To Change the World, James Davison Hunter, New York, Oxford University Press, 286,

The thunderclap title to James Davison Hunter's new book is misleading—doubtless with ironic intent. Though Hunter places himself in the line of Christian believers who have sought "to engage the world, to shape it, and finally change it for the better," he opens with a broadside attack on current Christian prospective world-changers, regardless of denomination or ideology, for proceeding on assumptions that are "almost wholly mistaken."

In his final chapter Hunter warns that it is essential that Christians now "abandon altogether talk of 'redeeming the culture,' 'advancing the kingdom,' 'transforming the world,'… and 'changing the world.'" It is essential because "such language carries too much weight. It implies conquest, take-over, or dominion, which in my view is precisely what God does not call us to pursue."

It is not that Hunter does not agree that, from a Christian perspective, to which he is committed, the world needs changing. "Our culture—business culture, law and government, the academic world, popular entertainment—is intensely materialistic and secular." Only occasionally are there "references to religious transcendence in these realms, and even these are vague, generic, and void of particularity."

Hunter identifies three "paradigms of engagement" within contemporary American Christianity that offer competing strategies for serving God's will while dealing with the church's modern predicament.

The first of these, which he calls the paradigm of "defensive against," is championed by the Christian Right among evangelical Protestants, plus substantial numbers of conservative Catholics and mainline Protestants. This model focuses on the "right ordering" of society and the renewal of America's roots in Christianity. Guided by these goals conservative Christians pursue strategies of evangelization of unbelievers and stout resistance against the ongoing secular offensive aimed at pushing once dominant Christianity to an almost wholly private cultural periphery. The fight against secularization has contributed to intense politicization and alignment with the Republican Party in a tradition that used to be decidedly non-political.

The second paradigm, focused on ''relevance to,'' is "animated by the myth of equality and community." The key goal for this paradigm is "justice, defined as economic equity—the equality component." The first order of priority for liberal Christians embracing this model is "to take back Christianity from those who would pervert it." Working within the left wing of the Democratic Party, liberal Catholics and mainline Protestants pursue Biblically inspired goals of "justice, peace, equality, and community." Hunter reports a recent swing to the left among pious evangelicals led by the charismatic liberal preacher Jim Wallis—a movement not much recorded by exit polls from the 2008 election.

A third paradigm, which Hunter associates with "neo-Anabaptists," including Quakers, Mennonites, and other so-called "peace churches" as well as Anabaptists themselves, presents a strategy of "purity

from," rejecting "the violence built into modern capitalism and the structures of political power that defend it." Seeking perfect moral and spiritual purity, they practice extreme disengagement from the sinful civil order. This group, descended most directly from the radical fringe of the Reformation, is numerically minuscule—less than one percent of the American population. Hunter nevertheless regards it as a currently significant representative of a tradition never quite lost in Christianity since the main body of the church came to terms with "principalities and powers" during the reign of Constantine in the fourth century.

Hunter acknowledges that all three of the paradigms present at least partially valid diagnoses of some of "what is most challenging if not destructive in the modern world." All three, however, fail to come to grips with underlying crises of "difference" and "dissolution" that he maintains lie at the heart of Christianity's current troubles.

Difference, Hunter's title for cultural pluralism, "not only represents a multiplicity of ways of perceiving and comprehending the world but also a multiplicity of plausibility structures that make those perceptions credible in the first place." As a result "God is simply less obvious than he once was, and for most no longer obvious at all—quite the opposite."

Dissolution, "the deconstruction of the most basic assumptions about reality," not only among intellectual elites but also in large areas of popular culture, presents a less visible but even more threatening challenge. "The modern world," Hunter observes, "by its very nature questions if not negates the trust that connects human discourse and the 'reality' of the world." Negation of this trust undercuts the reliability of language as a means of communication and promotes development of a kind of cultural nihilism.

Hunter offers a fourth paradigm, based on what he calls a "theology of faithful presence"—in a way more modest because it is less overtly political, but also more fundamental because it seeks to "go to the core of what it means to be a Christian in the first place."

Central to the theology of faithful presence is the incarnation of Jesus. "For the Christian," Hunter writes, "if there is a possibility for human flourishing in a world such as ours, it begins when God's world becomes flesh within us." The incarnation responds to dissolution by restoring the trust between word and world. And acceptance of the incarnation of the Word in Jesus Christ and the purposes to which it was directed provide "the only adequate reply to the challenge of difference."

God's faithful presence through the incarnation calls on Christians to be fully present to each other within the community of faith and fully present to those outside the church; to be fully present in their practical tasks and responsibilities; and fully present in their spheres of social influence including families, neighborhoods, voluntary activities, and places of work.

Hunter provides numerous examples of actual instances in which realizations of God's faithful presence are already being applied through innovative practices of aid and service by Christians in a wide variety

of walks of life. He calls on the churches to provide networks of leadership through which such practices can be generalized and more widely employed.

Will Hunter's fourth paradigm be more successful at restoring Christian unity and confidence than the other three have recently been doing? Possibly not—the challenges that he correctly describes are of course enormous. His doctrine of faithful presence is essentially a restatement of traditional broad Protestant theology. At times he seems eager to light up the sky while at the same time professing modesty. But by drawing on impressive knowledge of the Bible, theology, and religious history, refined through lucid reason and mature Christian passion, he at least provides a structure of ideas that should help brighten the way for fellow journeyers.

As he writes in the last sentence of his book: "Christians, at their best, will neither create a perfect world nor one that is altogether new; but by enacting shalom and seeking it on behalf of all others through the practice of faithful presence, it is possible, just possible, that they will help make the world a little bit better"—not exactly changing the world but a worthy and practical aspiration.

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