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## How Not to Change the World

*A call to "faithful presence."*

Andy Crouch | posted 4/23/2010

Near the end of his masterful book *To Change the World*, we discover that James Davison Hunter does not believe we should (or can) change the world. Nor should we be "redeeming the culture," "advancing the kingdom," "building the kingdom," "transforming the world," "reclaiming the culture," [or] "reforming the culture." It's a surprising turn, given that a casual reader might naturally think, for the first hundred pages, that *To Change the World* is about how to change the world. And therein, as they used to say, lies a tale worth telling.

It is a tale of three "essays" originating in a talk that Hunter gave a number of years ago, also called "*To Change the World*," which has circulated widely among leaders in the evangelical movement. The substance of that talk, with its analysis sharpened and extended, forms the first of Hunter's three essays in *To Change the World*, and it maps fairly neatly onto the "irony" signaled in his subtitle.

The irony is that there is no phrase more beloved to a certain kind of Christian than "to change the world." But in Hunter's persuasive account, the strategies those very same Christians have pursued are, by themselves, woefully incapable of changing the world. (Hunter's greatest interest is clearly Christianity's theologically conservative varieties, though he attends to mainline and progressive Christianity as well.) One group focuses on personal renewal and national revival, while another—championing a "Christian worldview"—locates the necessary condition for cultural change not so much in the heart as in the mind. Either way, the premise is that once the hearts and minds of ordinary people are properly revived and informed, the culture will change. "This account," Hunter says flatly, "is almost wholly mistaken."

It is mistaken because of its individualism: it ignores the central role of institutions in transmitting culture. It is mistaken because it is not just institutions that matter, but institutions at the cultural "center" rather than the "periphery"—so that an op-ed in the *New York Times* is of vastly greater importance than one in the *Sacramento Bee*. It is mistaken, perhaps most of all, in its egalitarian assumption that the hearts and minds of ordinary people matter—in fact, cultural change is almost always driven by change among a small élite who occupy powerful positions in those culturally central institutions.

And Christianity in America, as Hunter sees it, is very much on the periphery, for all its numerical strength. Its institutions, such as they are, tend to be weak, they tend not to be in culturally central locations, and they tend to address the "lower and peripheral areas" of culture—secondary education rather than university research, popular culture rather than high art, ministries of mercy rather than public policy. At their worst they glory in their marginal status, feeding a subculture that churns out substandard cultural products for consumption by other Christians, simultaneously the most energetic and the least effective culture-makers you could imagine.

If this is sounding tragic as well as ironic, wait until Hunter's second essay. In a trenchant analysis of the three most coherent Christian social movements of our time, he finds a shared fixation on politics, and on power conceived narrowly as political. Exhibit A, of course, is the Christian Right, which perennially survives the predictions of its demise. It is driven by nostalgia for Christian dominance and moral coherence. Exhibit B is the Christian Left, less well-organized but still vigorous, and driven by a desire for economic justice (and abhorrence of the Christian Right).

And Exhibit C, shrewdly presented, is the "neo-Anabaptist" faction carrying on the thought and work of John Howard Yoder, driven by a distrust for the ungodly violence of the market and the state. This last exhibit is Hunter at his best, arguing that in the very ferocity of their dissent from state power and Christian collusion with it, the neo-Anabaptists end up defining themselves in political terms just as much as the partisan movements they seem to oppose.

What none of these movements can truly imagine, Hunter maintains, is a genuinely cultural vision, one that seeks human flourishing and sees the intrinsic value of culture in its manifold forms. The tragedy of all three movements is their impoverished understanding of culture and of cultural power, and the degree to which they have become captive to *ressentiment*, the rehearsal of grievances (whether the enemy is secular humanists, Christian conservatives, or the imperial state) rather than the pursuit of a true common good.

And this leads to the last, and most hopeful, of Hunter's essays, in which he calls for a Christian posture that is neither "defensive against," nor "relevant to," nor seeking "purity from" the culture. (Be assured that, as with his whole argument, Hunter frames these broad categories with considerable nuance—he is no sloganeer but a deft analyst.) Rather, Hunter calls us to "faithful presence"—fully participating in every structure of culture as deeply formed Christians who also participate in the alternative community of the church. Whereas the first essay is relentlessly sociological, the last is surprisingly theological, even doxological, in its call for Christocentric, ecclesially formed cultural presence. The vision Hunter would have us embrace turns out not to aspire to world-changing at all—the very idea of "changing the world" is rooted in a quest for dominance that fundamentally misunderstands the Christian gospel and the way of Jesus, not to mention the realities of our pluralist, late modern society. Rather, we should embody a sacrificial love for our neighbors, of all faiths and none, expressed in acts of culture-making and institution-building that serve their good and leave the ultimate fate of our culture to the judgment and providence of God. And by this third essay, the strategic concern for elite presence has faded into the background—Hunter envisions Christians practicing that presence at the "periphery," in the "center," and everywhere in between.

Taken as a whole, these three essays are persuasive and compelling. There are certainly questions worth asking, especially about some of the stark claims early on. Many have observed that being culturally elite ain't what it used to be—élites themselves evince a level of anxiety about their own influence and staying power that is worlds away from the serene dominance of the establishment even one generation ago. No less commanding an elite insurgent than Barack Obama is living proof of just how hard it is to get things done in a world of fragmented and distributed power. We could observe that much creativity, especially in market economies and democratic polities, comes from peripheral locations, as in the pharmaceutical industry's striking reliance on startup companies or the astonishing salience, at least at crucial moments, of outsider movements from Ross Perot to the Tea Partiers.

A more practical question is what evangelicals might have done in the last century instead of retreating to the margins. A subcultural strategy can sometimes be wise—if nothing else, it preserves an identity distinct from the dominant culture. I spent some of my formative years among mainline Protestants for whom "faithful presence" was the very watchword, but in practice that meant nearly complete cultural accommodation. This is perhaps the greatest practical obstacle to enacting Hunter's vision. Creating a strong alternative community to counter the dominant culture, while still boldly commissioning that community's members for presence even in places of great cultural power, has proven quite the sticky wicket for two millennia now. (American Jews, whom Hunter cites as an example of a culturally central minority, could equally be an example of just how much assimilation such influence requires.)

To be sure, the parallel structures of evangelicalism have often collapsed into stifling subcultural hothouses. But that does not mean they have not played a formative role, and a culturally significant one. Hunter has little to say, none of it very complimentary, about Christian colleges like Gordon, yet that is the alma mater of two notable sociologists of our time: Christian Smith and, yes, James Davison Hunter. Hunter allows that Christians have a significant, influential presence in the fields of philosophy and American history, but he does not mention that many scholars who were the vanguard of that presence began their careers at "underfunded," "peripheral" evangelical colleges. If Hunter wants to bite the subcultural hand that fed him, he is not the first nor will he be the last; but speaking as an outsider to evangelical education who has spent my whole life, from birth to the present, in the midst of the secular academic world, I have been pleasantly surprised to find intellectual and spiritual seriousness on Christian campuses that put many putatively more selective secular schools to shame. There is plenty to critique about these institutions, especially the ways they handle the demands of pietistic donors and market-driven parents and students, but if this is failure, let's have some more.

This leads to the one feature of this book that is troubling, and genuinely perplexing. Hunter is quite thorough in his documentation of both the sociological literature and primary sources from the Christian Right, the Christian Left, and the neo-Anabaptists. What you are unlikely to ascertain from the text or the notes, however, is the existence of any Christian scholar or public actor who has pursued the course Hunter recommends other than Hunter himself, along with a few of his students and associates. D. Michael Lindsay's study of 360 Christians "in the halls of power" is waved aside as a mere cataloguing of isolated individuals, even as Hunter goes on to critique their generally pietistic and ecclesologically deficient approach to their faith in precisely the terms that Lindsay has used in interviews about his work. Lindsay's February 2008 article in the *American Sociological Review* argues for the importance of overlapping networks and models of elite agency. Hunter does not reference it at all, nor John Schmalzbauer's *People of Faith: Religious Conviction in Journalism and Higher Education*, nor, in a slightly different vein, Rodney Stark's *The Rise of Christianity*. It would take nothing away from Hunter's brilliant synthesis to acknowledge that others are doing similarly important and influential work.

When it comes to Christians attempting to do some good in the wider world, Hunter finds very few he can put in a good light. Charles Colson is dismissed as a quasi-Hegelian idealist based on his enthusiasm for worldview education, rather than recognized for his considerable network-convening savvy. Gabe Lyons's Fermi Project comes in for sustained examination only for its sometimes glib promotional material, not for the work it is doing to build overlapping networks of young elites in some vital cultural centers. The patient and wide-ranging intelligence of Os Guinness is similarly passed over in the course of making a point about evangelical individualism. Hunter devotes several pages, rather than just an endnote, to dismissing my own book *Culture Making*, and some of his criticisms, as of the others mentioned, are fair as far as they go. But a reader of his summary would never guess how much my book and his overlap in their fundamental concerns and final vision.

A truly cultural agenda, putting our power to deeper and better use than the rehearsal of *ressentiment*, is one of the most important callings Christians could possibly embrace. Hunter offers a crucial alternative to the political and anti-political camps of Right, Left, and Yoder. But such a movement will require partners. Dismissing most of your potential allies is no way to build a movement. And there is a deeper concern as well. To his credit, Hunter is keenly aware that cultural power brings with it the corrosive quest for status. "The social dynamics of status," he observes in a brief but penetrating section, "are really fundamentally about the dynamics of exclusion." It is hard not to sense these dynamics at work in Hunter's selective sketch of the scholarly and cultural landscape. If there is any difference between the elite-driven world he sketches in essay one and the beloved community he describes in essay three, it must involve generosity even toward those one sees as mistaken. One can only hope that whatever cultural power Hunter gains from this book will lead to the kind of intentional and sacrificial friendship that he so eloquently commends as elements of faithful presence.

That said, I celebrate the possibilities opened up by this book. It is groundbreaking, it is comprehensive, and it is visionary. Above all, it is wise, both sociologically and theologically. No Christian entrusted with institutional leadership or cultural power should miss the chance to read it. It will be provoking better Christian conversations about culture for years to come, and may well help our secular neighbors understand what Christians really are, or should be, aiming for—even when we use slogans like "to change the world." Bravo.

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