuals have always been tempted to view them as less morally and spiritually important than they are.

These flaws in the book are interlocking. The inadequate safeguards against elitism are related to the false distinction between politics, economics, and culture; being the most democratic areas of life, these are also the areas where the equal dignity of all human beings is most obviously affirmed, and hence where the self-understanding of the average rationalist is most challenged. This nexus of elitism and anti-political thinking is in turn related to liberal theology; consider the example of Martin Luther, whose recognition of Scripture's divine authority and the sovereignty of the *individual* conscience put him in direct conflict with both the political elites and the rationalistic theologians of his time.

TRAGEDY

This irony could easily lead to tragedy if not corrected. The seed of great and terrible injustices is contained in one seemingly innocent passage where Hunter says that advanced modernity creates the problem of "a consumer mentality" leaking out from economics, where it belongs, into other spheres of life such as sexuality; and a leveling spirit of "democratization" leaking out from politics, where it belongs, into other spheres of life such as philosophy and art.²⁹ This critique of modernity has been repeated among Christian intellectuals over and over again for decades, until it has reached the status of platitude.

²⁹ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 198.

It is false. Ask the slaves and concubines and cult prostitutes of ancient Rome whether “commodification of sexuality” is a special product of advanced capitalism. Ask Socrates and Aristophanes if the leveling effect of democracy is a modern development. There is no need to invent theories about the corrupting influence of modernity to explain these ubiquitous human evils. What really needs explaining is not their current return to prominence, but the brief and extraordinary historical period we have recently lived through during which they were relatively suppressed.

This idea is not just false; it is urgently dangerous. It implies that the monstrous sins of envy and consumerism are appropriate and even praiseworthy in political and economic systems. They only become a problem if they are practiced elsewhere.

Something Hunter says about the neo-Anabaptists could often be said about the analysis in *To Change the World*: “Their identity *depends* on the State and other powers being corrupt and the more unambiguously corrupt they are, the clearer the identity and mission of the church. . . . The church depends on its status as a minority community in opposition to a dominant structure in order to be effective in its criticism of the injustices of democratic capitalism.”³⁰

The more we chant “Politics is about power! Business runs on greed!” the more our political and economic leaders internalize that narrative and act accordingly. As Arthur Brooks has said, societies tend to become what they describe themselves as being.³¹ We must beware of the deadly illu-

³⁰ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 164.

³¹ Arthur Brooks, *The Road to Freedom* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

sion that it is possible to delegitimize political and economic systems and not be responsible for what takes place in those systems after we have helped remove the basis of their legitimization.

Hunter's view that politics is about power inadvertently legitimizes injustice; his view that capitalism inevitably dehumanizes workers and consumers inadvertently promotes the dehumanization of workers and consumers. If politics is about power, then mobilizing poisonous resentments in order to dominate enemies is clearly what political leaders are supposed to be doing. If capitalism inevitably dehumanizes us, then ruthlessly exploiting customers and employees for profit is clearly what business leaders are supposed to be doing. That's their job.

Pharisaism is morally paralyzing. You set out to condemn everything, and discover that by doing so, you have lost the power to condemn anything.

The danger is that the church may become ideologically fortificationist and functionally accommodationist. That is, it would tell itself a story that overemphasizes the evils of political and economic systems—thus helping remove moral guidance from those spheres of activity, while moving the church toward the self-referential nullity of having no mission other than to be itself—and then nonetheless send Christians out into centers of cultural power, having talked about “moral formation” but paid insufficient attention to critical loci of that formation, such as sexuality and serving the poor. The intention of sending Christians into the centers of cultural power would be to subvert those structures, but more often they would end up simply conforming to them and serving them. Thus the church would have the worst of

both worlds, accelerating the corruption of the social order through a fortification ideology while at the same time producing loyal servants for that corrupt order.

POSSIBILITY

Nonetheless, Hunter has cleared the way for Christians who love the world to begin building new ways of showing that love to the world. We must stop trying to find a lever long enough to move the world. We are always already within the culture, and there is no Archimedean point from which we can manipulate it. But if we abandon hope of “changing the world” and instead organize with one another to use our cultural power to love our neighbors, God may invisibly and supernaturally use our faithful service to change the world.

David Wells has stressed that the church today tends to emphasize God’s love at the expense of a traumatic encounter with God’s holiness. This is true, and a major problem. But Christian intellectual leaders who emphasize the deficiencies of the modern social order—Alasdair MacIntyre, Stanley Hauerwas, Wendell Berry—generally have the opposite problem. The whole current in which they swim is deeply tainted with bitter resentment, not love, for the world.

Of course the world is corrupt and falling apart. The gospel calls us to love it and serve it anyway. We must have what Tom Nelson calls hopeful realism—neither closing our eyes to the world’s evil nor forgetting that a higher power, one our eyes can’t see, is already at work, all around us and also within us.

We can and must love the world with a holy love and convict the world with a loving holiness. But this can only be

done by those who really possess God's holy love. The proud, the dishonest, the manipulative, and the treacherous cannot improve culture. We must act with deep humility, transparency, and meekness if we expect the world around us to actually believe we have something it doesn't have, and needs.

We must become the humblest and lowliest people, abandoning pride and power, to improve culture. That is not something Hunter can do. Neither can you or I. No merely human power can do it. We must be supernaturally transformed by the Spirit of Christ through the gospel.

DON'T WAIT FOR A GREAT MAN

It is only natural for the church to hope that at this crisis moment, a savior would appear and teach us what to do. This is the "great man theory of history" Hunter deconstructs so ably in the first section of *To Change the World*.³² We will only know we have really have learned something from Hunter when we stop either expecting him to give us all the answers or blaming him for not having done so.

Hunter has awoken us from our dogmatic slumbers. Building the future is our job.

³² Hunter, *To Change the World*, 37–38.

FAITHFUL PRESENCE: A THEOLOGY FOR THE TRENCHES?

DANIEL STRANGE

THE VERY EXISTENCE OF this forum of essays demonstrates the significance of *To Change the World*. Even though I teach within a British context, there are many profound and helpful aspects to Hunter's analysis, particularly his theses in Essay I regarding the dynamics of cultural change. In the last five years, I have been thinking through how this analysis might apply to cultural change in Britain not only at the macro level, but also at the micro level. What does it mean for cultural change within my particular conservative evangelical constituency? What is the symbolic capital and status of my own seminary within the culture as well as of my constituency, in

which there are all kinds of peculiarly British subterranean sociological complexities (such as class) in play?

However, for all the many “light going on,” “penny dropping,” and “Ah yes!” moments scattered throughout, my overall feelings as I finished the book were of being underwhelmed and frustrated at an unsatisfying anti-climax. The book has been a set text in my public theology module, and subsequent readings have only confirmed this take. In fact, a more intense “No!” has emerged in the process. Of course, one mark of a “classic text” is not only to inform and educate but also to test and provoke, and *To Change the World* has certainly provoked me.

Much of my disquiet revolves around the concept of “faithful presence.” In one sense, all of us want to lay claim to being faithfully present. None of us wants to be either “unfaithful” or “absent,” and after Hunter’s description (sometimes I think a little crude in the sketching) the alternative models don’t look like attractive propositions.

The problem is when Hunter begins to unpack what faithful presence means. Some critiques I have encountered focus on the fact that apart from his few intentionally localized vignettes, the concept is all quite nebulous—as we Brits say, “airy-fairy.” In other words, Hunter needs to fill out the model. The focus of my critique, though, is that I think Hunter *does* fill out the model, and the lack is the filling itself. Both theologically and contextually, the model is too passive and concessionary. I even sensed a slight undertone of resignation in the sense that we’re about to run out of ideas. I contend that faithful presence, as Hunter conceives it, lacks the punch, drive, and vision needed to be in the world but not of the world in 2015. Let me unpack this argument a little

more, recognizing that my few words are going to be a somewhat blunt instrument against Hunter's scalpel-like erudition and nuance.

THEOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS

Since the publication of Hunter's book, and maybe partly because of it, there has been a flood of material on the relationship between Christianity and culture with models and typologies abounding. Within the Reformed evangelical camp in which I operate, the choice between a more "two kingdoms" model as against a more "one kingdom" (a.k.a. transformationist) model has produced some heat, but also some light in that these mutually exclusive models³³ helpfully present clearly different theological decisions and visions. I've thrown my own hat into the ring.³⁴ Where is Hunter to be placed? Although there are aspects of Hunter's exposition that two-kingdom proponents can applaud, his terminology and tone do not situate him comfortably in this model. So can Hunter's faithful presence be in the one-kingdom/transformationist camp? Conceptually this is a better fit, and there is promising material on whole-life discipleship and formation, on affirmation and antithesis, on church as *polis* and *altera civitas* and on a new city commons. However, to my mind this promise remains pregnant and doesn't deliver. With an overall conclusion of possibly, just possibly we can

33 Contra Timothy Keller in *Center Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), ch. 17.

34 Daniel Strange, "Not Ashamed! The Sufficiency of Scripture for Public Theology" in *Themelios* 36/2 (Aug. 2011), 238–260.

“help to make the world a little bit better,”³⁵ this is a low-calorie diet and decaffeinated transformationism. And that is my problem: it’s simply too soft and needs significant strengthening at key doctrinal points.

Let’s compare Hunter’s “faithful presence” with a version of faithful presence that might be called, in Hunter’s words, “an old Calvinist formulation.”³⁶

In terms of *creation*, Hunter begins the book by speaking about the creation mandate in contradistinction to a “lifeboat theology.”³⁷ Correct. But this cultural mandate is precisely that, a mandate for God’s image bearers to “fill,” “subdue” and “have dominion” (Gen. 1:28; cf. Ps. 8:4–8) over the rest of creation, and to “work” (in the sense of “cultivate”) and “take care of” (in the sense of “not exploit”) the environment around them (Gen. 2:15). Culture is a calling, and faithful presence recognizes this responsibility. Human beings have a delegated kingly authority and vice regency to rule over creation, but crucially this authority is under God’s norms and with a *telos*: for God’s glory. Hunter may not like the word *dominion*, but it’s in the text and associated with a form of power and authority that should lead to human and creation-al flourishing. Of course the concept can be misunderstood and abused. It can become triumphalistic. But potential abuses do not make the mandate itself invalid.

In terms of *de-creation*, Hunter speaks about the antithesis and the parodic nature of idolatrous culture.³⁸ However, I

35 Hunter, *To Change the World*, 286.

36 Hunter, *To Change the World*, 231.

37 Hunter, *To Change the World*, 4.

38 Hunter, *To Change the World*, 231–236.

don't think he is stark enough in his exposition of the term. God does providentially restrain sin and enable a certain civil "goodness." Yet God's first movement post-fall is to place enmity between the seed of Satan and the seed of the woman, between death and life, darkness and light, being in Adam and being in Christ. Those "rooted and build up in Christ" are distinct from those captive to "hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces, and not according to Christ" (Col. 2:6–8). In Adam we have lost true dominion. As such, making a home for ourselves after the fall cannot properly be called culture, because the norms and goals are so radically different from those established in the original creation. In other words, however appropriate the language of affirmation, flourishing, and *shalom*, equally appropriate to faithful presence is the language of confrontation, fight, battle, and—yes—warfare. Faithful presence can and must incorporate "gentleness and respect" together with deep "distress" at idolatry and the use of genres like the satirical (cf. Isa. 40–55) to deal with and demolish idolatry.

In terms of *re-creation*, we proclaim the preeminent lordship of Jesus Christ over the cosmos and in contrast to any vision of Christ that either dilutes or delimits his lordship. A few points follow.

First, I want question the appropriateness of "incarnation" as the theological justification for faithful presence. As Michael Horton rightly notes:

Jesus is a Savior, not a symbol. His incarnation is unique and unrepeatable. It cannot be extended, augmented, furthered, or realized by us. . . . [Jesus] did not come to

show us how to incarnate ourselves, but to be our incarnate Redeemer. . . . But nowhere, not even in Philippians 2, are we told to imitate, repeat, or extend Christ's incarnation.³⁹

A better "imitation" concept is expressed in the New Testament in terms of union with Christ (being the body in relation to him as our head). As those united to Christ (body to head) we inherit his story of relating to culture. As the recapitulating second Adam, Jesus Christ is the man of culture *par excellence*, anointed by the Spirit, demonstrating his perfect dominion over creation (being the fulfillment of Psalm 8 in Hebrews 2:5–9). His death deals with divine wrath and curse, his resurrection is the firstfruits of the new creation. Christians are anointed by the Holy Spirit and, in their adoption as sons, are restored to take up the cultural mandate originally given to Adam. Our "good works" that cover every aspect of our individual, social, and political lives, while never redeeming, are part of the redemptive kingdom. As done in Christ and by the Spirit, they are God's way of extending the kingdom in the present. As faithfully present ambassadors of Christ we actively proclaim his lordship, taking every thought captive for him in anticipatory foretaste of the final consummation.

Second, "culture is religion externalized."⁴⁰ True and lasting cultural change can only come through conversion

39 Michael Horton, "Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is?" *Modern Reformation* 18/1 (2009), 15.

40 Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 200.

where worldview root produces worldview fruit; in other words, where Christ's disciples apply his lordship to all areas of life, including institutional change. As already noted, proclamation of the *evangel* remains ultimate and urgent. And the exhortation to turn in repentance and faith to Jesus Christ means the reemphasized *solas* of the Reformation, not their "functional irrelevance."⁴¹ Faithful presence means *both* a bottom-up and top-down strategy that is cognizant of the dynamics of cultural change, so helpfully described by Hunter. But as I have stressed before, our public theology is public apologetics is public evangelism.

Third, faithful presence means related but different callings for the gathered church and its spiritual leadership, as distinct to Christians in the world. This distinction, and to an extent its "protection of the former," does not diminish the cultural task but enables its flourishing. In the words of Klaas Schilder, the church "should not be even in the smallest direct center of culture, but she *must* be the greatest indirect cultural *force*."⁴² As I state in a forthcoming article, and where once again I'm happy to use militaristic language, on behalf of the Lord Jesus Christ, Christians are engaged in a battle with the world. The gathered church is the heavenly, anticipatory, eschatological army tent of the Lord. Pastors are field medics, strengthening the troops, treating their wounds

⁴¹ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 281.

⁴² Klaas Schilder, *Christ and Culture* (Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 1977). Available at http://www.reformed.org/webfiles/cc/christ_and_culture.pdf, 107.

after battle, feeding them with God's Word and sending them back out to take every thought captive for Christ.⁴³

Fourth, proclaiming the preeminent lordship of Jesus Christ means a faithful presence that cannot accept as its *telos* the "principled" or "chartered" pluralism that Hunter advocates in his new city commons. This side of Christ's return, the highest ideals and practices of human flourishing, including non-Christian "flourishing," are only going to be realized (imperfectly of course) in a culture that has accepted Christ's lordship and submitted to his rule. Whatever our eschatology, faithful presence commits us to this *telos*: for Christ's sake and for his glory, to change the world.

CONTEXTUAL OBSERVATIONS

Hunter's book focuses on the contemporary American context in 2010. The British context was very different from the United States in 2010, and this difference continues five years later. Put simplistically, if my American brothers and sisters are concerned about how different the landscape in the States looks five years on, here across the pond the cultural tide is further out, and at the moment shows no signs of coming back in. Evangelicals here are far smaller numerically, and far smaller in terms of resources and social capital. Where one yearns to see the decoupling of the public and political,⁴⁴ the

43 Daniel Strange, "Rooted and Grounded? The Legitimacy of Abraham Kuyper's Distinction between Church as *Institute* and Church as *Organism*, and Its Usefulness in Constructing an Evangelical Public Theology." *Themelios* (forthcoming).

44 See Hunter, *To Change the World*, 185–186.

tendrils of the political are increasingly curling around every institution and every person so that even the private realm is being threatened. Suffocating and life-sapping juridification, bureaucratization, and politicization of culture make seminary life, and other walks of Christian life, increasingly difficult.

Some of this change is out of our control (thankfully not God's), but I want to suggest that conservative Christians have played a part in this process. In part due to fear of the social gospel, we have not been as publically and politically engaged as we should have been. We have pulled out when we should have piled in. Sociologically we have been naïve. Laws do not save people, but they do shape people. Plausibility structures affect the communication of gospel truth in a culture. My own calling is to theological training for pastoral ministry, yet I don't believe we have encouraged and disciplined as well as we could have those whose giftings and vocations are in areas where the cultural weather can be made: in the arts, in the media, in public life in general.

Therefore, while I understand Hunter's different cultural context, and while I appreciate his helpful analysis of power, of *ressentiment*, and of the focus on the localized, his call to be "silent for a season" is the exact opposite of what I want to call for here. Yes, we must be reflective practitioners, but we cannot be silent. We don't have that luxury. The dynamic of our modern secular state is not simple libertarianism. Giving license in some areas, the state takes more and more away in others. Not speaking up is a recipe for living in a smaller and smaller "game reserve."

Given what we are facing, to be present without proclaiming in public and political arenas is to be absent and

unfaithful to our calling. For those in the trenches, we shouldn't be hearing the bugle call of retreat, but rather the blood-pumping wakeup call of reveille.

CAN CHRISTIANS CHANGE THE WORLD AFTER *OBERGEFELL*?

HUNTER BAKER

WHEN THE SUPREME COURT handed down its decision in the *Obergefell* case, establishing a constitutional right to same-sex marriage, public Christianity in America suffered what might be its greatest defeat in the nation's history. Others might point to earlier decisions that struck down practices such as prayer and Bible readings in public schools, but that would not be quite right. Faithful Christians could reconcile those cases as a matter of simple prudence and religious liberty. *Obergefell* and the cases that led up to it dealt squarely with the Christian view of marriage, which was normative in America for most of the republic's history. The court's decision largely completed the job of severing the connection

between the Christian sexual ethic and American law. While nearly the whole of American and world culture for about the past 5,000 years has clearly rejected gay marriage (if not always gay sexual relations, as in the Greco-Roman classical period), the majority opinion has changed rapidly and radically during the past decade.

Five years ago, James Davison Hunter rendered his verdict on Christian efforts to change the world (from his well-known book's title). While he noted the amazing and disproportionate success of tiny minority groups such as Jews and gays in affecting culture, he simultaneously observed that conservative Christians have failed to achieve similar success despite their far-superior numbers. Hunter explains that part of the problem is that Christians have misjudged the mechanics of culture change. Thus, they have set up outposts in perimeter places, such as Colorado Springs, when they should have been concerned with engaging elites in cultural centers, such as New York and Los Angeles. By correctly understanding that kind of influence dynamic, enlightenment thinkers were able to take over what had been a mostly Christian sphere of higher education, for example. Culture change is not about the numbers so much as it is about the use of elites to win over other elites in the major cities.

One of the interesting things about Hunter's analysis is that while he describes how culture changes, he does not recommend that Christians attempt to follow his blueprint. Rather, he encourages Christians to be content with being faithfully present in culture and to emphasize *shalom* (peace and the common good). Inherent in this modest advice is a gentle rebuke. The sociologist seems to see conservative Christians as a group who overreached in the culture wars.

They relied too much on political solutions to establish cultural norms.

In America, it has been the lot of conservative evangelicals and Catholics to insist on male-female marital and sexual complementarity in terms of morality and law. And it has not been a happy task. We have seen our young people frequently disagree with us on this issue (even many of those enrolled in Christian colleges). They have often agreed with the charge that Christians have acted in a bullying fashion toward gays. And if there is one thing of which millennials are sure they disapprove, it is bullies. Worse still, we have had to strongly resist comparisons between the struggle over civil rights for African Americans and the gay marriage controversy. It is entirely possible that the dominant interpretation will ultimately be that those who fought gay marriage will come to be viewed in the same light as Southern segregationists.

Young evangelicals are in the toughest position. Their peers probably have less respect and tolerance for orthodox Christianity than has been the norm (and it wasn't much to begin with). They have grown up in a period when gay marriage has been the single biggest moral controversy. While the pro-life movement conferred some elements of a civil-rights movement type of legitimacy on the political activity of my generation (Generation X) of Christians, they have experienced the opposite sense with regard to gay marriage. Something that once seemed self-evident (male-female complementarity) now manifests as some repressive "Christianist" construct oddly imposed on innocent human beings who need greater room for self-discovery and self-expression.

As we evaluate our situation, Christian writers and other leaders are looking at new approaches. Rod Dreher, who has become an important voice for Christians during this period, has written about what he calls “the Benedict option.” While there is room for interpretation, Dreher seems to mean that Christians need to place more focus on orthodoxy and orthopraxy as a community. By strengthening their cultural and spiritual core from the inside, the devout may be able to engage the culture in a more meaningful way. Some see Dreher’s approach as a call for withdrawal, but I think he intends merely to change our priorities as the church in such a way as to improve the authenticity of our witness.

Others refer to a Robert George option. The Princeton philosopher emphasizes continuous, rational engagement at the highest level of discourse. We see his strategy at work in the activities of his student Ryan T. Anderson during these past few years.

In a third camp, I see something like an option I would associate with people such as former George W. Bush speechwriter Michael Gerson, Q Ideas founder Gabe Lyons, and James Davison Hunter. This group notes the toxic reputation Christians have developed in the broader culture (with Lyons focusing attention especially on how young people feel about us) and recommends a focus on “*shalom*,” as Hunter says, or “the common good,” as Lyons emphasizes in his conferences.

There are some problems with this approach. First, people in the third group seem to think that bad public relations for Christians are due to their activities in the culture war. The problem with that analysis is that we have not been the aggressors, though we are often seen that way. We have

tried to preserve important values against a social revolution championed by the cultural vanguard and aided by technology (such as the birth control pill). Could we have been shrewder, more compassionate, and better communicators? Sure. But I think we owe it to those who entered the fray to honor their part in the struggle.

Second, when I listen to Gerson, I hear him talking about how we should be doing things like the Bush administration's campaign to reduce AIDS in Africa. He is rightly proud of that success. But I can't help but note that these kind of common good initiatives tend to already claim overwhelming support. Let's wipe out malaria. Absolutely. Let's prevent sex trafficking. Who would disagree? Let's prevent child abuse. Right on. These are not the matters, though, which separate us. The things that actually separate us already have been and remain the big controversies in our culture: What is the proper place for sex in a relationship? What is marriage? When does life begin? These fundamental debates are not easily resolved by a focus on the common good. The real reason these things become a fight is because they hit close to home for everyone.

Emphasizing the common good will not make those battles go away. And changing our focus away from these divisive matters will only make matters worse as we lose momentum in those conflicts and leave the remaining fighters isolated, dispirited, marginalized, and weakened.

I am suggesting that the battle is where the battle is. Do we get a bad reputation (especially today) by making a case for sex and childbearing exclusively within the bounds of marriage? Yes. Some think of our position as repressive and freakish. When we argue that the collapse of marriage

among the poor has made the problem of poverty worse, that position, too, invites scorn. In our opposition to abortion, we continue to incite the contempt of important cultural elites. Our resistance to gay marriage is the worst of the bunch. I can't easily explain how something that was an overwhelmingly dominant view for thousands of years has now become the greatest black mark against the church, but it has. Focusing on the common good is only likely to prove a tonic if we give up contesting these other matters. But I don't think we can faithfully do that. Even if we could, the fact remains that the core of our message is that human beings are fallen creatures who live in sin and are hopeless without Jesus Christ. That message automatically creates friction in a society that has reduced sin to the categories of violence and intolerance.

This perspective reveals my pessimism about a strategy oriented around emphasizing the common good (*shalom*). I would be more inclined to accept Hunter's description of how cultural change occurs (via the interaction of elites at the centers of culture) and to pursue that strategy as smartly as possible.

Dreher's recommendation seems to be the most promising. Christians have two great needs in terms of their cultural engagement. First, they have to defend orthodoxy. There will be a powerful attempt to argue that marriage is a secondary issue and that the case against gay marriage is little more than one interpretation among many. But, second, Christians will have to become a more distinctive community. That is difficult because the church is by definition full of redeemed but not yet glorified sinners. Yet as cultural Christianity collapses, we can more closely resemble what Elton Trueblood called "the company of the committed." What we

lose in numbers, perhaps we will gain in authenticity and in the strength of our testimonies.

There is one thing of which I am almost certain. The arguments aimed at reclaiming America by pointing to some purportedly fully Christian nature of the American founding are not going to restore what has been lost. That is a dead end. Even if we were to concede the entire case (which I do not), Americans today feel no obligation to act as if Christians were granted a permanent lease on the republic. We aren't going to convince them that they are now obligated to respect the sensibilities of those who preceded us.

I confess that I am and have been a culture warrior. When I became a Christian, I vowed to press the Christian case (as I saw it) in the public square. But I believed I could be smarter, more careful, more articulate, and more convincing than many others I had seen. I am beginning to realize that changing the culture may not ultimately be a matter of the intellect so much as it is of the spirit. As I look back on the American attitude toward sex, for example, I realize that we the people have mostly acted like utilitarians. We embraced the Christian sexual ethic until the birth control pill made it unnecessary to do so. Obedience to Scripture was less devotion to God than a form of behavioral calculation. Martin Luther tended to believe the number of true Christians was quite small. We seem to have assumed the opposite to be true.

Today, I look more intently toward spiritual experience and the transformation of minds and hearts through an encounter with the living God. Reading the work of writers such as C. S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer moved me and

shaped me, but that process only started after I began to seek a relationship with Jesus Christ.

We can strategize and advance important ideas. I believe in doing those things and have dedicated my career to that end. Ultimately, however, the most important works will be those of evangelism and discipleship.

The challenge before us is great. But I remember how unlikely it was that I, a scoffer, came to have my heart struck by the Holy Spirit. As a result, there is no social revolution, no worldly court, and no legislation that will reorient me. We need not run with the herd nor participate in some osmosis of values. We know what it means to live as Christians. And we must do so.

TRUTH, POWERFUL AND PREVAILING

K. A. ELLIS

I

THE TUMULTUOUS EVENTS OF the last five years since James Davison Hunter published *To Change the World* have left the body of Christ in the United States in a dilemma. At a time when the body most needs to be standing in solidarity to face an increasingly hostile culture, we face inward, still struggling to reconcile our own racial, social, cultural, and political polarization.

Among recent events that have erupted, one of the most disturbing and significant was the massacre of nine African Americans at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. The event introduced a momentous question into

our cultural mix: were the members of Emanuel AME targeted for their race, or for their faith?

Following the cold-blooded attack, *The New York Times* ran a column titled "Persecution and the Black Church" in which Ross Douthat argued that the Charleston massacre was both domestic terrorism *and* Christian persecution.⁴⁵ Douthat's argument has historical merit: choice of place was just as significant to killer Dylan Roof as was his choice of persons. With slight nods to Frantz Fanon and W. E. B. DuBois, the discussion stretched the African American Christian's dual consciousness yet again, this time framed by conflict between ethnic identity and identity in Christ.

Roof, who admitted his racial animus, could have chosen any number of historical African American sites in Charleston if the issue were simply racially motivated. However, as Roof echoed the racist heritage that historically targeted numerous Southern black churches for bombing, burning, and domestic terrorism, he chose a location central to African American endurance throughout a difficult history: a house of worship.

One may dismiss either the blackness or the faith of the Charleston Nine, yet when we attempt to focus on one to the exclusion of the other, both demand to be acknowledged. This shouldn't surprise us, as the Christian reality takes into account both body *and* soul, and they cannot be separated without dishonoring a person's God-given totality. Bifurcating the two denies God's work in and through the African American Christian's unique cultural history.

45 Ross Douthat, "Persecution and the Black Church," *The New York Times*, June 23, 2015.

The African American church experience is one piece in the larger course of church history. In analyzing anti-Christian persecution, we see that assaults against the church are always culturally, ethnically, and historically determined. While there will be similarities in the persecution of Christians around the globe, hostile motives will be shaped by the immediate cultural and political dynamics that surround each local body. This is the historical stage onto which the Charleston massacre made its entrance.

Meanwhile, world leaders, politicians, and charities have noted the unprecedented rise in the global marginalization of Christians. Whether the acts are perpetrated by Hindu, Islamic, or Buddhist extremists, by hostile governments, or by white supremacists, this new climate of hostility is the larger global picture into which the Charleston tragedy fits.

Through the Charleston massacre, American Christians simultaneously glimpsed America's historical past and the present reality for Christians around the world. Framing the Charleston tragedy solely on racism ignores the larger context of today's rising global hostility toward Christ followers. From slavery to abolition to Jim Crow to the civil rights struggle, the African American church narrative shows that one need not live in a "restricted foreign country" to experience anti-Christian hostility.

Some might argue that American Christianity itself perpetrated the atrocities against the African American church. At best, these practices emerged from an ethically deficient form of Christianity. At worst, a distorted "Christianity-ism" co-opted the language of Christianity to serve a dominant culture that worshipped itself. Yet true Christianity emphasizes a basis for individual and communal

transformation that worships Christ, not the culture, as the ideal. Such transformation is an obvious threat to cultural dominance. When that transformation is accompanied by spiritual empowerment, the need arises to stifle Christians and their institutions lest they grate like sandpaper against the approved status quo.

The fruit of Christocentric transformation may take many forms: racial or tribal reconciliation, personal or collective growth toward a richer biblical identity, or even spiritual empowerment to stand against cultural oppression. Those who run counter to the dominant culture's accepted practices must be silenced, since the greatest threat to the hostile dominant culture is transformation away from its perceived ideal.

II

Perhaps the black church experience can help prepare the larger church in America for cultural marginalization.

We may define marginalization as "being relegated to a position of insignificance, devalued importance, minor influence, or diminished power."⁴⁶ A similar dynamic that oppressed the African American church is brewing in America today—this time against the larger body of Christ, without respect to race. Driven at first by an engine of cultural disdain, the African American's rights were legislated away slowly over the course of decades; today, we see the whole

⁴⁶ Carl F. Ellis Jr., "Marginalization and Its Racist Effects." Lecture, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, October 4, 2005.

body of Christ in America experiencing these all-too-familiar rumbblings.

One of the contributing factors to the survival of the African American church under persecution was the ability to navigate doctrinal differences while simultaneously pursuing justice and kingdom priorities. In 2013, Pope Francis's *Evangelii Gaudium* suggested Catholics and Protestants are one widely dispersed ecumenical organism of Christ followers who need to be reconciled.⁴⁷ In a subsequent speech regarding global anti-Christian persecution, he noted that those hostile toward Christ don't see doctrinal distinctions. He further asserted that this should spur us toward ecumenical solidarity—that the “Devil has created our differences, and that we are all one in the blood” of Christ.⁴⁸

Would that we all shared Pope Francis's boldness in speaking out against global anti-Christian hostility. Protestant evangelicalism has yet to catch up to the Vatican's vigorous denouncements and advocacy. The reasons for our sputters and starts in response are myriad, but perhaps they lie in a lack of navigational skills regarding our doctrinal differences and our general discomfort with loosely defined ecumenism.

47 Frances, *Evangelii Gaudium* [On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World], Vatican Website, November 24, 2013, sec. 98–101. Accessed August 28, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations.index.html#apost_exhortations.

48 Cindy Wooden, “The Devil Knows Christians Are One, Says Pope Francis,” *Catholic Herald UK*, May 15, 2015. Accessed August 30, 2015.

The concerns are legitimate. In a separate yet related context, Shelby Steele identifies the Vatican's reasoning as "poetic truth," noting that at times:

[I]deological identity clearly precede[s] truth, [representing] a specific fallacy that might be called "poetic truth." Poetic license occurs when poets take a certain liberty with the conventional rules of grammar and syntax in order to achieve an effect. They break rules in order to create a more beautiful or more powerful effect than would otherwise be possible. Adapting this idea of license and rule breaking to the realm of ideology, we might say that "poetic truth" disregards the actual truth in order to assert a larger essential truth that supports one's ideological position. It makes the actual truth seem secondary or irrelevant. Poetic truths defend the sovereignty of one's ideological identity by taking license with reality and fact.⁴⁹

We venture into unstable territory when scriptural truth becomes "adaptable" to ideology—in this case, "solidarity under persecution." How, then, can we find solidarity when discussing anti-Christian hostility, as the African American church did in facing off peacefully against oppression legislated by its own government?

We find solidarity not by ignoring our differences but by holding the reality of three separate perspectives in tension. The first is the *transcendent* perspective. In this view, the

49 Shelby Steele, *Shame: How America's Past Sins Have Polarized Our Country*, New York, NY: Basic Books, 2015.

blood of Christ is the standard for orthodoxy. This perspective belongs to God alone. Scripture affirms that God alone knows and weighs the hearts of men;⁵⁰ he alone knows the intricacies and motives of each, and whether a person is truly in union with him. While some doctrines are closer than others to the heart of scriptural truth, men and man-made doctrines still fall short in fully embracing and expressing all that the Bible teaches. Only the Word of God accomplishes this perfect fullness, through the infallible written Word and applied through the incarnate Word—the person of Jesus Christ.

The second perspective is the *internal* perspective. In this view, the revealed Word of God is the standard for orthodoxy. The church focuses inward, using Scripture to preserve her own health and purity. The early Puritans, for example, relied on three marks of the true church: right preaching of the Word (or sound doctrine),⁵¹ right administration of the sacraments,⁵² and right administration of discipline.⁵³

Some churches hold to biblically based confessional standards to expound on these principles of doctrinal purity.⁵⁴ Yet our doctrine, though vital to the health of the church, will

50 1 Samuel 16:7; Proverbs 16:2; 21:2; 1 Kings 8:39; Jeremiah 17:9–10; Acts 1:24; 15:8.

51 John 8:31, 47; 14:23; Galatians 1:8–9; 2 Thessalonians 2:15; 2 Timothy 3:16–4:4; 1 John 1:6; 2:4; 4:1–3; 2 John 9–11; Jude 1:4; 1 Corinthians 11:19; 1 Peter 5:12; 2 Peter 2:1.

52 1 Corinthians 10:14–17, 21; 11:23–30.

53 Matthew 18:17; Acts 20:28–31a; Romans 16:17–18a; 1 Corinthians 5:1–5, 13; 14:33, 40; Galatians 6:1; Ephesians 5:6, 11; 2 Thessalonians 3:14–15; 1 Timothy 1:20; 5:20; Titus 1:10–11; 3:10; Revelation 2:14–16a; 2:20.

54 Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 25, “Of the Church.”

not ultimately save us; we are saved by grace, through faith in Christ. For those who hold more closely to their personal doctrinal position, if we cannot agree on who qualifies as a member of the “household of faith” as we are “doing good,”⁵⁵ then we may at least agree that all individuals possess intrinsic value that affords them the right to be treated humanely, whatever their religious belief and practice.

The finer points of doctrine are rarely discussed at the business end of a gun or sword. Sound doctrine is vital, yet when it comes to anti-Christian hostility, we need to be discerning about the right and wrong time for doctrinal correction.

The third and final view is the *external* perspective, in which the non-Christian culture surrounding the church establishes itself as the standard for a perverted or distorted orthodoxy. The surrounding culture knows nothing of doctrinal distinctions and does not distinguish between nominal Christians and faithful believers. It sees one label only—“Christian”—either through professed faith in Christ alone, disagreement with the surrounding culture, or even just a traditionally Christian surname on a government identity card. In some cultures, simple association with the name of Christ indicts us, regardless of our fidelity.

All three perspectives reflect experienced reality, and must be taken together. By only focusing on one or two, we ignore some aspect of truth and create for ourselves an ecclesial schizophrenia.

55 Galatians 6:10

III

Today's Christian is wise to consider these dynamics. Ideologies and philosophies aimed at stifling Christian voices are openhandedly pushing boundaries in America's educational institutions, courts, and marketplaces.

The current progressive language of "evolution" on cultural matters is reminiscent of the propaganda that defined African Americans as ontologically inferior beings, less than human and deficient in intelligence. This language gives tacit assent that anyone who disagrees with the status quo remains *unevolved*, justifying marginalization and maltreatment; that which is not *progressive* must, by default, be *regressive*. When those who hold to scriptural fidelity are presented as a regressive drain on society, they become society's "problem" that must be managed.

The road from marginalization to martyrdom is paved with a thousand cultural cuts. Marginalization generally does not become extreme persecution overnight, but rather grows in barometric degrees; we would be unwise to overlook the chill in our cultural atmosphere. Yet we must not dismiss our ecclesial differences but rather navigate them while working together to preserve religious freedoms and, in extreme global cases, Christian lives.

Preserving our freedoms will not only help us speak prophetically into our surrounding culture but also serve our ecclesial differences as they afford us the liberty to dialogue, correct, rebuke, discipline, warn, and encourage each other as Christians.

More and more, Christ followers are being asked to defy the culture and pay the cost of marginalization. Yet marginal-

ization strengthened the African American church, and that strength sustained believers through the same cultural hostility that birthed it. Shunning and demonization may be forms of derision for the rest of humanity, but Scripture and history prove they often empower the marginalized believer and the gospel in which he trusts. Hostility toward Christ's followers still serves his ultimate purposes, for he superintends all he has created.

Or, to quote Christian abolitionist and emancipated slave Sojourner Truth on the matter: "Truth is all powerful, and will prevail."

SLOW DISCIPLESHIP AND THE END OF CHRISTENDOM

JOHN JEFFERSON DAVIS

THE THESIS OF THIS brief essay is twofold: In post-Christendom America, Reformed and evangelical Christians need to (1) rethink their current understandings of the Great Commission and associated notions of the “lordship of Christ over all of culture,” and (2) rediscover the concept of slow discipleship from the early pre-Constantinian church.

These thoughts have been provoked by three “game-changing” events of 2015 that, in retrospect, will in all likelihood be seen as marking the “end of Christendom” for Christians in America (and Western Europe): the national vote in Ireland legalizing same-sex marriage; the highly publicized transgender transition of Bruce Jenner to Caitlyn

Jenner; and the U.S. Supreme Court decision *Obergefell v. Hodges*, legalizing gay marriage in all 50 states. “Christendom” could be seen as having begun in AD 380 when the Roman emperor Theodosius I made Christianity the legally established religion of the Roman Empire, beginning a more than 1,500-year period in which biblical values were foundational for both public law and private life.

These recent “end of Christendom” events are part of a long trajectory of secularization in America that began in the 19th century and accelerated in the 1960s with Supreme Court decisions effectively removing Bible reading and prayers from public schools; with *Roe v. Wade* legalizing abortion in 1973; and with no-fault divorce laws and the broadening acceptance of sex outside of marriage. Biblical sexual ethics no longer form the basis of American law, the larger culture no longer supports Christian sexual morals, and we as Christians are no longer in charge of the “high places” of the public culture—the media, the elite universities, the law schools, and the courts.

In light of these new realities, Reformed and evangelical Christians need fresh thinking about the meaning of the Great Commission and the nature of discipleship in our time. In his final marching orders to his disciples, the risen Christ declared: “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:18–20).

In the history of interpretation, the church has often missed key elements of this commission, reading the text in

terms of the church's own immediate internal concerns—such as disputes over the proper forms of baptism or over the doctrine of the Trinity.⁵⁶ Today, we need to take a fresh look at these key terms in the Great Commission: *nations*, *disciples*, *teaching*, and *obey*. I would also argue that churches in America need to make three important “moves” in their understanding of mission: (1) from a focus on “lordship” over the culture to a focus on in-depth discipleship of the Christian; (2) from a primary emphasis on correct belief to a renewed emphasis on transformed behavior; and (3) from a prioritizing of quantitative metrics for success in the church to a qualitative metric (e.g., John 13:34–35; John 17:21) that focuses on the unity, harmony, and quality of relationships among Christians.

While Christ will indeed finally be confessed as Lord by every tongue and tribe and nation, with every knee bowing to him (Phil. 2:10–11), his own strategy of spreading the kingdom of God was not a “top down” political agenda but more of a “bottom up,” one-by-one process of leavening (Matt. 13:33) with high standards for following him as a disciple (e.g., “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” [Luke 9:23]).

THE LORDSHIP OF CHRIST: BEGINNING WITH US

While the concept of the “lordship of Christ over all of culture” is indeed biblically and theologically valid—and dear to

56 John Jefferson Davis, “The History of the Interpretation of the Great Commission and Implications for Marketplace Ministries,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 25:1 (2001): 65–80.

the hearts of Reformed Christians—we must realize that in our own time a phrase like the “lordship of Christ over culture” can be heard and interpreted by non-Christians as the lordship of Christians over them—as the recent backlashes against the political efforts of the Christian Right and Moral Majority would seem to suggest. If Christ were to comment on the Great Commission today, perhaps he might tell us that if we want to see his “lordship” over all of culture, we shouldn’t begin in Washington; we should begin in our own churches and with ourselves. Rather than focusing on public opposition to same-sex marriage, we should work on making our own marriages more lasting and loving. His commission was not just to make “converts” or to seek “decisions for Christ,” after all, but to make disciples willing to live—and to die—for him.

We also need to notice that the commission to “teach” (Matt. 28:20) explicitly focuses not, in the first instance, on belief, but rather on behavior: “teaching them to *obey* all that I have commanded you.” Jesus’s new commandment was that his disciples were to love one another as he had loved them (John 13:34–35). This love for one another—rather than mere profession of correct belief—was how the world would know they were followers of Jesus. His commands also included specific instructions about the need for continuing forgiveness (Matt. 18:21–22) and the way to resolve conflicts and disputes within the church (Matt. 5:23–24; 18:15–18)—injunctions that have been unevenly and inconsistently practiced in the history of the church.

In an important historical study Alan Kreider has shown that, in the early church prior to Constantine’s conversion in AD 313, Christian catechetical instruction for church

membership was extensive—at times lasting for several years—unless candidates could demonstrate credible evidence of changed lives with positive answers to questions such as “Have you given to the poor? Have you helped those who were sick? Have you visited those in prison?” (cf. Matt. 25:34–36).⁵⁷

By the fourth and fifth centuries, however—likely in reaction to Arianism and other heresies—the focus in catechesis had shifted from changed behavior to correct belief. By the sixth century, with the virtually universal practice of infant baptism and fewer adult conversions, catechetical instruction in many parts of the church essentially disappeared altogether. And though at the time of the 16th-century Reformation Luther, Calvin, and the English Reformers attempted to revive the practice of catechetical instruction, for the most part the focus continued to be on right doctrine, with right behavior given less attention. Today we would do well to recover the early church’s catechetical emphasis on transformed lives, without neglecting the teaching of sound doctrine.

THE NEED FOR A QUALITATIVE METRIC FOR SUCCESS IN THE CHURCH

Churches today would do well to adopt Jesus’s own qualitative metric for success in the body of Christ. His final, climactic prayer in John 17 reveals his understanding of the highest and final goal of Christian life and salvation—“that

57 Alan Kreider, “*Ressourcement* and Mission,” *Anglican Theological Review* 96:2 (Spring 2014): 239–261.

all of them might be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21). In this one astounding verse, Jesus reveals the ultimate goal of his life, death, and resurrection: to bring about a state of affairs in which the intimate, harmonious, and united relationships among his followers would mirror the unity and intimacy of his own relationship with the Father. According to Jesus, then, such unity and quality of relationships would be the key to success in the church’s great mission—“that the world may believe that you have sent me.” Jesus was saying, in effect, that we should seek first not numerical growth but quality and depth in relationships. Quality precedes quantity, not the reverse.

Fresh reading of the Great Commission for our own post-Christendom America could, in effect, tell us to go and make disciples—but to slow down and make perhaps fewer but *deeper* disciples. Let the “lordship of Christ over all of culture,” then, take shape in your own church and in your own life. May we begin the work of making disciples anew, seeking to obey all that Christ has commanded us.

TO CHANGE THE WORLD?

R. ALBERT MOHLER JR.

I AM INCREASINGLY AWARE of James Davison Hunter's helpfulness as I have sought to understand our world and the conditions of late modernity. I first began reading Hunter back in the early 1980s when I was a seminary student. He had just published his first major work, *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity*.⁵⁸ I was at a crucial stage in my own theological and intellectual understanding of both Christianity's place in the modern age and of evangelicalism as a movement and a theological identity.

58 James Davison Hunter, *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983).

More than anything else, Hunter's argument concerning theological accommodation and the fragility of evangelical identity under the conditions of modernity caught my attention. His concept of "cognitive bargaining" became an important factor in my analysis of what was then a raging controversy within the Southern Baptist Convention. The controversy centered around theological identity—something that was then (and now) an ongoing struggle for American evangelicals. I was immediately able to see both the reality and the temptation of cognitive bargaining—the process whereby cognitive truth claims are "bargained" to lesser status and greater intellectual provisionality under the conditions of modernity. In this sense, Hunter's work was not only important to me for its description of the cultural situation, but also for my theological accountability. His category of cognitive bargaining and his lucid description of the evangelical predicament helped me to acquire a deeper sense of theological responsibility, even as his primary concern was sociological analysis.

Similarly, I eagerly devoured Hunter's 1987 book *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation*.⁵⁹ In that work, Hunter analyzed the generation of young evangelicals who had come of age from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. When Hunter spoke of the "coming generation" of evangelicals, he was talking about me and my peers. He documented the reality of cognitive bargaining among evangelicals who had arrived on American college and university campuses (also later on graduate campuses and theological seminaries) only to

59 James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

be confronted with late modernity in full force. Even then, Hunter warned of particular cognitive challenges representing areas of both temptation and transition among these young evangelicals. Doctrines such as the exclusivity of Jesus Christ were likely to be focal points in that process of cognitive bargaining. In both of those books, Hunter dealt with what I understood to be one of the most pressing questions of the age: “Culturally, what is the fate of Protestant orthodoxy in these circumstances?”⁶⁰

In 1991, Hunter published his most influential book to date, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*.⁶¹ He was far ahead of virtually any other major author or public intellectual in describing the reality of the culture war reshaping America. He also directly tied the book to the very social processes he had documented so well in his two previous volumes. Written for a far larger audience, *Culture Wars* entered the public lexicon by changing and providing the terms of debate. Shortly after the book’s publication, the Chautauqua Institution invited me to speak during Religion Week on whether or not Hunter, along with others making similar arguments, were describing something real or overblown. Ironically, anyone listening to the presentations that week would have had no doubt that the culture war was not only real but that, at least for the elites, orthodox Christianity was already an embarrassment.

60 James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 15.

61 James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

Already deeply indebted to professor Hunter, I looked forward with great anticipation to the publication of what was understood to be his *magnum opus*. When *To Change the World* was published in 2010, I reserved the time to work through it with the same care with which I had read all of his previous works. In terms of sociological analysis, Hunter once again offered one of the most important descriptions of Christianity's predicament under the conditions of late modernity. *To Change the World* underlines, once again, the indispensable role Hunter has played for our understanding the intellectual and social conditions of late modernity and the reality of biblical Christianity. In that sense, Hunter is to sociology what Alvin Plantinga is to philosophy. He is indispensable, unique, and never disappoints in his analysis and intellectual insight.

At the same time, *To Change the World* demonstrates a significant transition and revision of the argument Hunter presented in *Culture Wars*. In one sense, the intellectual, social, and cultural conditions Hunter describes in *To Change the World* are markedly more hostile to traditional Christianity than what had been described, even in bracing terms, in his previous books. *To Change the World* represents a chastened and chastening analysis of what Hunter rightly calls "the irony, tragedy, and possibility of Christianity in the late modern world." In fact, the "late modern world" described by Hunter has largely moved past the categories of the culture war he described almost two decades earlier. But *To Change the World* is not merely a work of sociological analysis. It is also a prescriptive argument addressed to American Christianity at this historical moment. As he states at the beginning: "The basic academic question is simply, how is religious

faith possible in the late modern world?” More personally, he acknowledges the question for Christians is “how do believers live out their faith under the conditions of the late modern world?”

One of the most important contributions that distinguishes *To Change the World* from Hunter’s earlier work is his analysis of the “top down” mechanism of cultural change. Given the displacement of traditional Christianity under the conditions of modernity, Hunter warns that evangelical Christians are naïve, and largely unfaithful, if we are driven by an ambition to change the world.

To put the matter bluntly, Hunter is clearly embarrassed by much of conservative Christianity in America. In particular, he is acutely embarrassed by the Religious Right and by the culture-changing ambitions of evangelical Christians in the last generation. That embarrassment shows up on virtually every page, and it drives Hunter’s warning that evangelicalism is not only fragile but also incompetent and powerless to bring about any major cultural change. The publication of *To Change the World* brought, as Hunter must have expected, immediate retorts and rebukes from some Christian leaders who argued that if evangelicals could only shift the worldview of the larger culture then the right kind of cultural change would naturally follow. In that sense, Hunter and his critics largely shared the fact that they had embarrassed one another.

Hunter’s analysis of how cultural change is driven by elites is indispensable to understanding not only the general conditions of late modernity, but also the specific challenge of the massive moral revolution around us. How could a tiny minority of Americans bring about a moral revolution that

normalized same-sex behaviors and same-sex relationships in such a stunningly short amount of time? How could such a minority drive revolutionary moral change in a pluralistic and democratic culture like the United States?

As Hunter explains, the numbers are far less significant than the placement. He offers an analysis of how social capital determines and influences the direction of the culture. Yet there are inherent contradictions in Hunter's argument. By the time he considers the alternatives presented to Christianity in the late modern age (including the Christian Right and the "neo-Anabaptists") he has virtually denied the possibility of Christian influence in the larger culture—especially in terms of changing the fundamental direction of that culture.

The central thrust of his argument is that the most faithful response of Christians within this set of cultural conditions is "faithful presence." Hunter's strategy would surrender any claim of massive cultural influence and would forfeit any pretensions of world-changing on the part of the church. Instead, faithful presence would suggest Christians should simply try contributing to the commonweal and to the preservation of society—and should do so as Christians who no longer have any ambitions of changing the larger culture.

Yet, even as Hunter's sociological analysis of the top-down mechanisms by which cultures change points to the inevitable conclusion that orthodox Christians are rarely found among the elites, the fact remains that professor Hunter certainly does find his placement among the intellectually elite. As a tenured professor and head of a research center at "Mr. Jefferson's University," Hunter stands at peak intellectual influence. While, as he explains, the stratification of the elites means there are institutions with even more

influence and prestige than the University of Virginia, there can be no question Hunter is a fully accepted member of the academic guild. The big question his book raises, then, is this: How in the world is a Christian who lives and works at a distance from those intellectual elites to be faithful? Reading *To Change the World* again in its entirety, I was struck by just how elitist the book's argument really is.

Now, even more than when I first read the book five years ago, I have to wonder whether Hunter is himself projecting the “*ressentiment*” he argues has driven both the Religious Left and the Religious Right in their cultural engagement. While there is plenty of evidence to suggest that a sense of cultural displacement, moral fear, and even resentment has driven some of the discourse and actions of Christians in the public square, my experience is that most faithful church members have been deeply involved in these issues out of urgent moral, spiritual, and personal concern—not out of *ressentiment*. Further, while a generation of leaders in the so-called Religious Right may still believe national revival is riding on the next presidential election, most of the Christian leaders I know were disabused of that kind of hope almost a generation ago. Hunter is undoubtedly right that the hope itself was unrealistic and simplistic. But what are Christians to do in the voting booth, and as participants in a cultural conversation, and as salt and light in a civilization increasingly hostile to the conditions that will lead to human flourishing? What are Christians to do in the face of sex trafficking, and abortion, and same-sex marriage, and economic inequality, and a host of other issues we did not choose, but that have chosen us?

James Davison Hunter does not reveal his own convictions or moral principles on many of these issues. Therefore,

his brilliant meta-analysis breaks down at the question of practical application. And the internal contradictions in his argument make it virtually impossible to know what he would define as our proper hope under the sociological, cultural, and intellectual conditions he so well describes. Hunter is certainly right to warn us that we will be embarrassed about simplistic ambitions to change the world. I think he is wrong, however, to suggest that “faithful presence” is an adequate response, even for a Christianity humbled by the modern age.

FAITHFUL PRESENCE NEEDS PROPHETS

VERMON PIERRE

IT'S ONE OF THE more demoralizing experiences in elementary school. It's the experience of being picked last, or perhaps not even being picked at all, for a playground game during recess. The playground community is basically saying you aren't relevant to the game. It never feels good to be considered irrelevant by your community. Kids respond in many different ways: indignation ("I'm a whole lot better than those other kids; I'll show them!"), appeasement ("I'll give you my lunch money if you let me play"), apathy ("Eh, I didn't want to play that stupid game anyway"), or hopefulness ("If I show them how helpful I can be to the game, they'll eventually want me more involved").

This is a metaphor for what it can feel like to be a Christian today. Christians are being picked last in today's modern

playground. The orthodox Christian worldview is increasingly considered irrelevant or even dangerous. And as a result Christians feel ostracized, isolated, and ignored.

So what are we to do? What is the best way forward? Which way will lead to Christians not only being let back into the game but perhaps even changing the game for the common good?

James Davison Hunter considers these and other similar questions in his book *To Change the World*. He reviews the Christian Right, the Christian Left, and the neo-Anabaptists in their respective attempts to influence modern society. Like the left-out children in the playground game, their responses range from active opposition to intentional disengagement to wide-ranging attempts to appeal to and connect with the culture. Hunter finds limited effectiveness and critical flaws in all these approaches as pursued by these different Christian subgroups.

In contrast, he offers “faithful presence” as a model for engaging our post-Christian world. Faithful presence is a kind of incarnational Christianity whereby believers are actively involved in society, bearing witness to Christ by their humble, winsome, loving engagement with others in their spheres of influence. Hunter supports the pursuit of righteousness and justice in the world. However, he argues that this is a secondary good to the primary good of worshiping and honoring God in all we do.

There is great value to Hunter’s model. Faithful presence calls us to a humble practice of our faith that stands in contrast to the politically preoccupied, confrontational approaches that have characterized the Christian subgroups he reviews.

However, I think a Christian engagement in today's world can and in fact must be more than what "faithful presence" might suggest. Faithful presence as a model tends to put the accent on a more passive witness within the culture. This point is best seen in the examples of faithful presence Hunter gives in chapter five of *To Change the World*. He describes many wonderful instances of Christians in various sectors of society doing things that contribute to the flourishing of others. The examples show Christians doing good work out of a Christian worldview that positively affects the people they work with and serve.

Yet none of the examples seems to include the kind of Christian cultural engagement that would be represented by, say, the Christian abolitionist movement in England during the 19th century or Christians' efforts to reform child labor laws during the industrial age. These examples reveal a more active type of witness, a more prophetic engagement with the culture.

A key biblical passage for Hunter's model of faithful presence is Jeremiah 29:4–7. These verses are a helpful framework and foundation for faithful presence amid a non-God fearing culture. However, if we look to the Jewish community's life in Babylon as a model, we don't have to settle for Jeremiah 29. We have multiple biblical "case studies" for how believers might live in Babylon—examples that suggest expressions of faithful presence that are anything but passive.

Take, for example, the case of Daniel and his friends. Does faithful presence capture what we see from them? In many ways it does. In Daniel 1 we see them as committed participants in Babylonian cultural training. And at the same

time they continued to be committed followers of God, as evidenced by their self-imposed dietary restrictions.

But we also witness in Daniel 3 a situation that could be more analogous to where our culture is heading, at least in the United States. It is a culture that in clear and public ways opposes worship of God. In response, faithful presence from Daniel's friends takes on a prophetic edge. They boldly stand out and speak against the surrounding culture.

There are other examples to consider. With Ezekiel we have a witness who in a sense ignores the surrounding culture in favor of encouraging and exhorting the believing community. With Nehemiah we see a faithful witness that manifests itself in measured, prayerful, strategic interaction with cultural elites in order to advance the cause of the believing community.

Faithful presence as described by Hunter fits all of these examples. At some points, faithful presence is directed first and foremost toward the believing community. At other points faithful presence means measured but strategic steps to advance the mission at the highest levels of society. And at certain points, faithful presence in Scripture demands active witness against and even defiance of cultural authorities and views.

From these biblical examples, then, I would suggest an expansion or perhaps a reframing of "faithful presence." I suggest we might better describe it as "faithful prophetic presence."

Faithful prophetic presence will entail some seeking placement within influential institutions in order to slowly subvert those institutions, thus setting the stage for long-term change. We might call these the "court prophets." They

seek to be wise compromisers within the current cultural systems and institutions. They are salt in the midst of the world, looking to subtly enhance and improve the culture in Godward directions.

Others agitate for change with a kind of “holy impatience”⁶² that keeps certain issues front and center before the culture. They are the “wilderness prophets,” on the periphery but close enough to the center to credibly speak into it. They are salt in the midst of the world, looking to be distinct so as to provoke response and even, over time, change.

Still others focus more on particular communities, to encourage and galvanize them. These “exile prophets” are salt in the midst of the world, looking to help their communities maintain their uniquely salty taste.

Faithful prophetic presence, then, is a broad category under which Christians will interact with the culture in a number of different ways. Certainly some of these ways are more powerfully effective than others (like, for instance, engaging the more broadly influential institutions). However, the other “less effective” ways still have their place, and indeed perhaps are the necessary sparks that give the more high-profile strategies unique power at significant times.

So, for example, the civil rights movement measurably advanced through the slow but steady leveraging of legal institutions—the court prophets at work, if you will. However, we might also say that some measurable momentum in this direction was generated and empowered through the work

62 Vincent Bacote, “Beyond ‘Faithful Presence’: Abraham Kuyper’s Legacy for Common Grace and Cultural Development,” *Journal of Markets & Morality*, Volume 16, Number 1 (Spring 2013), 203.

of various wilderness and exile prophets working through grassroots movements, alternative institutions, and strategic protesting.

We have probably spent too much energy as church leaders arguing for one model of cultural engagement over another, as if they were mutually exclusive. Indeed, the rich complexity of the biblical storyline shows people engaging culture in multiple ways simultaneously. Such a realization should encourage us to be more holistic and flexible in our cultural engagement.⁶³

It should also encourage us to be more modest in our expectations. The world is a big place, with complex networks of relationships and cultural forces and institutions. Hunter rightly argues that attempts to “change the world” are often misguided and resistant to the typical triumphalist efforts of various Christian subgroups.

Accordingly, Christians engaged in faithful prophetic presence must be modest and humble about their ability to change our world.

At the same time, perhaps we can be optimistic about our ability to at least change our city block. Change can and does happen, if our sights are aimed closer to home. Yes, we should stop expecting home run cultural changes every time we get a chance to bat. But let's not act like we can't at least hit a single and get on first base. And, of course, with luck and skill a player can be steadily advanced around the bases until he scores a run.

63 D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 227.

A historical example of this is the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 and 1956. By refusing to give up her bus seat, Rosa Parks incited a confrontation over racial segregation in the buses of Montgomery, Alabama. Parks and her allies confronted the issue at multiple levels, most obviously in the organized boycott of buses by African Americans, which in turn prompted change through the legal system. Admittedly, it would be many more years before these changes were fully embraced at the local level. And many more years later before broader changes concerning the treatment of African Americans in the United States become fully embraced and endorsed by the culture. The progress may be slow, but it is progress nonetheless.

Through faithful prophetic presence, culture can change in our block, our neighborhood, our city. It can change in multiple small ways. And perhaps, by the Lord's grace and in accordance with his will, our humble, steady, persistent efforts might add up to something more. Hopefully, along the way, we will no longer bemoan being left out of the game or be discouraged by our lack of immediate success. Instead, we will be encouraged the more we affirm that the game's ultimate outcome has already long been decided in our Lord's favor. This perspective gives value and meaning and, most wonderfully, hope to our efforts in this world. God is using all our strategic successes, and even our foolish failures, to bring about not just world change but even cosmic change—something always beyond our power but fortunately never beyond his.



THE GOSPEL COALITION

As a broadly Reformed network of churches, The Gospel Coalition encourages and educates current and next-generation Christian leaders by advocating gospel-centered principles and practices that glorify the Savior and do good to those for whom he shed his life's blood. A biblically grounded and united mission is the only enduring future for the church. We desire to champion the gospel of Jesus Christ with clarity, compassion, courage, and joy—gladly linking hearts with fellow believers across denominational, ethnic, and class lines. We invite all Christians to join us in an effort to renew the contemporary church in the ancient gospel of Christ so that we truly speak and live for him in a way that clearly communicates to our age.

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