

BOOK REVIEW: *To Change the World*

To Change the World: the irony, tragedy & possibility of Christianity in the late modern world
by James Davison Hunter, Oxford University Press, 2010

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One can be thankful that sociologist James Davison Hunter has offered his scholarly corrective to ineffectual Christian activism in his book, *To Change the World: the Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*. Hunter begins by asserting that changing the world is obviously part of the Christian mission (pp. 3-4), and then writes three essays which challenge major contemporary Christian approaches to the project. The first essay challenges the basic assumption that cultures can be changed “one heart at a time” or, in other words, from the bottom up. Hunter argues that cultures are usually changed by small networks of elites, who “create space” for thinking about an alternative culture, which thinking then spreads outward (p. 78). In other words, Hunter longs for Christian leadership in various fields who will be able to lead a culture in change, yet without “the Constantinian error” of resorting to force or imposition.

The second essay takes to task three major Christian culture-changing movements of our day: the Christian right, the Christian left, and what he calls the Neo-Anabaptists, all of which have misunderstood the relationship of power to Christian ideals, and are thus ineffective in bringing about lasting Christian change to the culture. In his view, they are beholden to the idea of “conquest, take-over, or dominion,” (or in the case of the Neo-Anabaptists, reaction to such) which is precisely what God does not call us to pursue (p. 280). In other words, God calls us to live as citizens of two kingdoms, rather than resort to the Constantinian error of conflating God’s agenda with the power plays of this world.

In his third essay, Hunter puts forth his vision for changing the world, something he calls “faithful presence.” In the end, this means setting one’s immediate goals lower, focusing on being thoughtful and faithful Christians in one’s own callings, thus seeking to bless both believer and unbeliever by our good works. Although Hunter advocates that great thought be put into the endeavor, he does not ask for or expect very much in our time, as his last sentence reveals: “Certainly, Christians, at their best, will neither create a perfect world nor one that is altogether new; but by enacting shalom and seeking it on behalf of all others through the practice of faithful presence, it is possible, just possible, that they will help to make the world *a little bit better*.” (p. 286, emphasis added). While Hunter may have meant this as a bit of humble understatement to close his masterful book, we find such understatement precisely in accord with the New Testament agenda as found in the epistles. This is not because the Church won’t accomplish great things in the world – she will by God’s grace – but because those great things are precisely the types of things that the world neither recognizes nor values. As the apostle puts it, what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. And we must remember that if we are ever going to do any real, lasting good in this world.

Much good can be said about Hunter’s book, particularly his chastening of the various Christian political movements. At times, I simply wanted to stand up and cheer that someone of Hunter’s

stature was saying such things. At the same time, Hunter is not saying anything particularly new. The idea of faithful presence has perhaps been held by the majority of traditional Protestants since disestablishmentarianism. The fact that it is not as widely advertised as the aforementioned activists is precisely because “faithful presence” Christians eschew the pursuit of worldly power and publicity which activists seek and so are less likely to get footnoted in a book of this nature. But the idea that Christians are a holy society within a larger society, yet seeking the blessing of both, is hardly revolutionary. This concept of Christians living in “two kingdoms” has been articulated throughout Christian history (see p. 284) and is not bereft of articulate advocates in our day. In fact, Hunter’s basic model looks very much like the Old School Presbyterian “spirituality of the church” doctrine of my own tradition, if perhaps with some different expectations and applications. But the theological grid is the same. So, we should be thankful that Hunter is reminding the activists of our day of this basic Christian reality of living in the world while not being of it (cf. John 17, I Peter 2, I Corinthians 4, etc.) And yet, because Hunter has not much interacted with explicit “Two Kingdom” theology (and even seems to disparage it, p. 218), he makes too many theological assertions without real argument, and makes too many ambiguous statements which can lead to “kingdom confusion” rather than clarity and direction (see below).

THE GOOD

As I mentioned, much good can be said about Hunter’s book overall, and one hopes it gets a wide reading in the halls of power, both sacred and secular. First and foremost, while yet advocating for cultural interaction, Hunter is very clear that such work is not the same as building the Kingdom of God, unlike many in our day, particularly in my own Reformed tradition. For instance, Hunter writes, “It is also important to underscore that while the activity of culture-making has validity before God, this work is not, strictly speaking, redemptive or salvific in character. Where Christians participate in the work of world-building, they are not, in any precise sense of the phrase, “building the kingdom of God.” (p. 233). He thus avoids the post-millennial optimism of the 19th century which conflated church and culture and eventually morphed into Protestant liberalism. Therefore, Hunter states that in his view it is essential that we “abandon altogether talk of ‘redeeming the culture,’ ‘advancing the kingdom,’ ‘building the kingdom,’ ‘transforming the culture,’ ‘reclaiming the culture,’ ‘reforming the culture,’ and ‘changing the world’” (p. 280). One would wish for such clear statements coming out of the Reformed seminaries of our day.

Hunter also clearly states that secular work has value in and of itself and should be pursued, regardless of what current influence it is having on culture (pp. 95, 246). This is an important qualifier to Hunter’s goal of setting up networks which will have cultural impact, and should mitigate against those who would turn such cultural agendas into a law which robs Christians of the joy of their justification in Christ. It is also exactly in accord with the theology of Peter, Paul and Ecclesiastes (see I Thessalonians 4:11; I Peter 2:13; and Ecclesiastes 2:24; 3:22; 4:6).

As part of this understanding then, Hunter embraces the local over the national (p. 253), the authentic over seeking a slick, celebrity status (p. 260). In this regard, Hunter sounds like an ecclesiastical Wendell Berry when it comes to changing culture. Likewise, it follows that Hunter clearly eschews violence as having any part of the Kingdom of God, while yet allowing for it in

larger society (pp. 192-193), which is part and parcel of clear “two kingdom” thinking. Finally, even as he advocates for elite networks working to influence culture, Hunter recognizes the irony and tension in this approach as apparently antithetical to Christian thinking (p. 94; see below for a critique). All of this is to be welcomed.

QUESTIONS & CRITIQUES

Nevertheless, despite the general helpfulness of Hunter’s book for our time, a few theological questions and points of critique remain. I state them as questions because Hunter writes as a sociologist rather than as a pastor or theologian. As such, there are places in this work which were theologically vague and so one may hope that further dialog will lead to further clarity. For the sake of brevity, I will mention just three critiques here, all of which are inherent in the very project itself. That is, whenever one considers the question of how Christians are to “change the world,” then it is likely that one may overemphasize that mission, with all its visible manifestations, rather than remaining heavenly focused, which is after all, the final hope of the Christian Gospel (I Peter 1:13; II Corinthians 4:16 – 5:10; Romans 8:18-25; Revelation 21). And so here are a few critiques along those lines, again to the purpose of encouraging further dialog concerning this important project.

First, at times Hunter seems to desire and even expect that if Christians redirect our attempts to influence culture in a wiser manner, that we will gain respect and appreciation from society (see for instance, pp. 174, 203, 217). This is akin to many who state that they want Christians to “have a place at the table” in the realms of the academy and public policy. The expectation is that the world will appreciate our input and attempts to bless our culture with our love and service. This may at times be true. But it also fails to take into account what our Lord promised, namely that the world would hate us, because it hated Him. Or how He prays not for the world, but only for His own (John 17: 9). Or how Peter reminds us that the world will ridicule us for not conforming to their sin patterns (I Peter 4:4). Or how Paul tells us to judge only those inside the church, not those outside (I Corinthians 5:9-13). The New Testament teaches a strong distinction between those who belong to the Church and those who belong to the world, and we make a grave (and oft repeated) mistake when we blur those lines too readily. Ultimately, we preach a Gospel of a coming judgment on this world (Acts 17:31; II Peter 3:7), and that the only thing that will survive its fiery destruction are the souls of those united to Christ by faith. This is not a message that the world has any interest in, except for those who know their own sin and need of grace. We cannot expect the world to respect this message, no matter what other good we do in the world. And if we fail to preach that message on top of our good works, then we are no longer distinctly Christian. But if we do, then we will be hated. We are no greater than our master. I believe more attention should be paid to this theme as we seek to bless our communities and influence them for righteousness and with a message of grace. But it will not always be welcomed.

Secondly, there are times when Hunter’s interest in Christianity’s contemporary lack of influence on our culture appears to undermine the credibility or effectualness of the Gospel itself. In other words, if Christianity’s credibility arises from her ability to exert influence, then Hunter at times appears to say that the faith itself is under attack since it is failing in that mission. For instance, he writes, “As the structures of belief have weakened, so has the self-assurance of belief. There

is little if anything one can take granted about the faith any longer” (p. 204). Regarding the post-modern challenges of difference and dissolution, Hunter writes, “Separately and together, these changes in the social organization of modern life challenge Christian faith to its core. *Both undercut the capacity to believe and to believe coherently, thoroughly, effectively*” (p. 224; emphasis original). He goes on, “And so the questions continue to press on us: How can one be authentically Christian in circumstances that, by their very nature, undermine the credibility and coherence of faith?” The answer is that Christian faith is not based on anything in our contemporary culture, good or bad. It is based on “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints,” the Gospel “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (Jude 3; I Corinthians 15:3-4).

Now, I am certain that Hunter affirms this, but one can see that too much focus on Christianity’s relative success over against its objective truthfulness can lead one to despair and doubt. The Gospel is as true in a 1453 Constantinople overrun by Muslim armies as it is in a Victorian England when it appeared to have won the nation. It is as true in the 21st century as it was in the First. And no contemporary circumstance or failure – or sin for that matter – should cause us to doubt its truthfulness or ultimate victory as promised in the Scriptures (cf. Matthew 16:18-19; Romans 8:28-39). It is one thing to say that post-modernity challenges our faith, but quite another to say that the challenge actually *undercuts* our ability *to believe coherently, thoroughly and effectively*. If I believe in the Gospel of God’s grace to me in Christ, then I will be justified, sanctified and glorified period. What could be more coherent and effective than that? A billion years from now, my soul will yet live, along with all those who believe. What could be more important to God’s glory in this world than that (Romans 11:33-36)?

A practical example of Hunter’s possible inconsistency in this matter occurs on pages 266-8. There, Hunter lists several examples of Christians doing good in the world and having an influence on their community. Among others, he describes an automotive executive, an art gallery curator, and a physician researcher all making a difference. But as his last example, Hunter describes a woman who rings up and bags groceries and whose “sphere of influence was only six square feet,” but who talked to her customers and told them she would pray for them. Yet he introduces this woman “as last, but not least.” That is a statement we must absolutely agree with, given Jesus’ clear teachings about the widow’s mite, and Paul’s assertion that in the Church, there are not many wise, not many powerful, not many of noble birth. “But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (I Corinthians 1:26-27).

Yet, the essence of Hunter’s first essay is that the world is not changed by the lowly, but by circles of elites. So which is it? We opt for Hunter’s later list, including this grocer as equally influential according to the wisdom of God’s economy. Such is well in accord with Jesus’ teachings that when we throw a feast, we should invite those who cannot pay us back because our reward is in heaven – in other words, to pour ourselves into the non-influencers of this world (Luke 14:7-11). But such actions call for faith in what is unseen rather than in what is seen. Our point is this: when one concerns oneself too much with having influence in this world, then one might be tempted to look only to the Christian elites, and neglect the real Kingdom work around us, work which the world (and sadly, the Church) often fails to see – the saving and

sanctifying of souls. As the Westminster Confession of Faith puts it, the church's mission is to "gather and perfect the saints." That is what we are to do, no matter who they are or what influence they may have. We do not know the wisdom of God.

Thirdly and finally, Hunter's commitment to influencing our culture leads to an explicit and unhelpful latitudinarianism when it comes to specific doctrinal commitment. This is seen most clearly on page 281, where he writes, "a vision of the new city commons rooted in a theology of faithful presence would lead believers to hold to many of these (doctrinal) differences lightly." He goes on to state that these differences are not irrelevant or to be ignored altogether. However, the greater mission of spiritual formation and public engagement must make us lay these differences largely aside. Hunter then gives a telling example: "This would include the great schism of the sixteenth century that divided Protestants and Catholics.... Unity around the core beliefs and practices of Christian faith can only serve the larger purposes of making disciples, on the one hand, and serving the common good, on the other." Here Hunter shows that his primary expertise is as a sociologist, not a theologian. How can one lay aside the differences between the Protestant reformers and the errant Roman church, which cemented their schism from the mainstream of Christian orthodoxy at the Council of Trent? How can one say that differences on the matter of justification are secondary? (Compare for instance Romans 4:5, indeed the whole of Romans, with the modern Roman Catholic Catechism on the matter of justification.) It is not my intent here to argue the Protestant case for justification by faith alone, but simply to assert that how one answers the question is critical to one's spiritual formation and mission in the world, not something secondary or which can be "held lightly."

And yet there is a school of thought which would seem to agree with Hunter, and which says that the crying need of the hour is to impact our culture for Christ rather than quarreling over details of the faith. But such a claim begs the question: what is the faith and what is its purpose? What is the cause of Christ in our world? Even a casual reading of the New Testament must recognize that the question of how one is justified is central to that cause, not secondary. There is far more about it and placing our hope in heaven than there is anything about impacting our cultures through our secular vocations. Moreover, those who feel the burden of "making a difference" under such transformationalist teaching often lose the joy and peace of their justification in Christ, since their focus becomes on what they must do in this world, rather than on what God has already done in Christ. And so, getting our doctrine of justification right is key to how we form disciples and how we publicly engage this world, not secondary. And so we must not hold these differences "lightly" if we want any impact which lasts into eternity.

Once again, I ask these three questions and make these challenges not to undercut Hunter's fine and corrective work, but to provoke further sharpening and dialog as to what the Church's truest and final mission is in this world. God has indeed saved us and left us here to "change the world." The question is to what end, and by what means. Word, Sacraments and Prayer will change the world, one soul at a time. And these saved souls will have a leavening influence in every sphere of their lives, as God blesses. And then, when all is said and done, and our Lord returns in glory, we shall see that which was built upon Christ alone and His Gospel, and that which burns up to no reward.