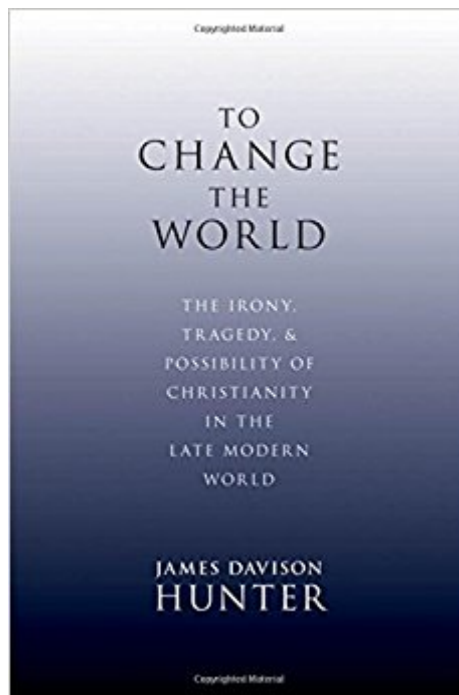




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# **To Change The World: The Irony, Tragedy, And Possibility Of Christianity In The Late Modern World**



## Synopsis

The call to make the world a better place is inherent in the Christian belief and practice. But why have efforts to change the world by Christians so often failed or gone tragically awry? And how might Christians in the 21st century live in ways that have integrity with their traditions and are more truly transformative? In *To Change the World*, James Davison Hunter offers persuasive--and provocative--answers to these questions. Hunter begins with a penetrating appraisal of the most popular models of world-changing among Christians today, highlighting the ways they are inherently flawed and therefore incapable of generating the change to which they aspire. Because change implies power, all Christians eventually embrace strategies of political engagement. Hunter offers a trenchant critique of the political theologies of the Christian Right and Left and the Neo-Anabaptists, taking on many respected leaders, from Charles Colson to Jim Wallis and Stanley Hauerwas. Hunter argues that all too often these political theologies worsen the very problems they are designed to solve. What is really needed is a different paradigm of Christian engagement with the world, one that Hunter calls "faithful presence"--an ideal of Christian practice that is not only individual but institutional; a model that plays out not only in all relationships but in our work and all spheres of social life. He offers real-life examples, large and small, of what can be accomplished through the practice of "faithful presence." Such practices will be more fruitful, Hunter argues, more exemplary, and more deeply transfiguring than any more overtly ambitious attempts can ever be. Written with keen insight, deep faith, and profound historical grasp, *To Change the World* will forever change the way Christians view and talk about their role in the modern world.

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**Product Description** The call to make the world a better place is inherent in the Christian belief and practice. But why have efforts to change the world by Christians so often failed or gone tragically awry? And how might Christians in the 21st century live in ways that have integrity with their traditions and are more truly transformative? In *To Change the World*, James Davison Hunter offers persuasive--and provocative--answers to these questions. Hunter begins with a penetrating appraisal of the most popular models of world-changing among Christians today, highlighting the ways they are inherently flawed and therefore incapable of generating the change to which they aspire. Because change implies power, all Christians eventually embrace strategies of political engagement. Hunter offers a trenchant critique of the political theologies of the Christian Right and Left and the Neo-Anabaptists, taking on many respected leaders, from Charles W. Colson to Jim Wallis and Stanley Hauerwas. Hunter argues that all too often these political theologies worsen the very problems they are designed to solve. What is really needed is a different paradigm of Christian engagement with the world, one that Hunter calls "faithful presence"--an ideal of Christian practice that is not only individual but institutional; a model that plays out not only in all relationships but in our work and all spheres of social life. He offers real life examples, large and small, of what can be accomplished through the practice of "faithful presence." Such practices will be more fruitful, Hunter argues, more exemplary, and more deeply transfiguring than any more overtly ambitious attempts can ever be. Written with keen insight, deep faith, and profound historical grasp, *To Change the World* will forever change the way Christians view and talk about their role in the modern world.

**Exclusive: A Q&A with James Davison Hunter** Q: Why did you write *To Change the World*?

Hunter: I wrote this book because I saw a disjunction between how Christians talk about changing the world, how they try to change the world, and how worlds --that is culture--actually change. These disparities needed to be clarified.

Q: How does this build on your previous work? Hunter:

One way it builds on my earlier work is that it provides a bigger picture of the nature of cultural conflict, why Christians seem to be neck deep in it, and why the approaches that they take in cultural conflict are so counterproductive. This is a response to some of the earlier work that I have done on the nature of culture wars and alternatives to them. Q: Who do you hope reads this book?

Hunter: The audience I had in mind was the diverse communities that make up American Christians and their institutional leaders--those who think about the world we live in today and how best to engage it. Those who think about these matters will find here a useful guide. Q: What three things

do you want readers to take away from reading this book? Hunter: The primary ways of thinking about the world and how it changes in our society are mainly incorrect. There is an answer to the question of how to change the world, but how it actually changes is different from how most people think. Most people believe that politics is a large part of the answer to the problems that we face in the world, and so a second insight would be the limitations of politics. Political strategies are not only counter-productive to the ends that faith communities have in mind, but are antithetical to the ends that they seek to achieve. A third thing that I would like for readers to take away is that there are alternative ways of thinking about the world we live in, and engaging it, that are constructive and draw upon resources within the Christian tradition. In the end, these strategies are not first and foremost about changing the world, but living toward the flourishing of others.

To change hearts and minds has been the goal of modern Christians seeking to correct a culture deemed fallen and morally lax. Hunter (Culture Wars), a distinguished professor of religion, culture, and social theory at the University of Virginia, finds this approach pervasive among Christians of all stripes and in every case deeply flawed. It can even undermine the message of the very gospel they cherish and desire to advance. In three essays—three groups of chapters developing a concept—Hunter charts the history of Christian assumptions and efforts, investigates the nature of power and politics in Christian life and thought, and then proposes a theologically sound alternative: what he calls the practice of faithful presence. This practice has benevolent consequences... precisely because it is not rooted in a desire to change the world... but rather it is an expression of a desire to honor the creator of all goodness, beauty, and truth. Well reasoned and thought provoking, Hunter's corrective argument for authentic Christian engagement with the world is refreshing, persuasive, and inspiring. (Apr.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

For those interested in looking deeply at the mission of the church and its implications for engaging with and influencing the world around us, "To Change the World" is serious analysis that demands consideration. While Dr. Hunter writes with the discipline and rigor of a highly respected academic, his style is both accessible and thought-provoking. For those in other parts of the world, beware that the examples and context of this book is limited to the United States. Yet, the principles of social change and the analysis of the roles of institutions are universal. I recommend this for those Christians who aspire to change the world and/or disciple nations. Be forewarned: that task will likely require some change in your own thinking.

The author presents a compelling critique of the failure of three predominate wings of contemporary, Evangelical Christianity to impact the culture in a redemptive sense. (These three movements are the Religious Right, the Historic Liberal Protestant/Current Progressives, and Neo-Anabaptist). All three have failed to really accomplish the Great Commission mandate, Hunter argues, in that they all have come to state and pursue their objectives solely in the political realms of our culture--and have generally treated their theoretical opponents with disrespect and rancor. He states that all three have become "politicized," and in that they have failed miserably. Indeed, he argues that their very underlying presumption that cultural change comes through winning the "hearts and minds" of the populace, is abjectly doomed to failure. (While the Neo-Anabaptist camp is not, technically, politically identified, the movement's pervasive criticism of both governmental and ecclesiastical structures serves as a clear political type of rhetoric and orientation.) The author's assessment of the alleged failure of these "big three" moments is insightful, though-provoking, and in many cases, compelling. Ironically, it is in the very stated goal of the book (a presentation of a new "possibility" of Christian presence in the West) that the author falls short. His explanation of a new, fourth way, a "Faithful Presence" in the culture, does little more than to reiterate a cultural approach that has always been present in faithful believers in the culture. (He notes, as examples of the Faithful Presence, car dealerships that seek a fair, equitable compensation package for their employees, businessmen funding private schools in low-income neighborhoods, art gallery owners funding the art showings in low-income areas of Washington, DC, etc.) It is not that the author's solution, a Faithful Presence, is untrue. It is simply that it is not new, as he exemplifies in his excellent application of Jeremiah 29:4-7 (exiles seeking the peace and prosperity of the host nation). While his application is not new, it is a powerful reminder of a biblical, more powerful opportunity of impact in our culture than the pathetic culture wars still being fought by the old school Religious Right, or the antiquated liberalism, some of which is now being adopted by the current "seeker-friendly" churches, and many "emergent" churches. All in all, this is a fascinating read, well worth the investment of time. However, if you are interested in a simple, biblical approach to current faithfulness in the culture that does not involved political war-making--go straight to the final section of the book. If you are interested in reading about what has gone wrong, and what is presently going wrong, with current mainline liberal and conservative religious moments in American, dive in at its first pages.

Christians serious about their faith and what it means to live out their lives in a modern world need

to read this book. Hunter is insightful and helpful as he dissects the various emphasis in Christianity in its attempt to change the world. His insight into the culture and its influence on living out our faith, the allure of power to promote culture change and our mixture of biblical Christianity with American idealism are all helpful critiques that are much needed. Hunter's solutions are not exhaustive. But he opens the door for a deeper discussion of how to live out our faith as exiles in a foreign land. His approach to a "faithful presence from within" is refreshing. We need more books like this that begin to not just critique biblical faith and the churches culpability in the demise of biblical faith in America but a fresh perspective on how to extract the western mindset out of the biblical faith so that we can live faithfully as exiles in a foreign land seeking its welfare as a prophetic community that points toward the New Jerusalem.

Hunter is an evangelical sociologist writing on how Christians or the Church should engage culture. The first part of the book presents a study of culture and what impacts cultural change. Hunter begins by providing us a general survey of how Christians desire to change the world; the common approaches that Christians at large have taken to accomplish cultural change; how the common approaches lead to failure; he then presents an alternative view in eleven propositions (excellent); shows its evidence working through history; then he addresses the cultural setting/economy of American Christianity as a weak culture; then he revisits the creation mandate. And that's just part one of three (358 page book). I recommend reading this book if you don't mind engaging with cultural sociology. I love this paragraph from Hunter: Let me say that the best understanding of the creation mandate is not about changing the world at all. It is certainly not about "saving Western civilization," "saving America," "winning the culture war," or anything else like it. The reason is that so much of the discussion surrounding this kind of world-changing is oriented toward the idea of controlling history. 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. There is a fine line between presumption and hope, as Aquinas observed, but in our culture, such presumption nearly always has tragic consequences (95). Hunter proposes that the role of the Church is to move towards what he calls "a theology of faithful presence" ... "the vocation of the Church is to bear witness to and to be the embodiment of the coming Kingdom of God" (95). The latter part of the book is more theological, Hunter presents the failed approaches of the Christian Right, the Christian Left, and the Neo-Anabaptist and presents a fourth approach entitled a faithful presence within. In summary, a theology of faithful presence, argues that Christians should be involved in every sphere of culture living out the presence of God's shalom towards all men. Hunter argues that even though

we cannot change the world, we can still have an impact on culture, if and only if Christ's presence is lived out through believers in every realm of culture. For a balanced view on how the Church should engage culture read this book (Hunter), David Van Drunen's *Living in God's Two Kingdoms*, and Tim Keller's *Generous Justice*. I found Hunter's book cited in the endnotes of *Generous Justice*, stumbled on a few online reviews, and decided to read it. Conclusively, this book has made a profound impact on my understanding of Church and Society. This is a must read for pastors and theologians.

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