

To Change the World and the Christian College

P.C. Kemeny Ph.D.

Introduction

American Christians often harbor rather lofty aspirations to change the world for the better. For example, the stated purpose of the Focus on the Family Institute is “to equip today’s student leaders to impact culture for Christ.” The Presbyterian Church U.S.A. declares that its goal is “renewing the church to transform the world.” In his groundbreaking work, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*, James Davison Hunter analyzes the ways that conservative, moderate, and progressive Christian organizations attempt to improve American culture. His analysis leads to a startling conclusion: American Christians aspire to change the world based on both “specious social science and problematic theology.”¹

Hunter presents more than an unsettling critique. He also offers an alternative theory of social change and a biblical rationale for constructively engaging the world, which he describes as a theology of faithful presence. When ancient Israel was in exile in Babylon, God told them to “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” In Hunter’s theology of faithful presence, believers will likewise pursue the “highest ideals and practices of human flourishing.”² This paper will summarize Hunter’s analysis and then briefly explore the implications of his theology of faithful presence for the Christian college’s curriculum.

¹ James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4-5.

² Jeremiah 29:7.

The Conventional Perspective of Changing the World

Hunter explains that the conventional American perspective on cultural change pivots upon critical assumptions about the nature of culture. The common view assumes that the essence of culture is found in the values of individuals. Values are moral preferences or conscious attachments to what is good, right, and true. A “worldview” is the collection of these values regarding a variety of foundational questions regarding how the world works. Culture is manifested in the various ways that values guide the decisions people make about how to live. In other words, they shape how people spend their time and how they live. Hunter cites Charles Colson’s discussion of worldview to illustrate this point. According to Colson, a worldview is “the sum total of our beliefs about the world, the ‘big picture’ that directs our daily decisions and actions [It] is a way of seeing and comprehending all reality.” By this definition, a worldview only exists in the hearts, imaginations, and minds of individuals. The nature of culture is dependent upon the nature of people’s values. For example, if a culture is decadent, it is because people maintain the wrong values, and therefore, make immoral choices. To change the world, Colson reasons, Christians have to cultivate a Christian worldview and then unleash its influence upon America.³

According to Hunter, this view of culture inspires American Christians to employ three key tactics to produce cultural change: evangelism, politics, and social reform. Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, explains how evangelism changes society: “In my opinion, the only way to change the world is to change individuals. Changed people, in sufficient numbers, will produce changed campuses, changed communities, changed cities, changed states

³ Hunter, *Change the World*, 6-9.

and nations—yes, in a very real sense, a changed world.”⁴ Only by converting people’s values will they be able to make the correct choices and influence cultural change.

The emphasis upon values, choices, and spiritual renewal, Hunter observes, also predisposes American Christians to look to politics as the central means of changing the world. “It is not an exaggeration to say,” Hunter writes, “that the dominant public witness of the Christian churches in America since the early 1980s has been a political witness.” Conservative Protestants have turned to politics to mobilize popular support for policies and laws compatible with their interpretation of the Christian faith. James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, explains why conservative Protestants favor politics: “The side that wins gains the right to teach what it believes to its children. And if you can do that, you write the curricula, you tell what to believe and you model what you want them to understand and in one generation, you change the whole culture.” If Christians vote into office representatives who have the right worldview, then politicians can then make the correct choices and consequently remake culture.⁵

The final tactic American Christians employ to achieve cultural change is social reform. Led by citizens and community leaders, voluntary reform movements, such as the fatherhood movement or the marriage movement, address particular problems within the family, schools, neighborhoods, and civic associations.⁶

These three tactics share the same critical assumption: Cultures change when people change and change occurs from the bottom up. While admirable in many ways, Hunter concludes that this conventional American Christian account of how cultures change is “almost wholly mistaken.”⁷

⁴ Hunter, *Change the World*, 9-11, quote on 10.

⁵ Hunter, *Change the World*, 11-14, quote on 13.

⁶ Hunter, *Change the World*, 14-15.

⁷ Hunter, *Change the World*, 5-17, quote on 17.

The Problem with the Conventional Perspective

Evangelism, politics, or social reform, Hunter argues, do not produce long-term cultural change. Hunter certainly does not dismiss the benefit of these three tactics but sees ultimately them as ineffective for achieving long-term culture change. If Christians comprise a majority of the American population, why then, are the business culture, law and government, higher education, and popular entertainment so radically materialistic and secular? The American Jewish community, which comprises some 3.5 percent of the population, has had a lasting impact on science, literature, art, music, and letters that is disproportionate to its size. If culture were just a matter of changing hearts and minds, then the influence of such a minority should be relatively insignificant.⁸ Advocates of the prevailing strategies for cultural change typically complain that Christians do not have more influence over American culture. The actual problem, Hunter insists, is that the conventional theory of culture and cultural change is rooted in the philosophical tradition of idealism. Idealism, as Hunter defines it, is “a principle and tradition in metaphysics that maintains that something ‘ideal’ or nonphysical is the primary reality.” The idealist tradition has exerted a profound influence over American Christians. Charles Colson provides a telling example of this point when he writes: “The culture war is not just about abortion, homosexual rights, or the decline of public education. These are only skirmishes. The real war is a cosmic struggle between worldviews—between the Christian worldview and the various secular and spiritual worldviews arrayed against it.” The material world is not unimportant, but what has greater significance and priority over nature are ideas and it is ideas which move history.⁹

⁸ Hunter, *Change the World*, 18-22.

⁹ Hunter, *Change the World*, 22-25, quote on 25.

While not dismissing the importance of values or ideas, Hunter argues that embedded in such idealism are several faulty notions about culture and cultural change. First, idealism underestimates the importance of history and the significance of historical forces and their interaction with culture. In other words, idealism makes people ignore the role that sociological forces play in shaping culture. Moreover, idealism overlooks the way that culture is created, coordinated, and systematized. Consequently, idealism undervalues how difficult it is to penetrate culture and influence its direction. Finally, idealism attributes a logic and rationality to culture where such linearity and rationality does not actually exist. One of the great virtues of the worldview perspective is that it rejects a “dualism” or a division between the secular and the sacred, the public and private, and the objective and subjective. Ironically, the worldview perspective also manifests the very dualism that its proponents are trying to challenge. According to Hunter, the critical problem of this perspective is that culture is more than a worldview and changing a culture entails more than merely adopting new values and mobilizing political support.¹⁰

Hunter’s Theory of Cultural Change

Hunter proposes an alternative approach to culture and cultural change. His theory can be summarized in eleven propositions; the first seven have to do with culture itself and the final four with cultural change: (1) Culture is a system of truth claims and moral obligations; (2) culture is a product of history; (3) culture is intrinsically dialectical; (4) culture is a resource and, as such, a form of power; (5) cultural production and symbolic capital are stratified in a fairly rigid structure of “center” and “periphery;” (6) culture is generated within networks; (7) culture is neither autonomous nor fully coherent; (8) cultures change from the top down, rarely, if ever, from the bottom up; (9) change is typically initiated by elites who are outside of the centermost

¹⁰ Hunter, *Change the World*, 26-31, quote on 27.

positions of prestige; (10) world-changing is most concentrated when the networks of elites and the institutions they lead overlap; (11) cultures change, but rarely without a fight.

A brief explanation of several of these propositions highlights the key features of Hunter's alternative theory. Proposition four—culture is a resource, and as such, a form of power—envisions culture as a form of capital. If one thinks of culture institutionally and organizationally, Hunter contends, it allows one to think of symbols as a resource. Symbols take on a variety of forms, including ideas, information, news, and knowledge. These, in turn, are expressed in speeches, essays, books, film, art, law, etc. Moreover, knowledge, credentials, and cultural accomplishments are also a form of capital. As such, Hunter asserts, the cultural meaning imputed to such things can be understood as symbolic capital. Unlike money, symbolic capital cannot be easily transferred from one generation to the next, but it can be accumulated. Some people, institutions, and objects have more symbolic capital than others. For example, a Yale degree has greater symbolic capital than a Bob Jones University degree. Like money, accumulated symbolic capital translates into power and influence.¹¹

In proposition six—culture is generated within networks—Hunter contends that culture is not manufactured by individuals but rather by institutions and the elites who lead them. Here, Hunter debunks the “great man” view of history where heroic individuals have shaped the future of civilization. Instead, he argues that individuals work within networks. The new institutions these networks generate actually produce cultural change. Hunter cites the work of John Calvin, William Wilberforce, and Martin Luther King, Jr. as leaders whose charisma and genius worked within institutional networks that shared their convictions, financed their efforts, and did so at great political and social risk.¹²

¹¹ Hunter, *Change the World*, 35-36.

¹² Hunter, *Change the World*, 37-38.

According to Hunter's fifth proposition, cultural production and symbolic capital are stratified in a fairly rigid structure of "center" and "periphery." The individuals, networks, and institutions most critically involved in the production of a culture operate at the "center" of a culture where prestige is the highest. By contrast, those on the periphery have low status. To illustrate his point, Hunter notes that one can sell one hundred thousand copies of a book published by IVP (Intervarsity Press) and only 5,000 copies of a book published by Knopf, but it's the latter work which will be reviewed in the *New York Review of Books*, and thus, have more influence. Knopf stands at the center of culture and IVP at its periphery.¹³

Culture change, Hunter asserts in proposition eight, occurs from the top down and rarely from the bottom up. While some economic revolts and social movements occur from the bottom up, the deepest and most enduring forms of change occur from the top down when the elite cultural gatekeepers provide creative direction within the leading institutions of social life. In other words, elites operating in well developed networks and critical institutions have a disproportionate amount of influence; however, it is not the "inner" elites who inhabit the inner sanctums of the key culture-shaping institutions that change culture. Instead, it is the "outer" elites operating on the inside edges of the key culture-shaping institutions who generate new ideas and then inspire researchers who explore these ideas and pass this knowledge on to teachers who popularize those ideas.¹⁴

Since the University of Chicago English professor Richard Weaver published his book *Ideas Have Consequences* in 1948, conservatives have liked to say that ideas have social ramifications. According to Hunter, ideas do have consequences but not because those ideas are inherently truthful; rather "because of the way they are embedded in very powerful institutions,

¹³ Hunter, *Change the World*, 36-37.

¹⁴ Hunter, *Change the World*, 41-42.

networks, interests, and symbols.” Ideas only have consequences, Hunter argues, when a fundamental restructuring of the institutions of cultural formation and transmission in society, including the market, government-sponsored cultural institutions, education, entertainment, and the church are changed.¹⁵

History, Hunter argues, demonstrates the accuracy of view of culture and cultural change. Hunter points to the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation as one example of how the growing desire for spiritual purity and theological precision succeeded because of cultural factors. Before Luther penned his ninety-five theses in 1517, others attempted religious reform, but their efforts failed. According to Hunter, several key features of the social, political, and economic landscape helped the sixteenth-century effort succeed. At its heart, the Reformation was an intellectual and moral revolution that was led by scholars who had been profoundly influenced by the Christian humanism which had gained popularity among academics. Although Luther and Calvin are rightly credited with inspiring the reform movement, it was perpetuated by a host of network theologians, professors, and students who taught in universities as well as new-found “academies” that had sprung up to disseminate the new Protestant beliefs. Prominent leaders, such as Luther, were surrounded by networks of like-minded theologians and preachers who further popularized his ideas. As universities and academies became centers of international activity, they helped spread Protestant beliefs across Europe, especially as political dissenters, exiled from their Catholic homelands, found refuge in Protestant cities. International connections grew as theologians, clerics, students, merchants, diplomats, and other social leaders developed networks of personal contacts in growing urban centers. Moreover, new technologies, especially the printing press, upset the Catholic Church’s monopoly on knowledge. Consequently, Protestant ideas spread as sermons, tracts, pamphlets, commentaries, and Bibles were published

¹⁵ Hunter, *Change the World*, 44-47, quotes on 44, 45.

at an untold rate of productivity. Not only did the emerging commercial elite support the Reformation, but regional political leaders protected Protestant dissenters and negotiated treaties, such as the Edict of Nantes, to protect them. Protestant communities thrived because they enjoyed the legal, political, and military protection of the local nobility. The emergence of a Protestant elite that was not bound to the Catholic network drew upon the wealth of resources—intellectual, administrative, financial, and political—to make common cause. The historical record demonstrates that change in a culture occurs when networks of leaders and new institutions work together to give voice to a new vision of civilization that challenges the status structure at the center of cultural life.¹⁶

Having laid out his alternative theory of culture and cultural change, Hunter then explores in detail the three most prominent American Christian approaches to culture change: the Religious Right, the Religious Left, and the radical Anabaptists. Hunter describes the first two groups as functioning Nietzscheans because they aspire to wield power and use *ressentiment*, or the narrative of injury, to marshal political support for their political agendas. In actuality, their tactics actually hasten the demise of culture which they so vehemently denounce. The Religious Right complain about secularists ruining American values. The Republican Party uses the Religious Right to mobilize support for its candidates. The Religious Left decries economic injustices and attacks the Religious Right as a threat to liberty. The Democratic Party finds the Religious Left useful agents in cultivating support for its political causes. The radical Anabaptists retreat from the world and denounce any involvement in politics as another manifestation of the corruption of the church that can be traced all the way back to emperor

¹⁶ Hunter, *Change the World*, 48-78.

Constantine in the early fourth century. To Hunter, these prevailing American Christian solutions to changing the culture are illusory, ironic, and tragic.¹⁷

Theology of Faithful Presence

Having spelled out his sociological analysis, Hunter then turns to theology to offer a biblical rationale for his alternative vision of culture change. According to Hunter, Christians are called to lives of faithful presence within the complex cultural situations in which they find themselves. To Hunter, faithful presence is not some dreamy state of piety. Paul told believers in Acts 13:36 that they are called, like King David, to serve God’s purposes in their own generation. Today, Christians should do the same. Before outlining his theology of “faithful presence,” Hunter offers three preliminary comments to set the groundwork for his alternative.

Although critical of the American church, Hunter is still hopeful that it might cultivate a vision of formation that empowers it to fulfill the Great Commission which calls Christians to evangelize and engage in spiritual formation. Formation or the task of making disciples “is oriented toward the cultivation of faithfulness in the totality of life.”¹⁸

To make disciples who are capable of living faithfully means that Christians need to be part of a local church or a larger Christian community that embodies a vision of renewal and restoration in all areas of life. Hunter writes: “The vision of this community—the hope for which it longs and the ideals to which it strives—is the vision of shalom.” Until God ushers in the new heaven and new earth, God calls believers, both as individuals and as a community, to conform to Christ and practice the shalom of God. “Time and again,” Hunter contends, “St. Paul calls Christians to ‘shalom’ (I Cor. 7:15). *In this Christians are to live toward the well-being of others,*

¹⁷ Hunter, *Change the World*, 99-175.

¹⁸ Hunter, *Change the World*, 227.

not just those within the community of faith, but to all.”¹⁹ The Christian community should long for this shalom while still remaining in this world.

Being in the world inevitably involves tensions because of the fallen nature of this world. Consequently, Hunter observes, Christians face irresolvable conflicts. On the one hand, Christians, as I Peter puts it, are “aliens and strangers in the world” and also a “chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.” The beliefs, values, ideals, and institutions of the Christian community are distinct from the larger society in which they find themselves. On the other hand, I Peter instructs believers to “be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution.”²⁰ According to Hunter, this means that Christians should accommodate themselves to existing social reality and also call them into question by being different.²¹

According to Hunter, this contradiction—accommodating and being different—means that Christians should live in dialectical tension with the world. On the one hand, Christians should affirm the original goodness of creation. Affirmation, Hunter explains, “is based on the recognition that culture and culture-making have their own validity before God that is not nullified by the faith.” Here Hunter draws upon the Calvinist notion of common grace to unpack how and why Christians can (and should) recognize that people of every creed and no creed have talents, possess knowledge, hold standards of goodness, truth, and justice that are, in relative degree, in harmony with God’s purposes. The human activity of culture-making has validity before God and yet, Hunter insists, it is not redemptive or salvific in character. Consequently, Christians should not aspire to “take over” culture. When God’s rule is established in the hearts and minds of believers, in their daily lives, and in their spheres of influence, God is present and glorified. The Westminster Shorter Catechism states that believers are “to glorify God and enjoy

¹⁹ Hunter, *Change the World*, 227.

²⁰ I Peter 1:1, 2:11, 2:13-17.

²¹ Hunter, *Change the World*, 230-31.

Him forever.” Christians then should do good to honor God by not only profiting the Christian community but by benefitting the flourishing of all.²² But Christians should also recognize the impact of the fall upon culture. The antithesis does not require a stance that is negational, subversive, or simply nihilistic but rather creative and constructive.²³

Hunter’s theology of faithful presence is disarmingly simple and rooted in the biblical conviction that God’s faithfulness to the church calls believers to be faithfully present to Him in return. He identifies three ways in which Christians can practice the theology of faithful presence. First, believers should be fully present both to each other within the community of faith and to those outside of it. Christians should actively participate in the life of the church and extend God’s grace to those outside the community just as God did before believers came to faith.²⁴

Faithful presence also means that Christians should be fully committed to their tasks as an expression of their commitment to fulfilling the Cultural Mandate of Genesis 1. Paul writes it in Colossians 3:22-24, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.” As parents, students, volunteers, employees, and citizens, believers should labor in a way that honors God. According to Hunter, attending to tasks that benefit both believers and non-Christians, even if they do not have “ultimate significance” by worldly standards, is a critical way to glorify God and serve the common good.

Finally, Christians should be fully committed to the benevolent use of power in their various spheres of social influence. Recognizing the dialectical tension between affirmation and antithesis, faithful presence means engaging in constructive resistance against patterns of social

²² Hunter, *Change the World*, 231-34, quote on 234.

²³ Hunter, *Change the World*, 235.

²⁴ Matthew 25:34-50.

organization that lead to oppression, injustice, enmity, corruption, and working toward harmony, fruitfulness, wholeness, security and the like.²⁵ As he explains:

If, indeed, there is a hope or an imaginable prospect for human flourishing in the contemporary world, it begins when the Word of shalom becomes flesh in us and is enacted through us toward those with whom we live, in the tasks we are given, and in the spheres of influence in which we operate. When the Word of all flourishing—defined by the love of Christ—becomes flesh in us, in our relations with others, within the tasks we are given, and within our spheres of influence—absence gives way to presence, and the word we speak to each other and to the world becomes authentic and trustworthy. This is the heart of a theology of faithful presence.²⁶

As Christians work toward the shalom that seeks the welfare not only of believers but those outside the community of faith, they exercise influence that constructively engages the culture-shaping institutions of society.

Such a perspective will eschew the Constantinian temptation to conquer, take-over, or dominate American culture through political action. Instead, this post-Constantinian perspective engages the world in a way that “neither seeks domination nor defines identity and witness over against domination.” Turning the church into a Right Wing or Left Wing political organization makes the primary purpose of the church subservient to its secondary goals. Christianity is not primarily about establishing righteousness or creating good values, securing justice, or making peace. Although laudable goals about which the church should care, they are “secondary,”

²⁵ Hunter, *Change the World*, 243-48.

²⁶ Hunter, *Change the World*, 252.

Hunter writes, to “God himself and the primary good of God himself and the primary task of worshipping him and honoring him in all Christians do.”²⁷

Some Implications for the Christian College

If the Religious Right, Religious Left, and radical Anabaptists have faulty views of culture and culture change; if Hunter’s alternative theory of culture and culture change are more accurate; and his theology of faithful presence is thoroughly biblical, then his analysis has some important implications for the theology, curriculum, vocational preparation, and mission of a Christian college.

If culture is upstream from politics, as Hunter argues, then effective long-term culture change can only be achieved if the key culture-shaping institutions of a society operate in ways that are consonant with Christian ideals that promote the common good. Because principles such as justice, fidelity, and integrity, promote the common good, Christians, as well as believers of other faiths or those who profess no faith at all, can share in a commitment to promote them. According to Hunter’s theory, it is crucial that Christians find a place in the most elite centers of a culture in order to practice a faithful presence. Consequently, colleges are strategically located to train their graduates to pursue vocations that will prepare them to have a constructive influence in the most elite centers of law, medicine, science, the media, business, education, public policy, and religion. To find a place within these culture-shaping institutions, students need to pursue academic excellence. Few people get into a prestigious doctoral program or climb to a position as the CEO of a Fortune 500 company with a mediocre college record. It also means that the faculty need to model excellence for students both inside the classroom and in their own research. Pursuing excellence, however, is not equivalent to grubbing for high grades. It entails a genuine intellectual curiosity, a creative spirit, and a relentless work ethic that inspires students

²⁷ Hunter, *Change the World*, 279, 280, 286.

to learn as a way to glorify God and benefit one's neighbors. If long-term culture change can only be achieved as Christians practice a faithful presence in the key culture-shaping networks and elite institutions of society, then there simply is no shortcut.

Two qualifications are in order. First, while Christians should strive to earn a place in the elite culture-shaping institutions, not every Christian has the ability, and perhaps more importantly, the calling, to do so. While Hunter's discussion of elitism and cultural power might strike some as anti-egalitarian, it does not mean that those without a great deal of cultural capital cannot play a constructive role in Hunter's proposed model. If the chief end of the Christian is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever, wherever divine providence places someone is where he or she should seek to practice a faithful presence. Such a perspective does not denigrate those who labor on the margins of culture. It rather infuses every "job" as a vocation with genuine Christian meaning and value. Again, long-term culture change rarely takes place quickly. But as generations of Christians dutifully seek the flourishing of all—Christians and non-Christians alike—then they are having a positive impact upon culture.

Second, Hunter's discussion of culture change through the practice of faithful presence may sound Machiavellian to some. Hunter can be misread as suggesting that Christians infiltrate the key culture-shaping institutions of society in order to "take it over," the same way that the Christian Coalition ran stealth Christian candidates for school boards back in the 1990s in order to control public education in certain school districts. Hunter's proposal is different because he is not calling Christians to "reclaim" these institutions in a Constantinian sense. Instead, he recommends that Christians in these institutions work for the common good of society. Such a perspective means that Christians work for the flourishing of all, not just those who share their theology. This means that Christians cannot act like representatives for a labor organization who

are only interested in promoting justice for their members. To those outside of the church, such a vision of justice sounds very much like Christians are only interested in advancing what benefits themselves.

Even if they are not at the center of culture, Christian colleges still stand within the larger matrix of culture-shaping institutions. Consequently, they can play a vital role in culture change. One critical way they can accomplish this goal is by promoting a robust biblical theology, especially regarding the Cultural Mandate, the Great Commission, the doctrine of common grace, and the doctrine of sin. Most Christian students already have some familiarity with these beliefs albeit often in a scattered fashion. By improving their understanding of these basic biblical convictions, both inside the classroom and in the extracurricular life of the college, it will help students connect their personal story with the larger narrative of God's redemptive activity. This is different from suggesting that students must learn the language of academic theology, which is often totally disconnected from the Christian life of the average churchgoer. These few basic biblical truths, however, have the power to totally reshape how students envision their place at the college and their lives after graduation.

The Cultural Mandate is found in Genesis 1 and reads: "And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'"²⁸ Christians are called to live in relationship with God, praising and glorifying Him in every area of life. The Cultural Mandate calls humans to rule over creation as God's servants. For the Christian the Cultural Mandate means that all areas of life are sacred. Every academic major at a Christian college offers a way for Christians to glorify God. No matter what their major is, students are ultimately studying God, God's creatures, and God's creation. Such a

²⁸ Genesis 1:28.

perspective infuses the entire curriculum, not just Bible classes and chapel programs, but every class and every major with lasting and important spiritual meaning.

In addition to a well-rounded understanding of the Cultural Mandate, Christian college students should have a fuller understanding of the Great Commission of Matthew 28: to preach the gospel to all nations and to make disciples. The Great Commission does not abrogate the Cultural Mandate but rather gives it even greater significance by calling believers to fulfill the Cultural Mandate by making disciples and bringing all aspects of culture under God's rule. One way to do this is to pursue vocations that glorify God by benefitting all of humanity.²⁹

Finally, Christian college students should be equipped with a thoroughgoing understanding of the doctrines of common grace and sin. Common grace can be defined as "the grace of God by which he gives people innumerable blessings that are not part of salvation."³⁰ Common grace is different from saving grace in that it is not salvific. Common grace is manifested in a variety of different ways, including in the physical, intellectual, and social realms. Scripture itself speaks to the existence of common grace. Jesus said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust."³¹ Jesus acknowledges God's common grace as an encouragement to his disciples that they too should love and pray for God to bless unbelievers. In his speech on the Areopagus, Paul quoted the pagan poets Epimendes of Crete and the Stoic Aratus to make the point that the Athenians already had an intuitive sense of divinity even if they did not worship the true and

²⁹ William Edgar, *Truth in All Its Glory: Commending the Reformed Faith* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004), 138-9, 180, 248-50.

³⁰ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 657.

³¹ Matthew 5:44-45.

living God.³² This means that people can obtain truth not only in the Bible but also through the natural world. The sixteenth-century Protestant reformer John Calvin says that Christians should admire the “light of truth” that secular writers express. Although wholly fallen and perverted, Calvin writes that the mind of man nevertheless is “clothed and ornamented with God’s excellent gifts.” Calvin believes that the truths expressed in law, philosophy, rhetoric, medicine, and math should not be despised simply because it comes from non-Christians. Calvin argues that despite the fact that human nature was “despoiled of its true good” by the fall, the good that humans do is still a result of the gift of the Lord. Calvin says that God distributes the most excellent benefits of the divine Spirit to whomever he wills for the common good of mankind. Conclusions reached by studying nature, of course, are always open to revision. This notion of God’s common grace should provide Christians with unbridled enthusiasm for studying all of God’s creation. For all truth is God’s truth, or as Calvin puts it, the Spirit of God is the “sole fountain of truth.”³³

On the other hand, a Christian doctrine of sin recognizes that the effects of the fall are deep and pervasive. Just as sin has impacted all aspects of the human person, body and mind alike, so the fall had cosmic consequences on creation itself. In Romans 8, Paul writes,

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.³⁴

Consequently, Christians invariably face conflicts with the world. The Cultural Mandate of Genesis 1 is followed by the fall described in Genesis 2 with a description of the toilsome

³² Acts 17:22-33.

³³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. MacNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955), II.ii.15-16.

³⁴ Romans 8:9-15.

nature of labor in Genesis 3. This tension pervades every aspect of life. The challenge for Christians, as Paul puts it, is to “take every thought captive to obey Christ.”³⁵ The invariable conflict with the world should not paralyze Christians with fear but serve as a caution that fallen but redeemable culture exerts an influence upon Christians. Because there is hope to redeem culture, however, this caution should also give Christians reason to engage culture. “Taking captive” implies that Christians actually can constructively engage the world without themselves being taken captive by it.

Equipping students with the theological framework necessary for nurturing a sense of faithful presence does not call for a sweeping reconstruction of the Christian college curriculum. In many ways, the curriculum of the Christian college is already very well positioned to reach this goal. At Grove City College, the general education curriculum provides students with a sturdy and well-rounded liberal arts education in the fine arts, humanities, social sciences, mathematics, and natural sciences. Every major, moreover, is designed to prepare graduates for the workplace or additional education. Certain courses, nevertheless, might need certain revisions in light of Hunter’s theory of culture and culture change. For instance, HUMA 201, *Civilization and the Speculative Mind*, depends heavily upon James Sire’s *Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalogue*. By Hunter’s standards, this work promotes the kind of idealism that actually undermines cultural engagement. Strengthening this course would simply entail a survey of Hunter’s theory of culture and culture change and the addition of a couple of concrete historical case studies to illustrate how cultures actually change. The curriculum should also ensure that students have a broad understanding that the nature of public life in a liberal democracy such as ours involves more than just politics. Students should have a holistic understanding of what constitutes the common good and the limited role that politics can play in

³⁵ I Corinthians 10:5.

cultivating it. In those classes which deal with public values, public policy, and law, students need to be equipped with an understanding of how Christians can play a positive role in working for the common good in business, education, social life, and voluntary organizations, including the church, and the state.

Perhaps even more important is to promote a thoroughly Christian vision of vocation. Any job that is not explicitly forbidden by biblical standards and that promotes the common good can be a Christian vocation. This genuinely biblical understanding of vocation can free students from the burden that the only valuable profession to pursue is one in which they will have a monumental impact on the destiny of the world. Since few people actually achieve such significance, those lofty aspirations can become idols. The graduate in music education who excites students to learn to play instruments and to participate in a symphony not only enriches the lives of the young, but contributes to the flourishing of society by inspiring a lasting appreciation for music. The accounting major who dutifully keeps the books for a business enriches culture as he or she helps a corporation create wealth that enables its workers to take care of their families and benefits the development of society. Most graduates will find “regular” jobs, live in modest homes, pay their taxes, serve on local boards, coach their kids’ soccer teams, and teach Sunday School. While such pursuits might not have ultimate significance by the world’s standards, they are spiritually laudable goals for the Christian because acting locally is actually a way of pursuing a faithful presence that contributes to the well-being of the community and glorifies God. Such a perspective can also be liberating to students. They can pursue their academic interests with the confidence that they can use their skills to change their world without bearing the burden of feeling like they have to be the next Albert Einstein, Warren Buffet, or William Wilberforce to live meaningful lives. It will also undermine the “expressive

individualism,” as the sociologist Robert Bellah describes it, which is dividing our culture. Cultivating a more biblical understanding of what constitutes a Christian vocation can equip students to cultivate an enduring sense of how they might pursue a career that enables them to exercise a faithful presence in whatever field God calls them to serve. Every good endeavor, even the more simple ones, can be a way to serve God and make a lasting impression upon the world in response to God’s grace.³⁶

Such a vision of the role of the Christian college is in perfect keeping with the founding purposes of Grove City College. The College’s founder, Isaac Ketler, rejected the idea “that Colleges are to educate for specific purposes and the Common Schools [that is public high schools] for general purposes.” The distinction between common schools and colleges, he wrote, “should be swept away,” and colleges should be made accessible to anyone without “lowering the standard of a College education.” The College, moreover, should “carry forward the aim and tendency of the Common Schools,” he wrote. At its founding, the College not only offered a classical curriculum that led to the B.A. degree, but it also offered a Bachelor of Science degree. In addition, the College had a conservatory of music and continued to offer college preparatory courses that equipped students to teach in the public school system or to go on to a college. To meet the pressing needs of western Pennsylvania’s growing economy, the College added mechanical engineering, mining engineering, business, telegraphy, stenography, and typewriting programs during Ketler’s tenure. The curriculum, which prepared graduates to take up a variety of professions, illustrates the College’s commitment to serving the practical needs of the region. Ketler and his colleagues conceived this entire endeavor as central to the College’s Christian mission. When the College opened, trustees defined the institution as “a Christian but

³⁶ Timothy Keller, *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God’s Work* (New York: Dutton, 2012), 18, 29.

undenominational institution of learning.”³⁷ Mandatory chapel and Sunday services, as well as courses in moral philosophy (ethics), evidences of Christianity, and philosophy, played a critical role in the curriculum. The notion that serving the pressing educational needs of American culture and doing so as a Christian institution went hand-in-glove for the College’s founders. In fact, one could plausibly argue that equipping graduates to practice faithful presence would be fulfilling the College founders’ original vision.

³⁷ *Grove City College Catalogue, 1884-1885*, 5.