The following article is located at: http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/may/16.33.html

Faithful Presence
James Davison Hunter says our strategies to transform culture are ineffective, and the goal itself is misguided.

Interview by Christopher Benson | posted 5/14/2010 09:09AM

To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World
by James Davison Hunter
Oxford University Press, April 2010
368 pp., $27.95

Over two decades have passed since Allan Bloom’s famous polemic, The Closing of the American Mind, shook up the American academy. The time is ripe for another shakeup. Enter James Davison Hunter, whose latest contribution, To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World (Oxford), promises to shake up American Christianity. An endorsement for Bloom’s book applies just as well to Hunter’s: It “will be savagely attacked. And, indeed, it deserves it, as this is the destiny of all important books … Reading it will make many people indignant, but leave nobody indifferent.”

Hunter, professor of religion, culture, and social theory at the University of Virginia, is author of Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America and The Death of Character: On the Moral Education of America’s Children.

To Change the World comprises three essays. The first examines the common view of “culture as ideas,” espoused by thinkers like Chuck Colson, and the corrective view of “culture as artifacts,” as recently argued by Andy Crouch in Culture Making. Both views, argues Hunter, are characterized by idealism, individualism, and pietism.

Hunter develops an alternative view of culture, one that assigns roles not only to ideas and artifacts but also to “elites, networks, technology, and new institutions.” American Christians—mainline Protestant, Catholic, and evangelical—will not and cannot change the world through evangelism, political action, and social reform because of the working theory that undergirds their strategies. This theory says that “the essence of culture is found in the hearts and minds of individuals—in what are typically called ‘values.’ ” According to Hunter, social science and history prove that many popular ideas, such as “transformed people transform cultures” (Colson) and “in one generation, you change the whole culture” (James Dobson), are “deeply flawed.”

The second essay argues that “the public witness of the church today has become a political witness.” Hunter critiques the political theologies of the Christian Right, Christian Left, and neo-Anabaptists, showing that unlikely bedfellows—James Dobson, Jim Wallis, and Stanley Hauerwas—are all “functional Nietzscheans.”
Evangelism, political action, and social reform are worthy undertakings, but they aren't decisively important if the goal is world changing.

The third essay offers a different paradigm for cultural engagement, one Hunter calls "faithful presence." Faithful presence is not about changing culture, let alone the world, but instead emphasizes cooperation between individuals and institutions in order to make disciples and serve the common good. "If there are benevolent consequences of our engagement with the world," Hunter writes, "it is precisely because it is not rooted in a desire to change the world for the better but rather because it is an expression of a desire to honor the creator of all goodness, beauty, and truth, a manifestation of our loving obedience to God, and a fulfillment of God's command to love our neighbor."

Christopher Benson, a writer and teacher in Denver, Colorado, spoke with Hunter about To Change the World. Benson's work has appeared in The Weekly Standard, Books & Culture, Christian Scholar's Review, Image, and The City. Mark Galli, senior managing editor of Christianity Today, assisted in the interview. Colson, a CT contributing editor, and Crouch, a CT editor at large have responded.

What's wrong with viewing culture as ideas or as artifacts?

Both perspectives fail to recognize that culture is also infrastructure. Culture is constituted by very powerful institutions that operate on their own dynamics independent of individual will. Ideas do move history, and objects do have their place, but only under certain social conditions. When ideas do move history, it's not because those ideas are inherently truthful or obviously correct, but rather because of the way they're embedded within institutions and structures of power. Both perspectives are looking at the tip of the iceberg, overlooking the mass of ice beneath the water.

Why are the principal strategies for cultural change failing?

Evangelism, political action, and social reform are worthy undertakings, but they aren't decisively important if the goal is world changing. These strategies don't attend to the institutional dynamics of culture formation and cultural change; in fact, they move in exactly the opposite direction of the ways in which cultures do change.

You argue that cultural change is not wrought by individuals in isolation from institutions. But why should we not regard William Wilberforce as an individual who changed the world?

What history tells us is that the key actor in history is not the individual genius but rather the network and the new institutions that arise out of that network. This is not to undermine or undersell the importance of charismatic figures like Luther, Calvin, or Wilberforce. That kind of genius, courage, and charisma, however, cannot be understood apart from a network of similarly oriented people.

You say that the "parallel institutions" of American Christianity are ineffectual as change...
agents in culture. Why?

Culture is organized according to a framework of center and periphery. *The New York Times* sells fewer copies than *USA Today*, but *The New York Times* is at the center whereas *USA Today* is at the periphery. Some community colleges and state universities provide as good an education as the Ivy League colleges, but the Ivies are at the center, whereas community colleges and state universities are at the periphery.

By and large, American Christianity has produced a huge cultural economy, but it operates on the periphery of status rather than in the center. The importance of cultural capital is determined not by quantity but by quality. Quality is measured according to the kind of status it attracts, and status is almost always measured by exclusivity. As I note in my book, evangelicalism boasts a billion-dollar book publishing industry, yet the books produced are largely ignored by *The New York Review of Books*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Washington Post Book World*, and other key arbiters of public intellectual argument.

Are American Christians not elite enough?

Populism underwrites American Christianity, especially within evangelicalism. That populism speaks to cherished values, but it also works against the dynamics of cultural change. The main reason Christian believers today lack influence in the culture, despite their aspirations, is not because they don’t believe enough or try hard enough or think Christianly enough. It’s because they’ve been absent from the arenas in which the greatest influence in the culture is exerted. The culture-producing institutions of Christianity are largely marginalized in the economy of culture formation in North America. Its cultural capital is greatest where leverage in the larger culture is weakest.

But didn't the Vietnam War protests and the civil rights movement, both populist movements, force elites to change?

In the case of the anti-war movement, you must look at the demographic base of that protest. It was overwhelmingly white and upper-middle class, and disproportionately well-educated. This was not a protest that was organized by the working class or poor. In the case of the civil rights movement, it was black intellectuals in the church who mobilized people. The movement didn’t gain the kind of traction it needed to really change laws and public policy until white intellectuals and clergy from the North became involved.

Ordinary people in social movements can and do have influence, but rarely do they gain world-changing traction until the overlapping networks of elites operate within the center-most institutions of cultural production.

You say that it is "nothing short of ludicrous" to claim that the culture can be changed in one generation. Why?

Changes in political systems and economic conditions can occur relatively quickly. The most profound changes in culture typically take place over the course of multiple generations, often in ways we’re not even aware of. They penetrate the ways we speak, the ways we imagine the world. They penetrate the structures that organize social life—structures of reward, privilege, and punishment. So the deepest kinds of changes don’t happen simply by willing them into being. Powerful changes happen implicitly rather than explicitly.

Would a third Great Awakening change the culture, if two-thirds or half of the American population came to a radical embrace of the Christian faith? There’s no question that it would have an impact. But unless the elites of society were similarly impacted or affected, it probably wouldn’t change things as much as you might expect. What is more, it would probably take several generations of reckoning with what that faith meant to the people, their children, and their grandchildren before it finally penetrated the warp and woof of the social order.
When Christians turn to law, public policy, and politics as the last

When Christians turn to law, public policy, and politics as the last

When Christians turn to law, public policy, and politics as the last

What are the consequences of this for the church's public witness?

The state is the sole legitimate source of coercion and violence. When
Christians turn to law, public policy, and politics as the last resort, they have essentially given up on a desire to persuade their opponents. They want the patronage of the state and its coercive power to rule the day. What makes this problematic, in my view, is that the dominant public witness of the church is political, rooted in narratives of injury and discourses of negation. The sense of deprivation among Christians leads to an ethic of revenge, or what Nietzsche called ressentiment. In different ways and to different degrees, the prevailing political theologies in American society today—the Christian Right, the Christian Left, and even the neo-Anabaptists—partake in that ressentiment and consequent will to power. And here’s the tragic irony: Whenever Christian churches and organizations partake in the will to power, they partake in the very thing they decry in society.

Christian philosopher Carl Raschke has observed that "the emerging Religious Left is just a funhouse mirror of the Religious Right." Why do you say that the two Jims—Dobson and Wallis—mirror each other?

They both operate with a proprietarian relationship to American culture that obligates them to preserve the nation as well as their faith. They both offer different versions of civil religion. And they have both become instrumentalized on behalf of different party structures, jockeying for power.

**How should Christians think about power?**

There are two tasks for a post-political witness. First, we must disaggregate the life of the church and the life of the nation. Second, we must renew a distinction between the public and the political.

What would a post-political gesture look like in the pro-life movement? Borrowing an example from a friend, imagine ten thousand families signing a petition in Illinois that declares they will adopt a child of any ethnic background and physical capability. If they wanted to do something spectacular, they could go to city hall for a press conference, announcing that in the state of Illinois there are no unwanted children. That would be a public—but not political—act. Such an act leads with compassion rather than coercion.

By focusing too much on political power, we overlook how social power plays out in everyday relationships and institutions. There are four characteristics to the social power that Jesus exercised. First, his power was derivative—originating from intimacy and submission to his Father. Second, his power was humble—rejecting the privileges of status and reputation, suffering indignities with joy. Third, his power was compassionate—serving the good of all and not just the good of the community of faith. And fourth, his power was noncoercive—blessing rather than cursing "the other," as we can see from his encounters with Samaritans and Romans.

**How does your paradigm of cultural engagement differ from the others?**

All the paradigms speak to authentic biblical concerns. Yet the desire to be relevant to the world has come at the cost of abandoning distinctiveness. The desire to be defensive against the world is rooted in a desire to retain distinctiveness, but this has been manifested in ways that are, on one hand, aggressive and confrontational, and, on the other, culturally trivial and inconsequential. And the desire to be pure from the world entails a withdrawal from active presence in huge areas of social life. In contrast to these paradigms, the desire for faithful presence in the world calls on the entire laity, in all vocations—ordinary and extraordinary, "common" and rarefied—to enact the shalom of God in the world.

Christians need to abandon talk about "redeeming the culture," "advancing the kingdom," and "changing the world." Such talk carries too much weight, implying conquest and domination. If there is a possibility for
human flourishing in our world, it does not begin when we win the culture wars but when God's word of love becomes flesh in us, reaching every sphere of social life. When faithful presence existed in church history, it manifested itself in the creation of hospitals and the flourishing of art, the best scholarship, the most profound and world-changing kind of service and care—again, not only for the household of faith but for everyone. Faithful presence isn't new; it's just something we need to recover.

Related Elsewhere:

To Change the World is available at Christianbook.com and other book retailers.

Charles Colson and Andy Crouch have responded to James Davison Hunter's book.

Two talks that became part of To Change the World are available online: a 2002 discussion at The Trinity Forum (pdf) and a 2009 lecture at the University of Montana (mp3).

Hunter has abstracts of his chapters on his website.
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? 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.) and such presence requires disciplines. Faithful Presence is a meaty and delicious book.” Michael Frost, author of The Shaping of Things to Come and The Road to Missional. “Faithfulness is an intimidating idea, so the church can be tempted to find speedy shortcuts to growth, mission, and relevance. David Fitch is helping the church outgrow its obsession with fads to break open space for the reappearance of God’s real-time presence in our neighborhoods. Had the monks maintained faithful presence within it on Sunday morning when the quake struck, they would have been killed (Photo via Marco Sermarini). October 31, 2016. | 9:30 am. Rod Dreher. I received over the weekend a very thoughtful e-mail from a college professor, which I reproduce below: Like you, I too was frustrated by Claes Ryn’s piece and the general obstinacy of people in getting the Benedict Option. The problems seem to be many