Semper Informanda: Prolegomenon

This is the second part of a two-part series in “Prolegomenon” by John Muether in which he discusses Dr. James Davison Hunter’s book “To Change the World.” Dr. Hunter will visit RTS Orlando on Nov. 3 as part of the annual “One School, One Book” program. There will be a reception, lecture, and book signing at 7 p.m. on Nov. 3 in the Chapel. Update: The Thursday morning event that was previously advertised has been cancelled.

The Liberation of Exile

Among the many reviews of James Hunter’s new book that I have encountered, my favorite is the most vitriolic of the lot. It is not the careless reading, persistent mistruths, or reckless conclusions that attract me to this review. No, it is simply the reviewer’s stark opening, which is in these words: “I don’t consider myself an exile, but I do consider myself a Christian. James Davison Hunter would say that’s impossible.” That is the only place in this diatribe that gets Hunter’s argument right, and it underscores the timeliness of the book’s message.

Hunter’s book may be read as a sustained sociological reflection on Jeremiah 29:7 and its consequences for the church today. (RTS readers may find frustration at the lack of exegesis in his argument, but remember, this is not a theological treatise.) At least since the publication of Hauerwas and Willimon’s surprising 1989 bestseller, Resident Aliens, American Christians have recovered, much to their advantage, a stronger sense of their identity as a wandering group of pilgrims and sojourners in this present world, even as they eagerly anticipate the next. Even such advocates of boisterous Christian participation in the public square as the late Richard John Neuhaus came to increasing appreciation of the metaphor of exile (witness the title of his last book: American Babylon).

And yet, Hunter’s exposure of aspirations of “resistance against” or “relevance to” or “purity from” social strategies reminds us that cultural reconstruction, hard or soft, dies hard in the evangelical imagination, not least among the Reformed. The reviewer cited above is among many American evangelicals who remain triumphalistic in their approach to culture. The burden they are putting on themselves is the futile task of converting Babylon into Jerusalem, and Hunter’s book illumines many reasons why this is so.

“Exile chic” is what our disgruntled reviewer accuses Hunter’s book of advancing. I prefer to see the liberation in our exile. The church does seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which God has called us in our diaspora. But we do so by living quiet lives of faithful presence. We have no ambition of turning our Babylon in Jerusalem. And thus the church is liberated to become a kingdom not of this world.

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