

[*To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*, James Davison Hunter, Oxford University Press, 368 pages]

What Shall It Profit a Man?

By Richard Gamble

SOCIOLOGIST James Davison Hunter made his reputation as a public intellectual with a landmark interpretation of the “culture wars” in the early 1990s. Now he takes up the question of what Christian faithfulness ought to look like in 21st-century America. *To Change the World* asks Christians of every variety to reconsider the framework of power and transformation that has shaped their efforts to remake society. He offers nothing less than “a new paradigm of being the church in the late modern world.”

Along the way, Hunter challenges the American church’s assumption that it can redeem the culture from the ground up, one person at a time, with the power of ideas wedded to political activism. Flawed and ineffective, this “hearts and minds” approach—dear to so many celebrity pastors, authors, and “world-view” institutes—misunderstands the way sustainable change happens in society and will never achieve its noble purposes. He lauds contemporary American Christianity’s impulse to fulfill the “creation mandate” by obeying God’s directive to Adam in Eden to subdue the earth and wield dominion over it. Indeed, “to be a Christian,” he writes, “is to be obliged to engage the world, pursuing God’s restorative purposes over all of life, individual and corporate, public and private.” But that divine mandate needs to be combined with a strategy that will actually work.

Hunter’s alternative model of social change foregrounds the role played by institutions, top-down leadership, and

well-financed networks of elites operating at the centers of “cultural production.” He rapidly surveys early Christianity, the conversion of the barbarians, the Carolingian Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation and its “successor movements” of revivalism and social reform in America; these are historical instances of deep social change driven by the conscious effort to create alternative structures, not just by a shift in ideals. Hunter summons Christians to a more comprehensive application of the Great Commission that, while still carrying them into “all the world,” will reach beyond geography to include every institution: the arts, sciences, media, politics, education, entertainment, social welfare, and more. He envisions a culturally engaged church, active in every part of life, bearing witness through its “faithful presence,” and “enacting the shalom of God” to bring wholeness to a broken world.

Someone unfamiliar with this esoteric language about the creation mandate, faithful presence, and the peace of God will have a hard time wrapping his mind around just what kind of church Hunter longs to see. At times, he seems merely to dress up an old-fashioned social gospel and anemic ecumenism in trendy language. It is hard to grasp what his recommendations would amount to

gelical right and left and the neo-Anabaptists, uncovering the bad habits they have in common. American Protestants as a group, and even Catholics, have adopted, among other dubious propositions, a naïve transformationalism, a mythic civil religion that commonly fails to distinguish between Israel and America, a negative posture toward the world that emphasizes what Christianity opposes rather than the gift of grace it offers, and a politicized and power-driven strategy to defeat the enemy, whether that enemy takes the form of secularism, injustice, or the world and its ways. He rightly criticizes Christians for cultivating a “proprietary” attitude toward the American narrative and culture, as if the nation personally belonged to any branch of Christianity or even to Christians in general.

Hunter offers constructive reminders about the shared public space that belongs to all Americans regardless of their faith. This is the kind of “common life” that St. Augustine wrote about in the *City of God*, the secular realm inhabited by Christian and non-Christian alike, united by their common stake in promoting this world’s temporal peace, safety, and prosperity—or “human flourishing,” to use Hunter’s preferred description. Ordinary life in all its vari-

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if he explained them in ordinary words. But Hunter is an astute observer of American culture and worth listening to. He writes from within the American “we” and addresses himself to an audience of his countrymen in the hopes of moving Christians past allegedly obsolete doctrinal battles and “functionally irrelevant” divisions in Christ’s body. In his view, Christians must make common cause among themselves, with followers of other religions, and with nonbelievers for the sake of a more just society.

Hunter is at his best in cutting across superficial distinctions among the evan-

ety is a legitimate sphere of activity for the Christian to practice his God-given vocation. And the public realm, Hunter cautions, is not the same as politics. Our conception of public life, radically narrowed in recent decades, ought once again to be widened and enriched to include the whole range of intermediary institutions between the individual and the state. Faith in the omniscient state is one of the “illusions” of Hunter’s subtitle that he tries to unmask. Indeed, he warns, “the state cannot . . . provide fully satisfying solutions to the problem of values in our society.”

Much of Hunter's justification for Christian engagement in the world hinges on his belief that Christianity offers unique solutions to these problems. He doesn't picture Christians entering the public sphere simply as human beings and as American citizens, but rather as agents of the creation mandate helping "to make a profound difference in every sphere of life." Although that vision sounds pretty ambitious, he insists more than once that the goal of Christian activism ought not to be to transform the world. Yet underneath the whole book pulses Hunter's unmistakable desire for the church to be busy in worldly affairs, to move beyond Word and Sacrament for the sake of Word and Deed. He insists that a "faithful presence" is the Christian's calling "*irrespective of influence*" (his italics). But by mobilizing the gospel to penetrate into "all realms of life," his goal still seems to be to change the world.

In his enthusiasm for Christianity's ameliorative influence in the world, Hunter forgets what we might call the "dark side" of the gospel. Jesus rebuked his disciples for thinking he had come to bring peace—an odd claim on the face of it since the angels had announced peace on earth at his birth. He told his followers that he had come not to bring peace but a sword, one that would divide family members from each other. A robust "theology of the cross"—to borrow the vocabulary of Lutherans, who, along with other confessional, creedal Christians are nearly absent from this book—knows that the gospel reconciles God to man but that it doesn't necessarily reconcile man to man. Fidelity to Christ can set brother against brother, husband against wife, neighbor against neighbor, and citizen against the state. To be sure, a divided world isn't proof of a godly church, but neither is a world that has somehow been made "whole." Rather than solving the world's problems, the faithful church might appear to make things worse from a human perspective.

Hunter seems frustrated by the degree of alienation between the church

and the world, or at least by the presence of needless alienation between these kingdoms. Certainly, no Christian ought to provoke alienation for its own sake or wear that feeling as a badge of honor, as if it were a guarantee of piety. But Christianity entered the world as a scandal and a stumbling block, and it remains such to this day. Christians have it on good authority that it is hard to take up their cross and follow Jesus and bear his shame. But Hunter argues that thanks to radical pluralism and nihilism it is especially hard today for Christians to bear witness to the faith. "The grammar of Christian faith"—or "God-talk"—"has become more strange and arcane, less natural and more foreign, spoken awkwardly if at all." To the outsider "it has little or no resonance at all."

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Perhaps generic "faith" has become harder to arrive at in modern America—perhaps—but the Christian gospel has never expected to find "resonance" with the world. It did not resonate with the culture of 1st century Rome. Christianity exploded into the world as something hardly "plausible" or "persuasive" to human eyes. Yet pagans converted by the thousands and the Church flourished. Just why contemporary "social conditions ... make faithfulness difficult and faithlessness almost natural" is not obvious, nor is it clear why Christians today should find that challenge more daunting than the 1st-century martyrs did.

Christians who have a higher allegiance to the church than to American society will not take encouragement from Hunter's recommendations for "faithful presence." Social benefits from such a reconfigured orientation to the world may be real, but Christians ought to have their eyes open to the costs involved. A church that trades less effec-

tive techniques for more might lose its integrity, the very essence of what defines it as an institution unlike any other, and the unique message it brings to the world. Anyone who spends much time with young Christians these days knows that a generation has been raised by spiritually nomadic church-hopping parents—or even by radically de-institutionalized "home church" families—who have not bothered to initiate their sons and daughters into the life of the church. They have sent their children to the right schools and to worldview boot camp, but they have left them unbaptized, uncatechized, unaccountable, and unhabituated to regular public worship. This trend is becoming increasingly noticeable even among the offspring of conservative homes. A higher and more

urgent calling than engaging the world might just be engaging the church.

Hunter agrees that the church in America is unhealthy. Indeed, it is the premise of his book. But for him the evidence of good health is a church that "exercises itself in all realms of life, not just a few." Hunter's call to that comprehensive outworking of the gospel offers both diagnosis and prescription for the "post-political," "post-Constantinian" church as it faces an increasingly alien "post-Christian" culture. His book will perhaps redirect the strategy, funding, and vocabulary of transformationalists aspiring to be among the cultural elite, but it will not challenge their most cherished presupposition, that the church's faithfulness ought to be measured by the degree to which it changes the world. ■

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[*Bye Bye, Miss American Empire: Neighborhood Patriots, Backcountry Rebels, and Their Underdog Crusades to Redraw America's Political Map*, Bill Kauffman, Chelsea Green, 336 pages]

Breaking Up Isn't Hard to Do

By Thomas DePietro

MOST CONSERVATIVES want big government in all its bureaucratic remoteness to be shrunk. But few entertain the obvious solution: reduce the number of citizens and the dimension of the places governed. Ridiculously simple? Hopelessly utopian? Bill Kauffman doesn't think so. And this, his latest work of spirited social criticism, brings to bear all his talents—his historical smarts, his journalistic acumen, his muscular prose—upon his bracing argument for a perennial idea: secession. Let's break up gigantic states, he says, and let some simply leave the Union. It's a notion as old as the country itself and as fresh as the recent champions of the Second Vermont Republic, independent New Englanders who hope to bring government back to human scale.

Kauffman has made an admirable career of celebrating unsung heroes and lost causes. His books include melancholy reflections on the disappearance of small-town life (*Dispatches From the Muckdog Gazette*); a profound study of America's localist writers, artists, and thinkers (*Look Homeward, America*); brilliant accounts of American non-interventionism and antiwar conservatism (*America First!* and *Ain't My America*); and a wonderfully eccentric biography of Luther Martin, the cantankerous anti-Federalist (*Forgotten Founder, Drunken Prophet*). The last makes clear that Kauffman knows his Founders as well as any scholar of the subject.

By his own admission, Kauffman's politics are an unusual amalgam of

views. A self-described "reactionary radical," he elsewhere elaborates: "I am an American rebel, a Main Street bohemian, a rural Christian pacifist," with "strong libertarian and traditional conservative streaks." His decentralist views give rise to his isolationist sympathies and engender a pantheon of heroes ranging from Dorothy Day and Robert Taft to Gore Vidal and Pat Buchanan. In short, I've always thought of him as a party of one. (Or two, since I agree with him on almost everything.)

But Kauffman's latest book convinces me that he's not alone in his "front-porch anarchism," that all over the country movements for smaller, more local government have sprouted and enlisted supporters from across the political spectrum. More often than not, these secessionist groups transcend the tired categories of Right and Left. Yes, Kauffman's a "beyonder," as the smug pundits of the *Weekly Standard* once dismissed those who long for a way out of the conventions of current power politics. But if "beyonder" ideas promise little in the corridors of Washington, D.C., these simple views provide great hope for democratic renewal in the more familiar corners where you live.

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History, in Kauffman's deft retelling, often reminds us of things we too easily forget. In this case, he turns to the question that troubled American politicians almost from the start: "Did the states precede and create the United States without forfeiting their own sovereignty, or, by ratification of the Constitution, did the states subordinate themselves for all time to an indissoluble union of which they are constituent but not independent pieces?" The issue engaged the best minds of the day and soon devolved into the nullification debate of the 1830s—could a given state disregard a federal

law, declaring it "null and void?" Kauffman documents the eloquence on both sides, but the real kicker in his account is this little-remarked fact: the first vehement secessionists were not Southerners bent on preserving their right to own human beings. No, the loudest calls for disunion came from the Northern abolitionists, and rightly so. They saw no reason why they should respect the barbarism of slavery. When a slave escaped to their states, they felt no obligation to return him, despite federal laws.

The debate of course turned topsyturvy with the onset of civil war. Southerners fought for their right to secede (and—let's not pretend—to preserve slavery) where just a few years earlier the American Anti-Slavery Society in the North had proclaimed "that secession from the United States Government is the duty of every Abolitionist." Neither prevailed, and Union, which began, in Kauffman's words, as "a strategic imperative" became in Abraham Lincoln's "seraphic design" the gospel of the Republic. So much so that even a sophisticated jurist such as Antonin Scalia has argued that the matter of secession was clearly settled once and for all by the Civil War. Might, as it so often does, made right.

Maybe Justice Scalia is correct. Secession may have been a hot topic before the Civil War, as Kauffman's impressive array of distinguished commentary from the best minds of the time attests. But today, seceding from the United States is surely a pipe dream, entertained only by hippy tree-huggers, gun-toting militiamen, and racist neo-confederates. To be fair, Kauffman does indeed encounter some sketchy characters in his travels among the various groups who champion the decentralist cause. But the majority are nothing like the carica-