

Review of “To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World,” by James Davison Hunter

By Chris Rice

The Argument

A sociologist and professor of Religion, Culture, and Social Theory at the University of Virginia, James Davison Hunter’s project in this book is to detach American Christianity from its 30-year captivity to the politics of power and lay the foundation for a new vision of social witness.

The book consists of three major essays. In essay one, “Christianity and World-Changing,” Hunter shows how “changing the world” is the dominant rhetoric of Christian churches, ministries, and organizations, both liberal and conservative. Since the 1980’s, what Hunter terms “political witness” has become *the* central means of change by both the Christian left and Christian right (both Jim Wallis of Sojourners and James Dobson of Focus on the Family are fingered here).

There are several surprising turns in the book. The first is what Hunter terms the “irony” of Christian world-changing: Prominent American Christians and their groups want very much to change the world in order to control it, but their dominant ways of thinking about and seeking cultural change (evangelism, political action, and social reform) are deeply flawed. Citing both William Wilberforce and Chuck Colson as examples, Hunter argues that the approach is too individualistic and does not work (heroic individuals, one person at a time, changing hearts and minds). The counterpoint to this Christian failure is minority Jews and gays and their disproportionate cultural power, indicating they are far more skillful at understanding how change works.

In his second essay “Rethinking Power,” Hunter develops his case for how power works in cultural change. What Christians fail to understand is the importance of historical forces and the institutional nature of culture and how it is “embedded in the structures of power” (26; case in point are dense elites which are centers of cultural production, such as the New York Times). Another surprising turn in the book comes here. After describing how cultural change really works, and how Christian influencers are naïve about this, Hunter argues that the very pursuit of and desire for power and social control which dominates American Christianity is morally bankrupt and theologically suspect. He names a dual hubris: “The presumption is both that one can know God’s specific plans in human history and that one possesses the power to realize those plans in human affairs” (95). Christian thinking operates within a framework of political establishment rather than a theological framework. While Christian influencers imagine they might control politics, in fact that very vision is controlling them and eroding Christian witness.

In the third and final essay, “Toward a New City Commons: Reflections on a Theology of Faithful Presence,” Hunter offers his alternative, an antidote to the captivity. He calls it “*faithful presence* ... a recognition that the vocation of the church is to bear witness to and to be the embodiment of the coming Kingdom of God” (95).

To describe his alternative clearly, Hunter contrasts “faithful presence” to three other paradigms he calls “political theologies.” First is the “defensive against” paradigm of the Christian right. Their social vision is the right ordering of culture through politics. The enemy is secularism, the answer “resacrilization.” Second is the “relevance to” paradigm of the Christian left. Their social vision is equality through politics. They draw heavily from the biblical prophetic tradition, and their answer is redistribution. Third is the “purity from” paradigm of what Hunter terms the “Neo-Anabaptists” (he locates Stanley Hauerwas here). Unlike the Christian right and left, this paradigm dislikes power and has a strong opposition to the state. Their social vision is *koinonia*.

Crucial to understanding Hunter's vision of *faithful presence within* is what he both loves and abhors about the Neo-Anabaptists. He generally agrees with their critique of the modern world, their rejection of politics as the Christian norm for social change, and their strong ecclesiology and focus on a distinctive and visible Christian life. Yet he detests what he calls their "world-hating theology" (174). These claims are critical to understanding Hunter's alternative of "faithful presence" as opposed to the "defensive against," "relevant to," and "purity from" paradigms.

The challenge for Christian faithfulness is two-fold, to detach the church from politics and the public from the political. The hope that Hunter sees is in a *public church*, with a faithful presence not *apart from* society, but *within* (contrary to "purity from"), and with an Christian/church identity which is detached from an American identity (contrary to "defensive against" and "relevance to"). The problem is that Christianity has assimilated too much into the state and the market and lost the distance required to be prophetic.

Hunter's Christological account of "faithful presence" is crucial for him in distinguishing it from the non-theological alternatives he sees. He identifies in Christ's life, death, and resurrection the "demonstration of a different kind of power" (193). This is a different power from the drive to control, derived from intimacy with the Father, non-coercive, self-emptying, offering service to others, and rejecting status. What is desperately needed, and what faithful presence provides, is a new Christian paradigm for a post-Christian America: a "post-political witness" shaped by the life and way of Christ.

The final surprise in "To Change the World" is the theological category he adopts for the alternative of faithful presence within: *exile*. Jeremiah's call to the Jewish people is not to flee Babylon but to "build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce" (Jeremiah 29:4-7). Faithful presence within is to become a "community of Christians [who] are now, more than ever – spiritually speaking – exiles in a land of exile. Christians, as with the Israelites in Jeremiah's account, must come to terms with this exile" (280).

Choosing Jews in Babylon as the analogy for creating a new kind of Christianity in America says a great deal about how un-Christian Hunter thinks the church has become. American Christianity has become a weak culture precisely by selling its soul to politics and mixing its identity with the nation. It is time to abandon visions of grandeur and to stop imagining that politics can solve the deepest problems. A final quote is telling:

Changing the world is "based on the dubious assumption that the world, and thus history, can be controlled and managed ... By this logic our actions are justified only by the outcomes they promise to bring about ... Christianity is not, first and foremost, about establishing righteousness or creating good values or securing justice or making peace in the world. Don't get me wrong: these are goods we should care about and pursue with great passion. But for Christians, these are all secondary to the *primary good* of God himself and the primary task of worshipping him and honoring him in all they do" (285-6)

Strengths and Weaknesses

Some strengths of the book:

1. Hunter's critique of the modern world, the Christian quest for "saving the world," and of the "politicization" of the church is compelling and has a strong theological edge: "The presumption is both that one can know God's specific plans in human history and that one possesses the power to realize those plans in human affairs" (95).

2. The many paradigms (“defensive against,” “relevance to,” “purity from,” “faithful presence within,” “post-political witness”) are extremely fresh and compelling for the time we are in and make rich points of engagement for reflection, preaching, and congregational conversation. The book is accessible to a wide audience, and while dense it is not academic.
3. Hunter’s alternative of “faithful presence within” is fresh, set within the parameters of not simply assimilating into the culture and its mediocre standards, nor retreating into the walls of the church.

Some weaknesses of the book:

1. Hunter fails to give narrative texture to “faithful presence within.” His vignettes are limited to three pages (266-269), with no compelling stories to provide counterpoints to his critique of Wallis, Dobson, Colson, and the Neo-Anabaptist Ecclesia Project. One powerful historical analogy he offers is the creation of the social institution of the monastery, yet no contemporary equivalent is mentioned. The result is that his alternative looks vague, shy, and tentative. Hunter got lazy here. His argument would be far more compelling if he were to show as well as tell, even in such a way as to illuminate signs of fresh movements of the Holy Spirit.
2. Hunter’s account of the politicization of the church is compelling and begs for an account of how American Christianity can be “de-politicized.” By what means does this happen? Again, an account of hope is crucial.
3. The book is too America-centric. Hunter is calling for a kind of “post-Christian Christianity” which is not only post-political but also post-nationalist – where the identity of the church is not bound with the identity of the state. Hunter reads globalization as “Americanization writ large,” but the global landscape is far more complex and rich than that. Pockets of Christians in other countries are facing similar challenges as well as creating hopeful alternatives, and they are increasingly disenchanted with America’s unbridled capitalism. Exile is a powerful paradigm. But drawing on the Christian *diaspora* scattered among the nations would both illuminate new possibilities and a concrete means toward forming a new identity across political boundaries with other “post-nationalist” Christians.

Applicability to Christian Ministry

“To Change the World” offers rich resources for wrestling with questions of metrics and success in Christian ministry. It is a rare and rich mixture of theological and contextual analysis. It is a book to be reckoned with by any Christian who is concerned about social transformation.