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

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James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*. Oxford: University Press, 2010, 358 pp., \$27.95

Reviewed by Joel Rainey, Ph.D., Executive Director, Mid-Maryland Baptist Association

James Davison Hunter is the LaBrosse-Levinson Distinguished Professor of Religion, Culture and Social Theory at the University of Virginia and serves as the Director of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. He is also the author of *Culture Wars* and *The Death of Character*.

Hunter's latest volume is the product of roughly ten years of research into the subject of cultural engagement. It consists of three major essays that address the Christian mandate relative to culture, issues of change, power, and conflict related to this mandate, and a suggested model for accomplishing this mandate respectively. A Christian himself, Hunter states, "I find many perplexing disparities between the Christian faith that I have come to know and what I see acted out in the world" (ix). His ultimate goal in this volume is to reconcile the Christian responsibility for world-changing with a western form of Christianity he perceives to be largely impotent at accomplishing this goal.

In essay one, Hunter contrasts the Scriptural mandate of leading culture with the common view of culture he believes fails at this task. On the one hand, “human beings are, by divine intent and their very nature, world-makers” (3). On the other, “the dominant ways of thinking about culture and cultural change are flawed, for they are based on both specious social science and problematic theology” (5).

With these corollary propositions in mind, Hunter examines the view of cultures held by most within Evangelical Christianity—namely, that cultures are, at heart, driven by ideas and worldviews. He credits (or blames, depending on the reader’s perspective), conservative Christian figures such as Chuck Colson and James Dobson, and progressive Christians such as Jim Wallis for this popular view. He laments the practical result of this philosophy of culture, believing “it is not an exaggeration to say that the dominant public witness of the Christian churches in America since the early 1980s has been a political witness” (12).

268 Hunter confronts this common view by stating that cultural values are shaped in a much more complex fashion, not only dependent on ideas but also artifacts, history, and dialectical interdependence, and are generated within networks that are eventually guided by unprecedented leadership. In contrast to the “great man theory” of leadership, Hunter believes that the aforementioned networks are “where we do find the greatness of a Martin Luther or John Calvin, a William Wilberforce, a Dorothy Day, a Martin Luther King, and so on” (38). Building on this theory of cultural development, Hunter contends that “the deepest and most enduring forms of cultural change nearly always occur from the ‘top down’” (41). In short, lasting cultural shifts rarely happen at the popular level but instead take place within networks of institutions led by cultural elites. He then examines these claims against the measuring stick of Christian history, tracing how the development and growth of Christianity (from its first century Jewish roots, to the European Barbarian conversions, to the Reformation, to the Great Awakenings, to the present) followed the pattern he describes in the first four chapters. He ends the first essay by seeking to balance the inherently despicable nature of elitism with the equally disturbing picture of cultural egalitarianism, with a view toward laying the groundwork for a church that “exercises itself in all realms of life, not just a few” (95).

In essay two, Hunter critiques what he perceives as the misuse and abuse of power—and in particular political power—by the three most commonly identified expressions of Christianity in America: the Christian Right, the Christian Left, and the neo-Anabaptist movement. Hunter suggests that what binds a diverse society together is power, and that in democratic environments, “the final repository of legitimate force is found in the state” (101). As a result, these various

Rainey: Book Review: To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World. The fragments of diverse society, including those identified as “Christian,” tend toward the use of politics, a pattern that Hunter believes has been common in the west since the time of the New Deal. He states, “Slowly, often imperceptively, there has been a turn toward law and politics as the primary way of understanding all aspects of collective life” (108). Hunter further illustrates how this “turn toward law and politics” has negatively affected what he identifies as the three primary streams of Christianity in the West.

Where the Christian Right and Left are concerned, Hunter believes that both have resorted to the “selective use of [S]cripture to justify political interests” (147) and that the primary goals of each group, which through a more fully-orbed understanding of Scripture should be viewed as complimentary, are ironically divided through an identically applied *realpolitik*. Hunter then compares the approaches of the Right and Left with the view of the neo-Anabaptists, who seek to essentially disengage from all aspects of political life. Yet in the end, Hunter presents neo-Anabaptism as itself “a political theology that reinforces rather than contradicts the discourse of negation so ubiquitous in our late modern political culture” (166).

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Hunter concludes the second essay with a challenge to fresh thinking about the issue of power from a theological perspective, leading the reader inevitably to the third and final essay in which he envisions a “postpolitical witness” (184). In this final essay, Hunter posits a vision for a fresh Christian encounter with culture that evolves beyond the current paradigms of engagement and toward what he describes as “faithful presence.” Beginning with one’s own local community and branching outward, Hunter describes the possibility of Christians making a decipherable mark on the world in which they live.

Self-critique is always a painful business, and as a Christian, Hunter speaks well to the apparent failures of his faith as it is often applied in the West. His encouragement to move beyond mere political engagement is timely, and his revelation that culture is primarily changed at the level of the elite—though this be an unpalatable truth to an Evangelical Christianity that is largely grassroots—is poignantly accurate. At the same time, his comparison of conservative and progressive versions of Christianity cloud over his failure to distinguish cultural and evangelical Christianity. He is correct to point out that many in the Christian Right and Left do not hold to a holistic understanding of their faith, but in the process he neglects the possibility that neither of these approaches is genuinely Christian.

Perhaps what is missing in the midst of thorough definitions of “left,” “right” and “Anabaptist” is an equally thorough understanding of “evangelical.” It seems

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apparent to this reviewer that the author's focus on the social and cultural is certainly more accurate than his treatment of the theological, which results in the occasional abuse of terminology that is first and foremost theological in nature.

270 Additionally, Hunter's understanding of current approaches to cultural engagement is at times overly simplistic. His use of the term "always" to describe the approach of Christian conservative action, for example, seems a broad generalization hardly compatible with a scholarly work of this magnitude (219). Likewise, though he is familiar with precedent literature such as Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*, he appears to confuse Niebuhr's own categories of engagement. For example, he describes Calvin's views on cultural engagement—which in reality were philosophically close to his own—in terms that when examined, resemble more closely the views of cultural interface held by Tertullian (231). Such may be the cause for Hunter's assumption that any attempt by the church to build God's kingdom "this side of heaven is to begin with an assumption that tends to lead to one version or another of the Constantinian project" (233). Such categorical confusion also appears as Hunter unveils his own model of cultural engagement, which places great emphasis on disengagement with almost all things political and thus seems strangely reflective of the neo-Anabaptist view which he finds insufficient.

Two final concerns of this book involves a relatively vague description of the meaning of "faithful presence" and an overly pessimistic view of the result of this presence. In an anti-climactic conclusion, Hunter contends that if the reader takes to heart and applies the principles he suggests, "it is possible, just possible, that they will help to make the world a little bit better" (286). Such a statement, in the end, betrays an underdeveloped eschatology and a negative understanding of the power of the church as the presence of Jesus in culture.

Still, the book's shortcomings are overshadowed by the positive challenge toward an alternative route of cultural engagement for the church. The overall thesis of Hunter's work—that God's people must move beyond "culture wars" toward a more productive path to world impact—will well-serve the follower of Christ who rises to the challenge to become a "culture-maker." Hunter gives ample evidence that the current approach to cultural engagement is not working and grounds his primary emphases firmly in history, social science, and Scripture. The church will be better and more effective for heeding the exhortations of this book.

It is certain that Hunter would find a military analogy for his book to be an ironic thing indeed. Nevertheless, one moment in military history does serve as a great object lesson for what Hunter aspires to communicate. On the last day of the

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Battle of Gettysburg, Confederate General James Longstreet tried in vain to convince Robert E. Lee to pull back from the current battle lines and head south to re-engage Union soldiers on ground of their choosing. Lee refused, believing not only that his Army of Northern Virginia could successfully overwhelm Union forces at the center of their lines but also that any sign of pullback indicated a retreat from battle that Lee found unacceptable. Longstreet's response was that he was not asking for retreat, only redeployment. The subsequent bloodshed that day vindicated Longstreet's appeal.

James Davison Hunter has written a comprehensive analysis of the current state of Christianity in the West and its failure to be the global force for good that Jesus demands. His call is essentially to back away from the current "lines of battle," to get a realistic and practical view of the world as it is rather than as we wish it would be. Many who are heavily involved in the current "culture war" approach to extending the influence of Christian faith will see his book as a call to retreat. To be sure, some of the solutions he suggests are vague, others simply not practical. Still, his overall point is worthy of strong consideration. Christians should take a fresh look at how the spiritual battlefield has manifested itself in our current culture and "redeploy" accordingly.

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Jim Belcher, *Deep Church: A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional*. Grand Rapids, MI: IVP, 2009, 233 pp., \$17.00.

Reviewed by William P. Brooks. Brooks is the pastor of Thompsonville Baptist located in Springfield, Kentucky, and Assistant to the Dean of the Billy Graham School at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Younger church leaders often struggle to strike the balance between the practices of traditional churches in which they were raised and the contrasting practices of churches considered contemporary or "emerging." Most end up feeling like they need to choose sides or that they must end up at one of the two extremes. Emerging leaders argue that the traditional church is old fashioned and disconnected from the culture. Traditional leaders say the emerging church has abandoned the Gospel for the sake of being culturally relevant. Young leaders are often caught in the crosshairs of this debate.

Jim Belcher has sought to remedy this problem by presenting a third way that brings together the best insights of both the traditional and emerging camps. Once an insider to the emerging church movement, Belcher is the founding church planter and lead pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Newport Beach,