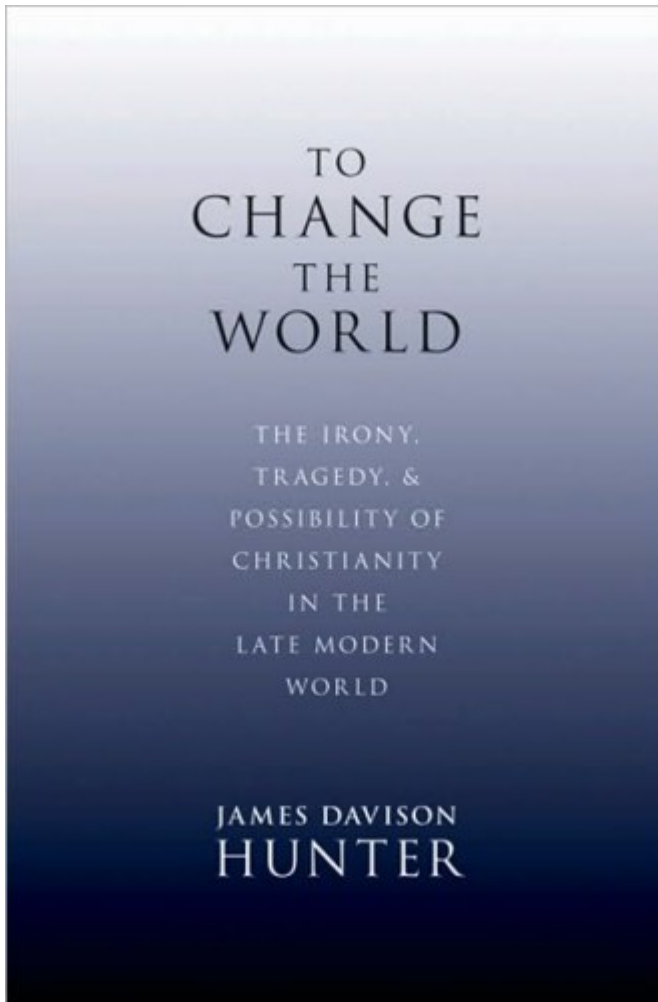


Back to the mainline

By [David Heim](#)

November 2, 2010

In Review



To Change the World

By James Davison Hunter

Oxford University Press

If you had asked the pastor of the mainline church I grew up in how his congregation was addressing public issues like poverty, health or education, he would have pointed to a few church-sponsored programs (like a child-care center and a Meals on Wheels program) but he would also have named church members who were doctors, civil servants and public school teachers. As he saw it, the church was making a powerful public witness through the faithful presence of these Christians--doctors who went the extra mile for their patients, government workers who were diligent and fair, and teachers who had a special heart for the disadvantaged. The importance of living out one's faith in one's vocation was a theme of virtually every sermon I heard.

There was nothing special about my pastor's perspective. He was expressing the mainline Protestant style of public witness (with lots of parallels in the Catholic tradition). Call it a tradition of civic engagement: Christians are called to work within their community and within their secular jobs to make the world a bit more just, loving and hopeful. We don't expect to transform the world, but we can offer the light of Christ here and there.

That tradition has never gone away. It has always been the dominant mode of public witness for mainliners. (See, for example, Mark Chaves's [account](#) of mainliners as "the quiet hand of God" [pdf].)

It is strange, then, to see sociologist James Davison Hunter write a whole book, *To Change the World*, that recommends this approach as if it were something new or one that has to be re-invented. Hunter recommends the "faithful presence" model as an alternative to the politicized attempts by Christians to change the world that have been offered by liberals and conservatives, as well as an alternative to the avoid-the-world response offered by neo-Anabaptists.

In [his review](#) in the *Century*, Duane K.

Friesen rightly notes that Hunter's three-part typology--in which there are Jim Wallis liberals, Christian Coalition conservatives, and Ekklesia Project

neo-Anabaptists--leaves out a lot of Christians and is downright inaccurate in some respects. (For example, if you've actually read Hauerwas or studied the Ekklesia Project, Hunter's primary examples of neo-Anabaptists, you would know they are not about being apolitical or remaining "pure from" the world.)

"The public witness of the church today has become a political witness," Hunter declares, with deep regret. Perhaps he has spent too much time listening to the culture wars rhetoric on the religious right. He is not describing most really existing congregations, at least not the mainline ones I know.