

**To Change the World**  
by James Davison Hunter  
Oxford University Press

Reviewed by Travis Vaughn

In recent years, Christian leaders and strategists have speculated a great deal on the subject of “transforming the culture” or “reaching the city.” James Davison Hunter offers an alternative to the current debate in his well-

researched book *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*.

While the title might suggest another “how-to” book written for those who want to influence or change their world, Hunter in fact proposes that “changing” or “transforming” the world and “reclaiming” or “reforming” the culture is the very language that needs to be removed from the conversation.

A professor of religion, culture, and social theory at the University of Virginia, Hunter demonstrates his academic acumen as he suggests that commonly held views of culture and ways to change the culture—on the part of both conservative and progressive Christians—are “almost wholly mistaken.” He argues for a better way forward—“faithful presence.”

Hunter describes seven propositions on culture and four on cultural change. In his view, cultural change happens from the top down, is driven by elites, is more about networks than individual efforts, and happens “rarely if ever without a fight.”

According to the author, cultural change occurs when “networks of elites in overlapping fields of culture and overlapping spheres of social life come together with their varied resources and act in common purpose.” With this perspective, Hunter seems to affirm current research suggesting that cities flourish when people collaborate from multiple sectors of society.

Taking a critical look at the Christian Right, the Christian Left, and even neo-Anabaptists in their posture toward the surrounding culture, Hunter argues that the influence these groups have sought to wield is undermined by the very methodology they have used in the process. With a propensity toward political posturing and pre-critical attempts to shape the world through power, Christians, he believes, have marginalized their witness and damaged their credibility.

Admittedly painting with a broad brush, Hunter describes how Christians in America have engaged the culture in one of three ways: “defensive against,” “relevance to,” and “purity from.” Hunter believes that even emerging evangelical attempts to engage culture (in the “relevance to” posture toward society) wrestle with the problem of marketing and drawing conversations around “celebrity Christian and non-Christian leaders,” ultimately offering “little for the confusion of the times.”

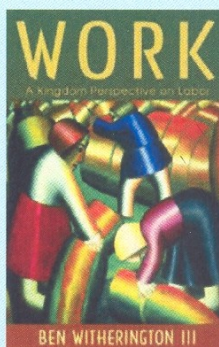
If readers seek more application of “faithful presence” than what is ultimately proposed by Hunter, they might find it helpful to pay close attention to his focus on Jesus and “social” power in the chapter titled “Rethinking Power: Theological Reflections.”

Here he draws stark contrast between the “power” modeled by Jesus and the “taking back” of culture, often sought through political and social reform, by both conservative and progressive Christians.

Hunter makes a convincing case for the pursuit of shalom—the kind of goal that benefits not only believers but humanity in general. To help the reader apply “faithful presence” in practical ways, he offers a series of illustrations that depict Christians embodying the rule of God in their lives through business, nonprofit ventures, or other innovative ways that serve the common good.

The book ultimately leaves the reader with hope and a paradigm which might “help to make the world a little bit better.” For those who want to develop a better grasp and command of a more critically informed perspective of the church and culture, I highly recommend it.

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**Work**  
by Ben Witherington III  
Eerdmans

Reviewed by Amy L. Sherman

It’s amazing—and tragic—that work, an activity consuming roughly a third of the average layperson’s weekly time, is so seldom the focus of theological reflection. New Testament scholar Ben Witherington III reports that we rarely find the topic of work in biblical and systematic theology textbooks, despite the fact that God’s Word has “so much to say about work; past, present, and future.” Witherington’s new book, *Work: A Kingdom Perspective on Labor*, seeks to help fill the void.

The book offers a helpful corrective to mistaken notions about work that are driven by popular culture but to which Christians are sometimes vulnerable. For example, Witherington reminds believers to eschew both the temptation to identify ourselves by our work and the workaholicism prevalent in many circles. He also reminds us that “our American theology of retirement has no real biblical basis, and it leads to despair and longing and a sense of abandonment on the part of those who have been set off in a corner of society and told to hush.”

He urges readers to resist evaluating their work solely on its market value, since American financial remuneration may bear little correspondence to a particular job’s worth in God’s eyes. And against media images of employees getting away with doing as little hard work as possible, Witherington reminds Christians of the Wisdom literature’s lengthy warnings against the sluggish and the sloth.

Witherington’s text covers a number of basics: that work



is not a curse; that there's no sacred/secular divide; that vocation and profession may or may not overlap. The book's more interesting sections are those where he muses on the ramifications of the gospel for our daily work. He writes early on that he wants to examine "how work looks different, in the light of kingdom come." Here, though, he offers just tasty tapas—savory bites but ones that leave us hungering for more, and especially for real-life stories of Christians at work that could illustrate how this theology gets fleshed out.

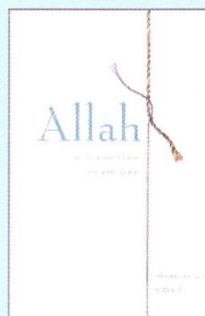
He does present a very helpful, Christian definition of work: "any necessary and meaningful task that God calls and gifts a person to do and which can be undertaken to the glory of God and for the edification and aid of human beings, being inspired by the Spirit and foreshadowing the realities of the new creation." He also offers a good assessment question for evaluating different jobs: "We must be constantly asking, Is this work that foreshadows the kingdom and its ends and aims and character?" And he devotes an entire chapter recapitulating Andy Crouch's important book, *Culture Making*, emphasizing that work, from a gospel perspective, means participating in the culture making (and remaking) of Jesus' renewal mission.

Though Witherington doesn't present evidence of how this theology of work can be enacted, I know it's possible. For I've had the privilege of meeting a number of Christians who are living it out. Jill, for instance, is a young architect who lives out vocational stewardship by designing sustainable, "green" buildings—because she wanted her work to foreshadow the kingdom's character. As mayor of his small but ethnically diverse village in Illinois, Don emphasizes the value of unity by facilitating neighborhood block parties and sponsoring "CommUNITY" dinners. Jessie deploys her artistic gifts to bring healing to folks in nursing homes, and Bruce, a manager in a large insurance firm, promoted justice by fighting discrimination against women and minorities.

These thoughtful, creative believers demonstrate the power of grasping what the in-breaking of Jesus' kingdom really means, right now, in the 9-5 workaday world. Books like Witherington's provide some of the needed fodder for producing even more Christ-followers like them.

*Dr. Amy L. Sherman directs the Center on Faith in Communities at the Sagamore Institute. Her newest book is Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good (to be released this December from IVP).*

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**Allah**  
by Miroslav Volf  
HarperOne

Reviewed by Mae Elise Cannon

"When the idol of religion is smashed and god is acknowledged as God, the world appears as a unity and the search for the common good can begin," Miroslav Volf asserts in his new book, *Allah: A Christian*

*Response*. Volf, theology professor at Yale Divinity School, seeks to determine a "proper Christian stance toward the God of the Qur'an and what that stance means for Christians' and Muslims' ability to live together well" in the modern world. Allah is simply the Arabic term for "God" which Arab Jews and Arab Christians have used in worship for millennia. Volf's goal is to bridge the chasm between Christians and Muslims by asserting (while providing evidence) that Muslims and Christians share the same God and the primary commandments to love God and neighbor.

In this four-part apologetic, Volf offers a comparative analysis of Christianity and Islam. Part I sets the stage with historical and contemporary arguments about the nature of Islam and Christianity and the God they worship by providing case studies of 15th-century Catholic Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa and 16th-century Protestant Reformation theologian Martin Luther. Part II wrestles with the Muslim affirmation of the God of Islam and Christianity as "one and the same." Volf takes issue with the assertion of some Muslims that Christian teachings about the Trinity "seriously compromise the most important characteristic of God, God's oneness."

In Part III, Volf wrestles with how Islamic notions of a loving God relate to perceptions and public discourse about violence in Islam. While differences exist between Muslim and Christian faith and practice, Volf provides compelling substantiation for many shared assertions: God loves; God is just; God's love encompasses God's justice; human beings should love their neighbors as themselves. Part IV shows how these commonalities can help Muslims and Christians work together for the common good: "Muslims and Christians have a common God and partly overlapping understandings of God and God's commands—above all that God is one and that God is benevolent and commands us to love God with our whole being and our neighbor as ourselves." Christians and Muslims must seek a "common code of conduct" as each pursues purpose and mission in light of their worship of a "common God."

While complex in subject matter, *Allah* is a welcome and necessary theological treatise written in a remarkably accessible style. Volf challenges Christians to overcome prejudices and enter into a deeper understanding of Islamic beliefs and traditions. He maintains Christianity as distinctive, particularly because "God manifests unutterable love toward humanity in Jesus Christ." Nonetheless, Volf provides "a solid foundation for Christians and Muslims to engage with one another in fruitful public debate