

How to Change the Culture
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If you could solve one problem in America today, what would it be? A well-known social researcher asked a large number of Americans that question. Their #1 answer was, "restoring national economic stability." But tying for #1, ahead of "preventing terrorism" and "curing cancer," was "restoring values and morality to society."¹

Do you agree? How can we make a difference in a culture that is moving so quickly from biblical morality?

To Change the World

James Davison Hunter's magnum opus is titled *To Change the World*.² This University of Virginia sociology professor founded the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. He may be the most profound Christian voice on culture change in America today.

How does Dr. Hunter think culture is changed? He begins with ways it is not.

Culture does not change by winning elections.

It is important for Christians to be engaged in public service. In fact, I am convinced that God is calling more Christians into public service than are answering his call. But electing Christians to office is not enough to change the culture by itself.

For instance, during the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and the first George Bush, divorce rates escalated. Gay marriage made significant inroads in American culture during the presidency of the second George Bush. Neither was their fault, of course, but both illustrate the fact that winning elections is not sufficient.

Culture does not change by evangelism and church attendance.

More than 80 percent of Americans are identified with some faith community, yet our culture is intensely secularistic and materialistic. By contrast, the Jewish community has never comprised more than 3.5 percent of our population, yet its contributions to science,

¹ Frank I. Luntz, *What Americans Really Want . . . Really* (New York: Hyperion, 2009), 288.

² James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

literature, art, music, film and architecture have been remarkable. At least 180 Jews have been awarded the Nobel Prize, constituting 36 percent of all American recipients.

Culture does not change by popularity.

While more evangelical books are being sold than ever before, they primarily target the faith community and exist out of the cultural mainstream. Few are ever reviewed by *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal*. People have heard of Rick Warren and Joel Osteen, but we cannot claim that our culture has been changed by their popularity.

How does a culture change? Here is the matrix, according to Dr. Hunter. For knowledge:

Theoretical

- Academic think tanks
- Elite research universities
- Elite opinion magazines and journals
- Elite and first tier university publishers



High-end educational

- First- and second-tier colleges
- High-end journalism
- Seminaries and divinity schools
- Elite private schools



Practical / everyday

- Journalism (print and electronic)
- The Internet
- Mass-market book publishing
- Churches, synagogues, and teaching ministries
- Public education
- Christian schools

For morality:

Abstract

- Academic philosophy and moral psychology
- Law schools and schools of public policy



Activist

- Public policy think tanks
- Special interest groups
- Innovative churches, synagogues and faith-based ministries of mercy
- Moral education activism



Grass Roots

- Local activist organizations
- School boards
- "How to" publishing
- Youth organizations and ministries
- Faith-based ministries of mercy
- Moral education

For aesthetics:

High Brow

- Visual arts
- Literature and poetry
- Classical and orchestral music
- Theater and dance
- Museums



Upper Middle Brow

- Public television
- Public museums
- Film
- Jazz and specialty music
- High-end advertising agencies



Low Brow

- Prime-time television
- Mass market movies
- Popular music
- Mass advertising agencies
- Cable television
- Mass circulation magazines

What are we to do to influence change in these cultural areas? Manifest "faithful presence" where we are, with those we influence, and seek to develop leaders at places of the greatest effective influence in our culture.

Applying Hunter to ministry

It seems to me that three applications of Hunter's brilliant thesis are especially relevant for pastors and vocational ministry today.

One: Be encouraged.

Pastors are the key spiritual influencers in the lives of their congregations. Think about those who made the greatest impact on your life and faith. How many of them were your pastors and other staff ministers? I was led to faith by my pastor's wife and mentored by my youth minister. College and seminary professors were critical to my faith and ministry. The influence God has entrusted to you is making a greater difference than you can measure. As Alfred North Whitehead noted, great people plant trees they'll never sit under.

Two: Equip your influencers.

God has entrusted to your ministry men and women of cultural influence. Identify them and find ways to equip and encourage them. Help them discover and use their spiritual gifts. Lead them to see their work and social status as their ministry to their "Jerusalem" and larger world. Just as Jesus spent three years discipling twelve men, so you are called to disciple those whose influence is touching the world.

Three: Never give up.

We cannot easily measure culture change. Attitudes change slowly and often imperceptibly. Jesus likened us to salt and light (Matthew 5:13–16)—both must disappear to do their jobs. We are called to measure success by obedience. So long as you are

faithful to your calling, you are a Kingdom success. We cannot measure the eternal significance of present faithfulness.

Conclusion

Changed people change the world. Use your influence for the Kingdom of God, praying for those in other spheres of influence. Ask God to make you his faithful presence where he has placed you. See every person you meet today as a subject for ministry, every problem and opportunity and temptation as a way to serve your King.

And step by step, day by day, as we serve our Father with faith and joy, he uses us to change our world.