

## **How do we avoid being 'Cooked in the Culture'?**

It is not often that social science and theology meet in ways that are vibrant, well written and intellectually imaginative. James Davison Hunter's book, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*, is a well crafted insightful reflection on the question how we live Christianly in the culture and society.

### **Two Scripts**

On the one hand, believers have been given a script by God to seek shalom, the wellbeing of the wider society. On the other hand, we have been given a script by contemporary culture and by our employers. The two scripts may overlap. After all, God's creation initiative is filled with affirmation ("it was good"). Our creative mandate is to be involved in this world in which people of all faiths-and-none hold standards of goodness, truth, justice, and beauty. Working with our gifting in media gives us plenty of opportunity to affirm such gifts and shape things for the good.

However, the two scripts also clash at times. For example, the late modern emphasis on entertainment contributes to the trivializing of things. The speed by which news travels following the digital revolution may compromise depth of reflection and considerate research. Organizations have an in-house culture, an implied script that outlines values and expected behavior. We may work in a subculture that prefers controversy over balance; profit at the cost of integrity; 'truth' without grace, or considers long-working hours a sign of commitment.

### **Are we assimilated?**

The danger is that unwittingly we are 'cooked in the culture'; we assimilate uncritically to the dominant way of life. Our life and work develop facets that compromise our vocation to seek the wellbeing of others and honor God. Career prospects, business considerations, desire for reputation, time pressures, the lure of opportunities or the threat of cuts may all work against our capacity to influence and serve the common good.

### **A Faithful Presence**

Assimilation prevents us from giving a rigorous critique and living out a creative alternative. Hunter proposes 'a new city commons', a commitment to the highest ideals and practices of human flourishing in a pluralistic world in which we are to live toward the wellbeing of others. He sketches a form of 'faithful presence' within culture and society.

While his discussion concerns a sharp analysis of the current ineffective ways Christians engage, particularly in politics, his carefully crafted alternative course for engagement translates well to all vocations. His wide-ranging examples range from vocations in healthcare, business, arts, housing education, IT, and service at the grocery check-out. These vignettes of the practice of 'faithful presence' are inspiring.

The computer geeks whose company's profit established a film and culture renewal fund in order to invest in projects that foster human flourishing; students who produce one of the most popular magazines of film and culture; a business that restructured around the concept of mentoring, focusing equally on profession and production; and more.

### **Better Together**

The alternative models also highlight the value of vocational networks and the new institutions created out of the network. For charisma and its cultural consequences exist within networks of similarly oriented people. This emphasis on community itself contains a rigorous critique of culture. While there is much to affirm in this world, the Church is meant to be a community of resistance. In every sphere (media, enterprise, education etc.), we are meant to challenge structures that dishonor God, dehumanize people and neglect the creation, and offer a constructive subversion of the frameworks of social life. As such, our faithful presence needs to extend into institutions of which we are part.

### **Constructive Subversion**

Hunter beautifully shows that subversion is creative and constructive. As Jesus, in obedience to the Father, manifested the power to bless, unburden, serve, heal, mend, restore, and liberate, so also are we called in our home, work and community life to seek the good of all. I further quote, "For Christian believers, the call to faithfulness is a call to live in fellowship and integrity with the person and witness of Jesus Christ. There is a timeless character to this call that evokes qualities of life and spirit that are recognizable throughout history and across cultural boundaries". Yet, to serve God in a particular time and place, suggests that faithfulness works itself out in the multifaceted realities of actual situations, amidst complex, social, political, economic, and cultural forces.

Reading his insightful challenges and inspiring suggestions for a new departure is food for the mind and soul. It leaves me pondering how I change in its light. And it fuels my curiosity about the possible cumulative effect of a faithful Christian presence on our culture. It is good to have our imagination challenged and horizons lifted.

Shalom.

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