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Pro Rege

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I offer some reflections on the place of science in law today and on the way science is viewed in our legal system. I particularly want to focus on the various contemporary narratives about the proper use and role of science, in two contexts: (1) in the courtroom and (2) in the public policy debates in administrative agencies that regulate so many aspects of our lives. Many lawsuits involve or are decided on the basis of scientific knowledge wherein each side calls on scientific experts to deliver determinative science. Examples include claims against chemical companies or pharmaceutical manufacturers for producing allegedly dangerous products or litigation concerning workplace injuries arising from contact with harmful substances. In governmental agencies that protect human health, as in Environmental Protection Agency’s attempts to control or reduce air or water pollution, or the Food & Drug Administration’s decisions about which foods and drugs are safe, there is, on the one hand, a profound reliance on science to make decisions but, on the other hand, debate about what to do if the science is uncertain or which scientific studies to believe or whether the scientific decisions have become infected by politics.

In both the courtroom and the rule-making activities of governmental agencies, our common sense would tell us that we should let science decide whether a workplace chemical caused the plaintiff’s cancer or whether genetically-modified food is dangerous or what level of mercury in water is safe for drinking. But if we look closely at the lawsuits involving scientific issues or at the debates surrounding agency regulations, we find scientific controversy, contradictory scientific testimony, and high levels of scientific uncertainty.

What is our reaction to that state of affairs? Does it make us doubt the utility of science? Or does our trust in science remain firm and lead us to doubt the ability of the legal and political systems

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to get things right? Those are the questions I want to address because a great deal is going on right now—from climate change to food regulation to concerns about the safety of plastic water bottles—that should cause us to reflect on science, including both its potential to guide lawmakers and its limitations as a source of stable knowledge.

Part of that reflection on science involves the so-called “science wars.” Those wars were preceded by the so-called “culture wars,” the name given to the debates between modernists and postmodernists in the humanities. On the one side were the children of the Enlightenment, who believed in the capacity of human reason to overcome religion and other outdated traditions and to give us secure knowledge. On the other side were postmodernists, who claimed to end all totalizing narratives and who reduced knowledge to power. However, there is a softer version of postmodernism that is not as relativistic and is quite close to the Christian critique of rationalistic modernism. This softer version is one that recognizes the tradition-bound nature of all thinking, that understands why a purely objective and totally accurate expression of reality is impossible, that does not ignore the realities of power and coercion and that recognizes that all concepts have a history, and that all truths need to be put into their social and cultural context so as to understand their scope and claims more accurately . . .

Even though the term postmodern is sometimes used pejoratively in Christian circles, I like the foregoing description of soft postmodernism; I also notice the rhetorical move, where the author describes the extremes of Enlightenment rationalism and postmodern nihilistic relativism and then constructs a Christian view as a mediating or middle position, a third way, which avoids the extremes.

In the science wars that followed in the wake of the culture wars, the effort to avoid extremes is also apparent. On the one side are those who believe in the superiority of scientific knowledge to provide stable truths that transcend culture and history. On the other side are those historians, philosophers, and sociologists of science who emphasize that the scientific enterprise is human, who identify the social and institutional aspects of scientific communities, and who highlight the interests at work in allegedly disinterested science. In the most extreme version of the latter perspective, science is represented as a social construction, as just another cultural narrative without any unique claim to objective truth about reality. In its softer version, which is less relativistic and quite close to the Christian critique of scientism, it recognizes that science is not value-free and that there are genuine scientific disputes that destabilize any pretense that science is a machine-like producer of uncontroversial facts.

The science wars, a 1980s’ phenomenon, are obviously not a new topic or an earth-shaking revelation for Christian scholars. There is a rich and substantial history of neo-Calvinist reflection on the natural sciences, as well as a centuries-old conversation about conflicts between science and religion, about whether science replaced religion or whether science is a religion, and so forth. Calvin himself occupies an interesting position by having lived during the scientific revolution. I recognize that the period identified as the scientific revolution, beginning with Copernicus, who lived from 1473-1542, and ending with Newton, who lived between 1624-1727, is a purely modernist construction. I agree with Steven Shapin that this period is not uniquely revolutionary 2— it is just a convenient marker with no more significance than the debate over when the medieval “period” ends and the modern “era” begins. But it is convenient for my purposes that Calvin was born when Copernicus was 36 years old, that Galileo was born the year Calvin died, and so forth. It is not clear whether Calvin knew of Copernicus, and even though Calvin accepted the faulty Ptolemaic system that almost everyone else accepted, we do not think that Calvin was against astronomical investigation or against scientific inquiry. 3 Calvin does say that we do not get astronomy from the Scriptures, but Calvin does not degrade science—he simply warns that too much study of the creation might lead one to forget the Creator and might even lead one to think the universe was its own creator. 4 That warning is quite prophetic; Steven Weinburg, the great physicist who is now not quite as great as a public intellectual, wrote in 2001 that
One of the great achievements of science has been, if not to make it impossible for intelligent people to be religious, then at least to make it possible for them not to be religious. We should not retreat from this accomplishment. 

I’ll return to Weinberg below because he is exemplary, both (1) with respect to his position in the science wars, as a worshiper of science, and (2) with respect to my argument that the science wars are very important nowadays in law and politics; indeed, the science wars are now firmly located within the beltway, in Washington, and were anticipated by Abraham Kuyper. 

Over a hundred years ago, Kuyper dedicated the fourth of his Stone Lectures at Princeton to the nexus between Calvinism and science. Even though we need to be very careful to recognize Kuyper’s own background and historical context, that is, to recognize the particular views of science against which he was arguing, the lecture is nevertheless a sophisticated anticipation of the science wars to come. 

Kuyper makes four points, four observations, about Calvinism and science—and even though neo-Calvinists use the word “science” broadly to include academic inquiry in all the disciplines, including philosophy and history and even theology, note that Kuyper’s examples of science are almost all from the exact or natural sciences. He first says that Calvinism fosters a “love for science,” and he mentions that the microscope, the telescope, and the thermometer were Dutch inventions. Calvinists believe in law and order in the cosmos, which belief offers a foundation for empirical inquiry. Second, Calvinists do not place science below spirituality, as we have no contempt for the world, and he mentions the sixteenth-century plague in Geneva when prayer was accompanied by hygienic measures. This is where Kuyper mentions common grace and the ability of non-believers to excel in scientific inquiry. Third, Kuyper notes that scientific inquiry should be free from church, and state, interference. And fourth, Kuyper sees no conflict between faith and science. This is where Kuyper, anticipating the science wars, mentions that all science begins with faith—faith in our self-consciousness, in our senses, in our intellect, in universal laws, and so forth. This begins to sound like a critique of scientism, but as Jaap Klapwijk points out, Kuyper was quite “scientistic” about the exact sciences—observation for Kuyper did not depend on the subjectivity of the researcher; as a result, Kuyper does not give us much of a critique of the physical sciences. Later on, Dooyeweerd was more likely to challenge the myth of neutrality in the natural sciences, and he anticipated, much more than Kuyper did, the personal and creative aspects of scientific inquiry. Even before Polanyi’s “framework of commitment,” Habermas’s explication of human interests, Radnitzky’s theory of steering fields, and Kuhn’s paradigm theory, Dooyeweerd offered many neo-Calvinists a basis for investigating the subjective and cultural aspects of the exact sciences, and they did investigate those aspects. From the late 1950s to the mid-1970s, the conferences and journal of the American Scientific Affiliation included a lively discussion of Christian perspectives on science, and by the time I arrived at the Free University in 1975, the history and philosophy of science were major fields of inquiry and controversy. By 1979, with the publication of Bruno Latour’s and Steve Woolgar’s Laboratory Life, the sociology of science engendered the so-called sci-
ence wars with a research program into the social, institutional, and rhetorical aspects of the scientific enterprise. The sociology of scientific knowledge was a reaction against the idealized view of the scientific enterprise, which described science solely in terms of theory, data-collection, conclusion, publication, and application or refutation. As to ambition, persuasion, funding bias, or cultural values, those were not (in the idealized view) part of science; as to personal values, perception, consensus, or institutional gatekeeping, those were good for science but also not part of science itself. In contrast, the sociologists of science revealed the pragmatic nature of science, demonstrating that science was not merely influenced by but consisted of values, paradigms, cognitive and instrumental constraints, language and metaphors, consensus-building techniques, reputation, and variable conventions. If we view that assessment as an unfair challenge to the superiority of scientific knowledge, we are on one side of the science wars; and if we are comfortable with that assessment as a realistic account, we are on the other. Of course, this is old news—there’s a great deal of literature from the 1980s and 1990s describing, clarifying, and taking controversial positions in the science wars. So why am I talking about this?

Well, to my surprise, the science wars have arrived in law. Because of the need for judges and juries and governmental administrators to rely on science, the nature and reliability of the scientific enterprise have become important topics in legal discourse. Now to be fair, the legal system’s reliance on science is not new—we have had scientific experts in our courtrooms since the early nineteenth century, and we have also tried to regulate toxic substances and pharmaceuticals and even food for centuries. But a couple of high-profile events in recent years have heated up the controversy over the use of science in law.

First of all, there was a series of three U.S. Supreme Court opinions in the mid- to late-1990s that together establish a new vision of science in the courtroom. Because each side in a lawsuit hires its own expert to testify, there had been concerns for decades about junk science in the courtroom and about experts who become advocates for their clients, so the U.S. Supreme Court set up some new rules to ensure the reliability of scientific testimony. I think it’s fair to say that those new guidelines, and the immense, recent scholarly commentary concerning expertise in law, reflect a rather idealized or romanticized vision of the scientific enterprise. Whereas law is represented as a field of controversy, argument, advocacy, and rhetoric, science is represented as completely different. Science seemingly involves stable knowledge, without bias or interest or motivation. Consequently, when two experts disagree, it is often assumed that one of them is a liar, a junk scientist, while the other is telling the truth. In this new view of science, there is not a lot of room for talking about scientific controversy, argument, rhetoric, consensus-building, or advocacy for one’s preferred scientific theory. Indeed, if an expert conceives of his knowledge, or admits that scientists are influenced by the communities or institutions in which they work, that expert is often condemned as not delivering determinative knowledge, which is what science is supposed to offer to the indeterminate and argumentative field of law. And there is even a trend to blame lawyers for the shortage of scientific truth in the courtroom. Some have suggested that lawyers have an ethical responsibility to ensure the accuracy of their experts because anyone can supposedly do a little research and figure out the scientific truth in a particular field. Such suggestions are based on a very simplistic view of science, as if scientists do not disagree and as if there are no genuine controversies among scientists.

The second phenomenon that brought the discourse concerning science into law was the accusation that during the Bush administration, science became politicized. This kind of discourse also tends to idealize science and is the reason President Obama claims that his administration will pay attention to science, not politics, as if there is pure science available if we would just pay attention. But is it really possible to remove worldviews and values from the scientific enterprise in the service of law?

Now, I could at this point construct a debate and say that on one side are those who trust science completely, and on the other side are those who do not trust the scientific establishment, perhaps because they believe that all science is politically
motivated or perhaps because they fear scientists as a bunch of Dr. Frankenstein’s with no moral sensitivity. Then I could say that the Christian or neo-Calvinist view is somewhere in between. But the debates over science in law are actually a lot more nuanced and more interesting than that, and it is probably better to organize the various narratives concerning science on a continuum—there are various positions available in the debate, and I’ll identify five of them.

I will begin with those commentators who seem to have a near-complete faith in science as the single source of truth—I mentioned above the physicist Steven Weinberg, who wrote Facing Up: Science and Its Cultural Adversaries (2001). That book is a diatribe against those who view science as a cultural activity involving values, theoretical biases, and advocacy. We might also think of Michael Specter’s recent book, titled Denialism: How Irrational Thinking Hinders Scientific Progress, Harms the Planet, And Threatens Our Lives (2009). The very title of that book, Denialism, suggests that we should simply listen to the objective truths that science offers us. Among legal scholars, the parallel to such a perspective can be found in the work of Michael Saks, who thinks that the reason there is too much junk science in the courtroom is that lawyers don’t take the time to pay attention to scientific truth:

Any attorney, like any intelligent citizen who takes the time to research a purported scientific subject, has the potential to reach her own conclusions about whether or not the field’s beliefs rest on a foundation of data and logic that is solid, mushy, or non-existent.26

Anyone can do it. But what Saks ignores, in order to make such an observation, is that in litigation involving scientific issues, there is often considerable uncertainty, dispute, and controversy among scientific experts—(1) there may be no scientific consensus against which to measure a legal judgment; (2) the number of studies may be limited; and (3) it is commonplace that competent, well-intentioned, and conscientious scientists utilize identical data and agree on identical criteria of interpretation, and then reach different conclusions.27 So it’s not just core data leading to a conclusion—there’s more going on.

In the regulatory arena, the parallel with those who worship science is those who say that risk assessments should be value-free, without normative foundations. Values, in this view, introduce biases into an otherwise rational process—the Food & Drug Administration, for example, should act on the basis of science alone.28 If we allow ethical, religious, or moral values in the door, then, it is said, the process becomes politicized and produces junk science.29 It is said that the inherent uncertainty of science, unfortunately, can be exploited to derail the appropriate process of value-free risk assessment.30 Now that view, which finds its way into

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quality science, ample evidence, and small margins of error, the need for value judgments disappears.\textsuperscript{31}

That brings us to the next perspective, even less idealistic about the stability of science, which views \textit{all} risk assessments as judgment calls. Even a scientist’s degree of confidence is not a scientific matter, and our assessment of whether a scientific analysis is relatively certain is grounded in pragmatic decisions about what to study, which variables to consider, how accurate our measurements need to be, and how much potential error we’re willing to accept. When we say something is “safe” or “injurious” or we say that the evidence is “ample” or “convincing” or “reasonably certain,” those words sound scientific but are actually non-scientific judgments.\textsuperscript{32}

Now this sounds like a really sophisticated view of the limitations of the scientific enterprise, but notice that we’re talking about the limitations of science within the risk-assessment or policymaking context. That is, there is still a strong fact/value distinction, insofar as science is factual, and values only come into play as we consider the impact of a substance or technology on society. We begin with the inevitable scientific disagreements among technical experts; then we turn to the value conflicts as to the social and political evaluation of impacts.

Now we can move to another, more radical, position on the continuum, even farther away from the idealized position from which I started. I just described a seemingly sophisticated vision of the limits of science, wherein science necessarily involves non-scientific judgments; and it is the technical disagreement among scientists that leads us or causes us to make value or political judgments. This makes it sound as if we have one thing, namely an identifiable uncertainty, in science, and then we begin to argue about what to do in the face of that monolithic uncertainty, and we argue for precaution and about how much risk to take.

We should go back to the scientific enterprise that produced the thing we’re calling uncertainty. That enterprise includes contradictory certainties and plural rationalities: scientific debates gave rise to the label “uncertainty,” but in most major policy disputes—think of genetically modified foods, the danger of low-dose toxicity in plastic bottles, global warming—we find multiple and contradictory certainties.\textsuperscript{33}

Moreover, in the activity of risk-assessment and policy-making, we also have contradictory certainties and plural rationalities. And here’s the point: these contradictory certainties arise from culture, from cultural orientations, or worldviews. In all of the previous positions on the continuum, there was no talk of culture because in policy discourse, we only turn to culture as a last resort—we prefer to say there was scientific conflict or political conflict; but we can instead account for these regulatory conflicts in terms of cultural orientations.\textsuperscript{34}

Some people have a fundamental view of nature as robust and tolerant, while others see nature as ephemeral and vulnerable.\textsuperscript{35} One’s viewpoint is going to affect everything in debates over low-dose toxicity, global warming, or genetically modified foods. To the extent that politically conservative or religious people are respectively individualistic and hierarchical, they tend to be skeptical of environmental risks, while those with communitarian and egalitarian worldviews are more sensitive concerning global warming or nuclear power. But then, in a curious reversal, when it comes to synthetic biology, the engineering of new biological organisms, the conservative and religious citizens get very skeptical, while the egalitarian and communitarian citizens are suddenly less sensitive because synthetic biology can stop diseases and feed the hungry.\textsuperscript{36} Those decisions are not made on the basis of science or risk-assessment techniques but are made on the basis of worldviews. Each side is perfectly rational in terms of its convictions about the world.

Now, this is not simply an argument that politics infects the regulatory process. I think of David Michael’s \textit{Doubt is Their Product: How Industry’s Assault on Science Threatens Your Health} (2008), which explains how tobacco and pharmaceutical lobbyists exploit scientific uncertainty and claim that the science is not certain enough to regulate many products. That argument is basically that science is great but that politics gets in the way; it is another way of idealizing science as determinative. Nor am I arguing, as anthropologist Paul Rabinow does, that we need to put ethicists and lawyers and social scientists in the laboratory so that scientists will be
faced with values and regulation at the outset of their activities because Rabinow’s argument presumes that science is objective and value-free until the ethicists arrive.37

Rather, I am arguing for the acknowledgement of multiple interpretive frames, which reflect values but which see facts differently.38 People do not say, “I’m going to take a position or make an argument that serves my interests.” Instead, people see things differently and perceive the level and acceptability of the very same risks differently—that’s why I said we’re not dealing with scientific uncertainty followed by value judgments; we’re dealing with contradictory certainties. Our selection of facts and values is not so much conscious and voluntary as it is grounded in our cultural assumptions.

In any event, that’s a fairly skeptical view of the power of science to guide policy decisions, and the only position left on my continuum is the view that

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scientists are untrustworthy. So, where am I going with this? I’m trying to find a framework that explains what is going on when law appropriates science, in the courtroom and in the regulatory process.

First, as to the courtroom, if we idealize science, and we fail to acknowledge its pragmatic features, we have oversimplified the ability of science to serve or supplement law with determinative knowledge. Consequently, we cannot make sense of what is happening in U.S. courtrooms. We ei-

ther have to say that all scientists are correct because they are scientists; but we know that isn’t true because scientific experts disagree in court all the time. Or we have to say that when two scientists disagree, one of them is a liar, and the other has the truth; but we know that good scientists have genuine disagreements, so we need a better picture of science to explain why scientists disagree. The answer is to have a more modest view of science that acknowledges its pragmatic features. Every science has a history, every science operates on the basis of probabilities, and every science involves value-driven communities, consensus-building, and limitations in terms of instrumentation, resources, and human perception. Furthermore, science changes—many forensic scientists who provided evidence for criminal trials, on the basis of fingerprint or hair or bite-mark identification techniques, have now been proven wrong by DNA evidence.39 So should we now glorify DNA as the final step in our quest for knowledge? I don’t think so because even DNA analysis involves human beings and probabilities and possible errors—it’s great stuff but not always a truth machine.40 It is fabulous, but we need to remember that we thought fingerprint identification was flawless until we started reversing convictions on the basis of new DNA evidence.

In the regulatory context, I don’t think we want to explain or account for our current scientific disputes by saying that the scientists on one side are liars or that they have been duped by lobbyists or their own political interests. It makes more sense to identify cultural biases, which shape how evidence is gathered, interpreted, and reported. Whenever we have data, there is still room for selecting, minimizing, maximizing, magnifying, and dramatizing data on the basis of social preferences, even as we claim to be merely applying scientific expertise.41 The very perception of risk, or reasonable certainty, is framed by values in order to make strategic arguments. Some people have a precautionary worldview, and some have a Promethean worldview, the latter of which implies that we can technologically solve all our problems and that, therefore, we need not be so cautious.42 Both sides use science, so we cannot say, “Let’s just let science decide who is right.” Long before we leave the
scientific realm to enter law and politics, we have conflicting conceptual lenses. The very criteria for uncertainty, sound science, reliable evidence, and adequate research are not fixed but vary according to ideological commitments, social contexts, and interpretive frames. Therefore, any appeals to science as the final arbiter are oversimplifications.

In conclusion, when we visit courtrooms and regulatory agencies and we see how science is used, the debates are hard to explain unless we have a sense, a neo-Calvinist sensibility, that worldviews affect everything, even the exact sciences. We love and enjoy scientific progress and its benefits, but we do not idealize its potential to answer every question—science does not give us our purposes, aims, and priorities, and it comes to us with uncertainties, institutional biases, and even built-in values as to what was worth investigating, what could be funded, and what was advocated for and negotiated in scientific communities. We should neither worship nor distrust science, but rather we should recognize its limitations as the stabilizer of legal and regulatory disputes.

Endnotes
7. Ibid., 68.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 72.
10. Ibid., 73.
11. Ibid., 77.
12. Ibid., 79.
13. Ibid.
22. Ibid., 15-30.


29. Ibid., 139.

30. Ibid., 138.


34. Ibid., 141.


38. See Schwartz & Thompson, supra note 33, at 23.


Postmodernism accepts no textual interpretation as authoritative and no moral view as correct. In a culture that relies on opinion to resolve issues, how do Christians resolve biblical-cultural tensions when reading fiction? Abraham Kuyper answers that question. He tells us not to leave the arts and sciences “in the hands of unbelievers” but instead to consider it our task to know God in all his works,” to “fathom with all the energy of [our] intellect, things terrestrial as well as things celestial,” to “open to view both the order of creation and the ‘common grace’ of the God [we] adore” in “nature,” the “production of human industry,” and “the life [and history] of mankind” (Calvinism and Science” 125).

We are called, then, to fathom Virginia Woolf’s modern classic Mrs. Dalloway and Michael Cunningham’s postmodern derivative work, The Hours, as examples of common grace. Guided by biblical norms, we accept the truths and aesthetic brilliance of these works as “gifts of grace” (Kuyper, “Calvinism and Art” 155), while we resist and question the works’ moral and philosophical assumptions.

Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway (1925) and Cunningham’s The Hours (1998) succeed as gifts of grace by depicting one aspect of reality—the human struggle between certainty and doubt and the causes of that struggle. Writers who give us this “reality,” says Woolf, are “good human beings…even if they show every variety of human depravity” (A Room of One’s Own 109); they are good if they write with “integrity” (72) about the human condition. Woolf says...
it is the writer’s “business to find [reality] and... communicate it to the rest of us” for its “[cataract-removing] operation...on the senses” that allows us to see “more intensely afterwards” (110). Both writers do just that: they show us the contradictory internal world of characters enthralled with life, perplexed at its mystery, disquieted at their own choices, and anxious to perform a redemptive act before life’s end. Together, they give us a clearer perception of what Woolf calls “Mrs. Brown,” or “life itself” (“Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” 212). They show us what Clarissa Dalloway calls “an emptiness about the heart of life” (Mrs. Dalloway 31).

That perception grows if we read Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway and Cunningham’s The Hours together, along with Woolf biographies and Woolf’s non-fiction. Reading contextually, we enter what Schliermacher posited, and Dilthey coined, the “hermeneutic circle,” of moving from parts to whole and whole to parts (Murfin/Ray 155). Doing so illuminates the whole. And even though we can’t enter the “horizon,” or “range of vision,” of another time as if it were fixed, writes Gadamer, we can fuse our horizon with the horizons of Woolf and Cunningham (269-73) for the interaction and impact of the two “contexts” (297). Cunningham’s interpretation of Woolf’s life and text according to late twentieth-century sex/gender theories changes the focus of Woolf’s work.

This paper contends that re-reading Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway from a horizon broadened by Cunningham’s work changes the focus from Septimus Smith’s suicide and Clarissa Dalloway’s party to a pivotal moment in their youth: Clarissa’s kiss with Sally Seton and Septimus’ affection with his officer Evans. For both characters, that same-sex intimacy paradoxically fills the hours that follow with anxiety-producing emptiness and determines their need to compensate for life’s failure. This change of focus results from a “dialogue” between readers and texts over a common “subject” (Phillips 3). In that dialogue, Christian readers distinguish Cunningham’s assumptions from their own by turning to God’s Word, which, as Gadamer explains, is perfect and complete, unlike the human word, which “never possesses complete self-presence but is dispersed into thinking this or that...” (385).

The common subject is “life itself,” its mystery/ambiguity, represented in the insignificant but complex Mrs. Brown, of Woolf’s essay “Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown.” According to Quentin Bell, this essay comes “as near as [Woolf] came to an aesthetic manifesto” (2.104). In it she gives the “business” of the Georgian novelists: “to look past the...preaching and moralizing of Wells and Galsworthy...and approach that central mystery, Mrs. Brown herself!” (104-105). That central mystery, as Woolf presents it, agrees with what existentialists Søren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger explain as humanity’s inability to grasp or define life except in retrospect and therefore of living in ambivalence and anxiety, certain only of death. The splendor of an unexpected early intimacy, followed by a life that fails to match that splendor, points to ambivalence in Woolf, who blamed gender identity and inequity in her critical writings.

Woolf’s feminist theory blames cultural inequality for much of the dissatisfaction that plagues women—and by inference her characters. Woolf’s fiction and non-fiction introduce ideas developed by later feminist schools. First, Woolf resists phallic-centricism through silence (Murfin/Ray 172, 122) when character Clarissa Dalloway mentally escapes Peter Walsh’s criticism by remembering Sally Seton’s kiss. Second, Woolf introduces “semiotic” or “unifying and fluid” language, as opposed to classifying or “symbolic” male language (127), in her stream-of-conscious narrator, who connects characters’ thoughts and increases the ambiguity of each moment’s perception. Third, she connects “women’s bodies and writing” (123), using the window (symbolic of female sexual anatomy and absorbing perception) as the lens through which Clarissa Dalloway and her androgynous counterpart, Septimus Smith, absorb reality, as opposed to the clock, Big Ben (symbolic of male anatomy and analytical perception), whose striking divides the day with reminders of time’s and life’s passing. Fourth, she focuses on fashion, “madness, disease, and the demonic” (124), in Clarissa Dalloway’s comfort in clothes/Bond Street and in Septimus Smith’s hallucinations—prophesying a new religion, in which all things are alive in God. Most apparently, she introduces “gynocentrism,” or fe-
Christian assumption that God’s creation of humans “in his…image” differentiated “male and female” (Gen. 1:27) in more than anatomical ways. Some infer a maleness and femaleness in God’s nature to explain the two genders. Others infer inherent neutral capacities of self-consciousness and reason as God’s image but culturally constructed norms for maleness and femaleness. Karl Barth explains that each human being is totally “man or woman” and “man and woman,” reflecting the differentiation and unity of the Trinity (195). Jürgen Moltmann explains humanity’s likeness to God (God’s plurality and unity) in the “sexual differentiation and community of human beings” (220); for Moltmann the human analogy of God consists in “the community of man and wife, which corresponds to the fellowship of God with the Trinity” (220). For both theologians, the sexes and genders are distinct in nature and unified in marriage, not a compendium. Woolf’s assumption of greater freedom in writing as “man womanly” or a “woman manly” suggests cultural conditioning, cultural defiance, insight, or an empowering contradiction. Contrary to a sexual continuum, Christians assume that humanity’s defiance of God not only destroyed “intimacy, community” (Schwehn 131) and self-knowledge but fostered male attempts to master and limit women (Gen. 3.16-18), adding to the heart’s “emptiness.”

In A Room of One’s Own, Woolf roots her feminist/gender theory in a transcendent, all-encompassing “Nature” (72), which eliminates gender distinctions and moral judgments. Woolf asserts a woman’s need of resources and “a room of her own” if she is “to write fiction” (4). To legitimate that position, she implies nature’s divinity and the imagination’s participation in divinity in her description of the Oxford bushes, their seeming “to burn with fire” (5). This description implies both a world-spirit and the imagination’s participation in the world-spirit as it projects, like a lamp, what it perceives. Woolf implies not only nature’s reflecting, mirror-like, the images projected by human imagination but also reality’s consisting of our perceptions. From a transcendentalist frame, Woolf argues that denying women’s divinity has fostered their literary ignorance and silence (essay 1), a phallo-centric rendering of women by his-
tory (essay 2), and a tragic fate for any woman who dared to write and live like Shakespeare (essay 3).

The freedom to write “as women write” (74), Woolf implies (essay 4), presupposes a mind that, like a looking glass, finds “no obstacle” between itself and its expression (57). Identifying those obstacles as “anger, ignorance, and fear” caused by male-imposed restrictions (73), she attributes her ability to avoid those obstacles to Nature’s “inner light” of judgment (72), another allusion to a world-consciousness, and praises Jane Austen’s freedom from such obstacles in writing on women’s interests instead of men’s (74). Woolf exercises that freedom by focusing on Clarissa Dalloway’s concerns in a day.

This freedom is also contingent on the work of previous writers, Woolf explains in her fifth essay, as if predicting Michael Cunningham’s novel about her life/novel. Explaining her freedom to depict one woman’s feelings for another, she writes, “Books continue each other” (80), and cites novelist Mary Carmichael’s statement “Chloe liked Olivia” (82-83) as initiating a major change in writing. Woolf continues that freedom with Clarissa Dalloway and Sally Seton’s kiss, as does Cunningham, who develops that freedom in his character—Woolf’s kissing her sister Vanessa as “forbidden fruit,” Laura Brown’s kissing Kitty guiltily, and Clarissa Vaughan’s kissing partner Sally openly and guiltlessly. In a re-reading of Woolf, Clarissa Dalloway’s discontented life, after a moment of splendor with Sally, interrupted and trivialized by Peter Walsh, seems attributable to cultural prohibitions and conditions.

Clarissa Dalloway’s youthful love of Sally Seton (Mrs. Dalloway 32-35) makes sense in the context of Woolf’s life, recorded in Quentin Bell’s Woolf biographies and in Woolf’s non-fiction, dramatized in Cunningham’s character—Woolf. The conversion of Woolf’s father from Anglicanism to Agnosticism (“Leslie Stephen”) led to Woolf’s religious cynicism and mystic yearning (Bell 2.136), expressed in Clarissa Dalloway’s hope for absorption in a world-spirit.

Woolf’s sense of failure is rooted in women’s limited education. Though she studied literature with her father and learned German, Greek, and Latin (Bell 1.51), she resented a “haphazard” education that emphasized “female accomplishments” while her brothers studied at school and Cambridge (1.27). In A Room of One’s Own, Woolf decries women’s ignorance (112), expressed in Clarissa Dalloway’s anguish of knowing “nothing” (Mrs. Dalloway 8) and giving parties as compensation, like Cunningham’s Laura Brown.

Most significantly, Woolf’s enduring her two step-brothers’ sexual abuse explains her closeness with brother Toby’s gay Cambridge friends, her depression and hallucinations, her turn to women for affection (from sisters Vanessa and Kitty to friends Madge Williams, Violet Dickinson, and Vita Sackville-West) and the Sally Seton kiss. In A Sketch of the Past, Woolf recalls being “ashamed or afraid of [her] own body” and hallucinating a “hideous face” looking over her shoulder in the mirror (9), as if haunted by guilt, atavism, or a devil. That face appears to Cunningham’s Laura Brown as she anticipates, with dread, her waiting husband. As Clarissa explains in Mrs. Dalloway, love with Sally Seton evoked a “disinterested” and pure feeling (34), unlike Woolf’s “defensive panic” and self-loathing (Bell1.44).

Woolf’s relationship with Vita Sackville-West, the pen name for lesbian Mrs. Harold Nicolson (Bell 2.115, 116), attests to Woolf’s ambivalence and completes the model for Sally Seton in Mrs. Dalloway. Woolf’s biographer Bell believes that whatever happened between Virginia and Vita

Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway (1925) and Cunningham’s The Hours (1998) succeed as gifts of grace by depicting one aspect of reality—the human struggle between certainty and doubt and the causes of that struggle.
sexually was “not of a kind to excite Virginia or to satisfy Vita,” since for Virginia it was “an affair of the heart” (119) that ended after ten years.

Woolf writes in her Diary that her Vita friendship ended with “a certain emptiness” (324). Apparently, it didn’t satisfy Woolf enough to be continued or to end her marriage to Leonard. Though she identified herself “with the cause of homosexuality by spending a week in France alone with Vita,” she later wrote Vita that she married Leonard because she preferred “living with him to saying good-by to him” (139).

Woolf’s loving both Leonard and Vita supports Woolf’s belief in a gender/sex continuum. This continuum originated in her childhood victimization and transcendentalist beliefs and expressed itself in a moment’s dazzling kiss with Sally Seton in Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway. In The Hours, Cunningham develops the continuum into a permanent lesbian love between Clarissa and Sally and a gay love between Richard and Louis. But the ambivalence and anxiety remain.

Re-reading Mrs. Dalloway in light of Cunningham’s The Hours heightens Clarissa Dalloway’s ambivalence and its causes. Successive joy and misery characterize Clarissa Dalloway during a day, as events unearth contradictions from the past and create anxiety. Ambivalence toward life emerges when, at 53, she greets the June morning with “What a lark! What a plunge!” (3). Her delight reminds her of a similar but painful morning with Peter Walsh, “intolerable” but “adorable to walk with on a morning like this”; she admired his interests in politics, “Wagner, Pope’s poetry” but suffered when he trivialized her as a “perfect hostess” (7). And though she affirms her marriage to Richard, who gives her the luxuries that Peter could not, she remembers anguishing over Peter’s marriage (8) and anguishes again.

Her anguish leads to transcendent longing. Feeling “far out to sea and alone” in knowing “no language; no history” (8), she dreads her death while the world continues. For hope, she imagines her existence continuing “like a mist between the [trees] and the people she knew best” (9). Consoled in that hope, her love of Bond-Street shops, and her “gift” of knowing people (9), she buys flowers for her party.

Her party will serve as her gesture to a spiritually empty world. In such a world, she must “all the more…repay” in how she treats every creature, from servants to husband Richard, for their service (29). Then, diminished when Lady Broughton invites only Richard to a political luncheon, she retreats nun-like to her bedroom with “an emptiness about the heart of life” (31).

That “emptiness” triggers the consoling memory of a childhood love—of Sally Seton—and their “kiss.” She recalls her “rapture”: “Had that not been love?” (31). Memories of night-long talks about world reform, philosophy, and poetry clarify for her the difference between female love and male/female love: with women, there is “purity” and disinterestedness (34). Their kiss she compares to “a diamond, something infinitely precious, through which the radiance burned,” the “religious feeling” (34-35). The transcendent quality in her love with Sally, which resurfaces in Laura Brown’s love for Kitty in The Hours, surpasses love with Peter and marriage with Richard and filled the emptiness of Woolf’s own life.

Clarissa Dalloway’s effort to unite the incompatible parts of life through that same splendor and offer it to others—through a party—suggests more than Lacan’s object petit a, or unattainable object of desire. It suggests not only lost intimacy and purity but the desire to make a redemptive gift to compensate for life’s emptiness and failure (37). In fact, she affirms her parties as “an offering,…a person’s duty, as part of a doomed race, chained to a sinking ship…[t]o mitigate the sufferings of our fellow prisoners,” or, to “[do] good for the sake of goodness” (78). That gift inspires Clarissa’s “wave” of joy: “that is all” (40), or “enough,” she says, even though the party, like life, “must end” (122).

Christian readers recognize Clarissa’s emptiness and haunting moral responsibility. Compelled by truth written on the heart, she proposes an offering, Cain-like, and longs for transcendence. Affirming her parties in spite of male opinion, she tries to redeem the world temporarily. Hearing that Dr. Bradford’s patient—war-traumatized visionary Septimus Smith—has killed himself, she applauds him for preserving his soul’s “mystery” and attempting to “embrace” what evades one in life (184)—connectedness.
Cunningham continues where Woolf leaves off. In so doing, he recasts Clarissa Dalloway’s ambivalence by fictionalizing Woolf’s life through a late-twentieth-century frame, including her writing Mrs. Dalloway, its effects on reader Laura Brown, Laura’s effect on her son (gay writer Richard Brown), and Richard’s effect on his ex-lover Clarissa Vaughn, whom he calls “Mrs. Dalloway,” in gentle irony for her parties. Most significantly, Cunningham allows Clarissa Vaughn to pursue the life that Clarissa Dalloway lived in a moment’s kiss.

Not surprisingly, Cunningham’s characters voice the same “emptiness” but without the obligation for a compensatory gift. The gift—whether Laura Brown’s cake, Clarissa Vaughn’s party, or Richard Brown’s novel—seems motivated more by self-affirmation than a compassionate redemption of others. Its achievement leaves each with the same emptiness.

Cunningham’s emphasis on “the hours” addresses the same predicament: living between the no-longer and the “not-yet,” aware of time in the knowledge of death, and assuming the “burden” of the past to explain the “present” (Barrett 228; Heidegger, Being and Time 17). Like Woolf’s Clarissa Dalloway, who appreciates her husband, Richard, but regrets a life without Peter Walsh, Clarissa Vaughn appreciates her life-partner, Sally, but regrets a life without Richard Brown and plans a party to honor him. For each Clarissa, life fails to fulfill the promise of a past kiss.

Clarissa Vaughn’s ambivalence, despite her more advantageous educational and professional circumstances and her greater sexual freedom, suggests that even had Clarissa Dalloway graduated from Cambridge, stood for parliament, and married Sally Seton, she would voice the same ambivalence about life, alleviated only in the freedom to choose her burden. Cunningham suggests that possibility in the various approaches to suicide. Unlike character-Woolf, who drowns herself to escape madness and her husband’s restraints, or Richard Brown, who drops to the street to escape madness and the restraints of AIDS, Laura Brown stops her suicide attempts after leaving her husband and children. Still, her freedom, like Clarissa Vaughn’s, doesn’t end her ambivalence.

In his final chapter on “Mrs. Woolf,” Cunningham highlights the soul’s predicament. Here, character-Woolf recalls Vanessa’s kiss—“full of something not unlike what [she] wants from life[,]…full of love complex and ravenous, ancient, …this afternoon’s manifestation of the central mystery itself” (210). Then, to compensate for its absence, she designs a gift that evokes that feeling in others: she decides that her novel’s protagonist, Clarissa Dalloway, will have loved a woman when she was young, will “carry the memory of that kiss” and its “soaring hope…all her life,” but will “never find a love like that which the…kiss seemed to offer” (211).

The beneficiary of that redemptive gift is Mrs. Laura Brown, living in 1940s’ Los Angeles. She temporarily escapes her failure as a wife/mother and her guilt of kissing Kitty by driving to a hotel room to read Mrs. Dalloway. The novel “buoys her” upon “a wave…of weightless brilliance” (41).

Not surprisingly, Cunningham’s characters voice the same “emptiness” but without the obligation for a compensatory gift.

When her return to her anxious son and successful birthday party ends in “fury” at being “trapped” in a marriage of having “to please” (205), her solution is a suicide attempt, followed by escape to Toronto to support herself as a librarian. There, she lives the freedom fantasized by character-Woolf and Woolf’s Clarissa Dalloway.

By contrast, Cunningham’s Clarissa Vaughn—a 1990s’ New-York parallel of Woolf’s Clarissa Dalloway—faces no restriction but time. Free to acquire an education, a publishing career, a same-sex partnership, and the self-determinism that Clarissa Dalloway, Laura Brown, and character-Woolf lacked, she exudes not only the same fascination with the morning, the coming party, and the transcendent (in her case, an actress instead of a burning bush, a mist, or royalty) but also the
same second-guessing. With all her freedom, Clarissa Vaughn misses the splendor anticipated from her early love affair with Richard. Their break-up at eighteen—each to pursue greater happiness—ended in AIDS for Richard and a partnership with Sally for Clarissa. That kiss with Richard she now recognizes as her life’s best moment; and for Richard, the kiss is “still happening” (67), in spite of a succession of gay lovers.

Like the others, Richard had attempted a compensatory but self-affirming gift, a book “about the lives [they] might have lived” (67), “something alive and shocking enough [to]…stand beside a morning in someone’s life” (199). His saying so makes Clarissa Vaughn, like Clarissa Dalloway with Peter, imagine the life they “might have had together” (68). Richard Brown has lived the life that Septimus Smith wanted to live, but he lacks Smith’s transcendent hope: he falls to his death to escape his party and…every hour after that…toward silence” (197-8).

Clarissa’s reaction to Richard’s suicide lacks the affirmation of Clarissa Dalloway’s reaction to Septimus’s suicide; it even lacks disinterested love. Instead, her silent eulogy justifies leaving him and admits her party’s intention to “exhibit his devotion” to her (203).

Ironically, her party to honor Richard for his literary award becomes a wake, where his mother, Laura Brown, justifies her past decision—the only means of a person’s affirming existence, says Heidigger (“Holderlin” 565). She admits that deserting her family led to her contentment, in spite of their deaths. Of all the characters, Laura Brown voices the least regret: “We did the best we could, dear. That’s all anyone can do, isn’t it?” (222). Her life and words counter the feminine ideal by suggesting each person’s freedom to choose a life-course without guilt over consequences. She did what Clarissa Dalloway and character-Woolf only fantasized, yet her actions make Clarissa Dalloway’s party more heroic in its concern for fellow travelers.

Clarissa Vaughn’s summary of life, after Richard’s death, clarifies the difference between Woolf’s horizon and Cunningham’s horizon, between early and late twentieth-century worldviews. Woolf’s included moral responsibility and transcendent hope; Cunningham’s, as explained by Clarissa Vaughn, expresses moral neutrality, death’s finality, longing for what is lost, and hope for simply more:

We throw our parties, we abandon our families to live alone….; we struggle to write books that do not change the world, despite our gifts and our unstinting efforts…. We live our lives, do whatever we do, and then we sleep—it’s as simple and ordinary as that…. There’s just this for consolation; an hour here or there when our lives seem, against all odds and expectations, to burst open and give us everything we’ve ever imagined…. Still…we hope…for more. (225)

Re-reading Woolf after reading Cunningham clarifies one aspect of the human dilemma. Even though Cunningham’s Clarissa Vaughn and Richard Brown achieve what Woolf’s characters fantasize, they find no greater contentment than did Woolf’s Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith. All lack the unifying Word, which helps alleviate the heart’s emptiness by countering ambivalence with obedience, countering failure with redemption, and countering self-interest with the command to love disinterestedly.

Endnotes

1. Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway follows the actions and thoughts of Clarissa Dalloway, and those whose lives affect her, on a June morning in post World War I London as she prepares for a party, her specialty. Woolf demonstrates, through her stream-of-consciousness narrator, how each person affects the thoughts of others: these include Clarissa Dalloway, comfortably married to parliamentarian Richard; Peter Walsh, whom she rejected years earlier but who is briefly back in London and stops for a visit; Septimus Smith, a young traumatized war veteran whom she sees on her walk to buy flowers; Septimus’ wife, Lucrezia, who helplessly watches her husband’s psychological decline; Clarissa’s daughter Elizabeth, just starting her adult life; the daughter’s working-class tutor, Doris Kilman, enraptured with her student and jealous of Clarissa’s position in life; and Sally Seton, Clarissa’s girlhood friend with whom Clarissa once shared a dazzling kiss. Events progress from Clarissa’s buying flowers, to watching her husband depart for a luncheon, to being visited by Peter Walsh, to being visited by Miss Kilman.
and reach a climax at her evening’s party, where she attempts to connect disparate lives but learns that Septimus Smith has killed himself.

2. Cunningham’s *The Hours*, derived from *Mrs. Dalloway*, follows the thoughts and actions of author Virginia Woolf, as she writes her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, as well as the life and thoughts of reader Laura Brown, living in 1940s’ Los Angeles; writer Richard Brown, Laura’s AIDS-infected son, living in 1990s’ New York; and Clarissa Vaughn, Richard’s first love, before they both adopted the gay life. Cunningham writes of the ways Virginia Woolf’s novel affects and connects her readers’ lives, as they attempt their own creative works and parties. By the novel’s end, both Virginia Woolf and her reader’s son Richard Brown have committed suicide.

3. See 2 Timothy 3.15-17; 1 John 4:1; Ex. 20:1-2; Matt. 5-7; Rom. 1; Col. 3. 1-25.

4. Cunningham took as his title the working title of Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, as his novel responds to hers.

5. They reveal the fallen human condition as one of living in a good creation while defying or being oblivious to God and his laws, suffering the devastating effects of the fall, and ignoring Christ’s offer of redemption in their own attempts at self-redemption and philosophically based transcendence.

6. “Georgian novelists” refers to English novelists writing during the reign of King George V, 1910-1936, including not only the experimental work of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, etc., but also the continued work of Edwardian novelists Galsworthy, Wells, Bennett, and Conrad as well as work of Aldous Huxley, Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, and Somerset Maugham (Harmon/Holman 235).


9. This philosophy justifies her feminist-gender criticism and provides solace for her characters since it implies human divinity and makes death a transition to the universal consciousness.

10. This concept is explained by Hermione Lee, p. 19-20.

11. I.e., Clarissa Dalloway’s effort to give a party as a compensatory gift to the world, Septimus’s desire to bring a religion of love to the world, Clarissa Vaughn’s attempt to buy Evans a book that evokes a feeling beyond human happiness, her desire to give Richard a party that expresses more than friendship, Laura Brown’s effort to bake a cake that fills her family with joy, or character-Woolf’s desire to write a book that compensates for her failures.

**Works Cited**


I'm beginning this essay with the feminist technique of situating myself within the topics covered. I graduated from Dordt College in 1982. I had transferred to Dordt as a sophomore because I was interested in the Reformed worldview that the institution emphasized. As a political science major I read Calvin, Althusius, Kuyper, Bavinck, Dooyeweerd, and Groen van Prinsterer. I absorbed it all; I appreciated it all. And, if you had asked me then if I was a feminist, I would have said, “No way. I like men.” I was grateful to the feminists of the early 1970s because they had paved the way for me to go to law school, but I had no interest in feminist perspective.

From college I went directly to law school at the University of Iowa. Then I joined a large general practice law firm in Grand Rapids, Michigan. It was the mid-1980s and an unfortunate era for fashion. I had big hair, big shoulder pads, a little bow tie on my suit, power heels, and red lipstick. I powered my way through the cases I was given and never thought twice about feminism or women’s issues. Then, in 1990, I had a baby, and everything changed. I had gone back to graduate school when I became pregnant so that I would be able to spend more time at home with the baby. One day I was sitting at a picnic table with my friends, all new moms and their kids. We were talking about diapers and laundry. The conversation hit me between the eyes. Diapers? Laundry? How had my life turned into a discussion about these things?

Eventually, I joined the faculty at Whitworth University, a small Presbyterian university in the Pacific Northwest. Over the years I have seen a similar thing happen over and over. Smart girls come from high school by the droves. They have earned high grades and high test scores. They dominate in college. They earn great grades, and

If a Calvinist Had Coffee With a Feminist

by Julia K. Stronks

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they do internships and write amazing papers. Then they graduate and go off into the world. But when they return for their ten-year college reunion, the women are talking about their children, and the men are talking about their careers. At some point in the reunion weekend, some of these young women will take me aside and say, “Julia, I love my children. I picked this life. But I was going to change the world. How did this happen to me?” They have the same look on their faces that I had on mine the day I discovered that my conversations were mostly about laundry.

Now some reading this paper might be thinking, “There is nothing wrong with that. Those young women are being great mothers. That is exactly what they are supposed to do.” My point is not that there is something wrong with their lives. My point is that it is interesting that so little has changed in the thirty years since I was a college student. It is interesting that the public and private lives of Christian men and women have changed so little over the years. Consider even the contributors to this group of essays; few women participated, and this lack is reflective of my experience at the majority of Christian conferences where I speak. And so, at the age of almost fifty, for the first time in my life I have become interested in feminism.

This essay considers three aspects of this hypothetical coffee between a feminist and a Calvinist: What would the two have in common? What might the feminist learn from the Calvinist? And what might the Calvinist learn from the feminist?  

Defining the terms: Calvinists and Feminists

In politics, the Calvinist tradition emphasizes a number of themes. First, in the words of Abraham Kuyper, there is “not one square inch” of creation that does not belong to God. Our politics, our family life, our law—all of these—are subject to God. Second, we think of our world as fallen but redeemed. The themes of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration shape our understanding of our job in this world. God created the world in perfect form. The fall resulted in a broken creation: broken relationships, broken institutions, and a broken connection between God and humans. However, Christ’s death and resurrection redeemed our creation, and we live now with confidence that God guides us in the work we do while we are waiting for full restoration with God in the new earth. Third, God’s creation includes people, certainly, but it also includes social structures in society. Families, communities of worship, economic institutions, non-government associations—all of these—have responsibilities in the world. A biblical view of government recognizes that these social structures must be allowed to exist in a way that responds to God’s call. This respect for the uniqueness of each structure is called structural pluralism. In order for structural pluralism to flourish, confessional pluralism within these structures must be allowed. Even though the majority might believe that families or schools should operate in a particular way, confessional pluralism suggests that government should protect the space that allows even minority views (often Christian views) to flourish. Fourth, as Christians we are called to concern ourselves with the poor, the weak, and the sick. Fifth, God will achieve God’s work through a number of different channels. Included in those channels, Christians will be used to work for the glory of God, but through common grace, we know that God will often use those who are not Christians to reveal truth. We do not fear other perspectives—we can be confident that God will lead us as we listen to others and use discernment to determine what God is working to show us.

Feminists, on the other hand, are harder to define. There are many different kinds of feminists, and the word itself carries a great deal of baggage. However, in politics in the United States, two feminist views have emerged as dominant: the radical feminist perspective and the liberal feminist perspective.

The radical perspective represents a very small number of voices, but it is the target of the vast majority of Christian critics. Radical feminists emphasize the role of patriarchy in society and view most social institutions as examples of male oppression. They often argue that men and women are different and that women have qualities that make them better suited to positions of leadership: women are less divisive and more conciliatory. Radical feminists have sometimes argued that marriage and mothering are forms of male domi-
nance in our culture, and radical feminism has led commentators like Pat Robertson to say things like this:

[T]he feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians.¹

Liberal feminists, however, make up the vast majority of feminists in this country and present a far less controversial perspective. Their primary emphasis is rights-oriented. Liberal feminists have the same fundamental presuppositions as others in our democracy. They agree that representation, federalism, a market economy, private property and rule of law are fundamental to a well-organized society. But, they argue, these elements have far too often left women out. As a result, their emphasis is on equality for women. Liberal feminists consider whether women are represented in Congress or in the courts; they argue for equitable treatment under the law, and they encourage consideration of equality in areas impacted by the market.

Calvinists and Feminists in common

When most people hear the word “feminist” they think of the women’s movement of the 1970s. Many Christians are surprised to learn that there have been four feminist movements in the United States and that all four of them have involved active work by Christian women. Moreover, all four movements have focused on justice for the poor, the sick, and the weak—the very things that we in the Calvinist tradition have emphasized as part of our calling in a broken but redeemed world.

The first feminist movement in the United States occurred during the founding of the new Republic. Mary Wollstonecraft was a British author and intellectual writer during the 1700s. She wrote essays on rights and is best known for her piece called *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Wollstonecraft was a humanist and rejected the teachings of Christianity. However, women in what was to become the United States were interested in Wollstonecraft’s work. Abigail Adams, wife of second President John Adams and friend to George Washington, read much of what was written by Wollstonecraft. Though Wollstonecraft framed her perspective in humanist terms, Adams understood women’s rights to be grounded in the fact that women were created by God as equal to men. She encouraged her husband and George Washington to consider this perspective in their shaping of the new country. Even though she was not ultimately successful, she and other women of that time reflect the first significant movement toward gaining equal property and voting rights for women. In a famous letter to her husband, Abigail Adams demonstrates her understanding of equality when she writes, “If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice, or representation.”²

The second feminist movement in this country evolved with the abolition movement. From the early 1800s until the Civil War, those concerned with suffrage for women were also active in the movement against slavery. During this period Lucy Stone represents the role that Christian women played. Stone was a committed Christian who read the Bible over and over. She was a Congregationalist but was kicked out of two different church congregations because she insisted that the life of Jesus demonstrated that men and women are equal in God’s eyes. She challenged American churches to reform by bringing their treatment of women in line with Christ’s model.

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In addition to her attention to women's rights, she was also a committed advocate of abolition, tax reform, and temperance. Stone is credited for sparking the feminist interests of Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton; and the three women together, all Christians in their early years, are often referred to as the foundation of American feminism.

Another part of this era is the beginning of what we now think of as the “gender as construction” discussion. This discussion is illustrated by the words of Sojourner Truth, a freed slave living in Ohio toward the end of her life. She was a Baptist and is famous for her off-the-cuff remarks at a meeting held in her church that modeled the earlier Seneca Falls Convention on women’s rights. After a number of people had spoken, Truth asked for permission to speak and went to the front of the room:

Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that ‘twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what’s all this here talking about?

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what’s this they call it? [member of audience whispers, “intellect”] That’s it, honey. What’s that got to do with women’s rights or negroes’ rights? If my cup won’t hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn’t you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?

Then that little man in black there, he says women can’t have as much rights as men, ‘cause Christ wasn’t a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain’t got nothing more to say.3

Sojourner Truth’s poignant words highlight an important question: what does it mean to be female? Are attributes we ascribe to women those instituted by God, or are they socially constructed? These are issues we still debate and discuss today.

The early 1900s, the third wave of American feminism, are well-known as a time in which suffrage was a key concern, but it is important to note that racial and economic justice were themes of equal interest to the women fighting for the right to vote. Three Christian women are illustrative of this work. Dorothy Day, leader of the Catholic Worker’s Movement, was active on behalf of the poor, immigrants, and workers, who often experienced abuse at the hands of their employers. Ida Wells was a journalist who wrote about lynching and other criminal injustices suffered by the African American community. She worked on a wide variety of matters related to gender and economic justice as they impacted race, and eventually she began the NAACP. Alice Paul, a Quaker, led nonviolent protests for suffrage, getting arrested and beaten for her work. She then led a hunger strike in prison and was force-fed with straws pushed down her throat causing tremendous pain. After women received the vote, Paul worked toward a Ph.D. and a law degree. She continued to work for economic, racial, and gender justice throughout her life.

The 1970s women’s movement, or fourth wave of American feminism, is best known for its emphasis on abortion and birth control, but a closer look
discovers aspects of the movement that focused on justice for a wide variety of citizens. Delores Huerta spent decades working with Caesar Chavez in pursuit of fair treatment of migrant workers and with him started the United Farm Workers of America. The mother of eleven children, she often spoke of her Catholic faith as giving her motivation and comfort in her work. Elizabeth Farians was one of the founders of NOW. As a Catholic theologian she has argued that male and female are both created in the image of God. It was she who first crafted the buttons claiming “Jesus was a Feminist.”

All four feminist movements emphasized justice for the poor and the weak, but it’s also important to note that the solution toward which most feminists worked was government intervention and legislative control. This is a point at which Calvinists can contribute to the discussion.

Feminists learning from Calvinists

The two points at which feminists can learn from Calvinists have to do with the role of government and the value of human life. Feminists have established a firm track record on valuing human life that exists. Their concern for human rights, for economic and racial justice, and for those who struggle in the world is clear. In addition, American feminists have worked hard on the issue of birth control, arguing that every child born should be a child that is wanted. However, in recent decades some feminist emphases on rights have translated into a lack of concern for unborn children. The debate about abortion has been used as a litmus test for those who self-identify as feminists. Further, the rhetoric of the pro-choice and pro-life debates has diminished real public discussion about the role of government in protecting life.

Because Calvinists emphasize government’s responsibility to do justice, Calvinists are in a unique position to encourage discussion about abortion that focuses on justice to all involved in the debates: the woman, the unborn child, the father, and the community at large. The majority of Americans, including those who identify themselves as feminists, position themselves somewhere between those who would advocate abortion on demand and those who would criminalize abortion at any point in a pregnancy. Wise, balanced discussion in this area is needed.

A second area where Calvinists can contribute is the point of discussion about the role of government to achieve certain goods. American feminists, like Americans in general, are quick to turn to government to solve all problems. Legislation and litigation are the first tools to which reformers turn. However, government cannot and should not do all things. Because Calvinists have a developed understanding of the plurality of institutions in society, they are well positioned to encourage a holistic view of social change. The goals of economic, racial, and gender justice cannot be achieved by government alone. Families, businesses, schools, non-governmental organizations—all of these—must play a role in bringing about a just society. Calvinists, with their emphasis on structural and confessional pluralism, can encourage a diverse approach to working toward justice to all groups.

Calvinists learning from Feminists: methodology

One of the most important areas to which Christians of all sorts should pay more attention is methodology in understanding the world. Feminist methodology, like most postmodern views, emphasizes narrative, listening, and experience as tools for understanding others. The following parable illustrates the approach that feminists advocate:

The Blind Men and the Elephant
by John Godfrey Saxe (1816-1887)

It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.

The First approached the Elephant,
And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side,
At once began to bawl:
“God bless me! but the Elephant
Is very like a WALL!”

The Second, feeling of the tusk,
Cried, “Ho, what have we here,
So very round and smooth and sharp?
To me ’tis mighty clear
This wonder of an Elephant
Is very like a SPEAR!”

The Third approached the animal,
And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands,
Thus boldly up and spake:
“I see,” quoth he, “the Elephant
Is very like a SNAKE!”

The Fourth reached out an eager hand,
And felt about the knee
“What most this wondrous beast is like
Is mighty plain,” quoth he:
“’Tis clear enough the Elephant
Is very like a TREE!”

The Fifth, who chanced to touch the ear,
Said: “E’en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most;
Deny the fact who can,
This marvel of an Elephant
Is very like a FAN!”

The Sixth no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope,
Than seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope,
“I see,” quoth he, “the Elephant
Is very like a ROPE!”

And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!

This fable is often interpreted by Christians as a postmodern rejection of God’s Truth, but feminist methodology interprets the parable in a different way. Feminists argue that we can understand the world only when we all listen to each other and learn from the experience of each other. In this parable each blind man understands the elephant in part. Likewise, in our world each person understands reality only in part. It is only by pooling our experience that we can see the full identity of problems or solutions.

For example, if one polls middle-class Christians and asks them what they feel is the most challenging issue that government must confront with respect to the family, most will say that government should recognize the need for a parent to be in the home. As a result, they also say that tax policy and day-care-voucher systems should be revamped so that parents who want to be home with their children are encouraged to do so. But, if one polls Americans across age, ethnicity, worldview perspectives, gender, and economic background, a different view of challenges to the family emerges. In this case the issue that is highlighted by the vast majority of people is family violence.

In our country, intimate-partner violence is a critical problem. Over the course of their lifetimes, one in four women will report some form of intimate-partner abuse. Three women are killed every day by their partners in this country. There are more than 500 rapes or sexual assaults per day.5

Child abuse is another challenge. Every ten seconds, a report of child abuse is filed in our country. More than four children per day are killed by a parent or parent figure. Eighty percent of adults who were abused as children meet the diagnostic for psychological disorders, and over sixty percent of those who are currently in drug rehab were abused.

Sex-trafficking is also a growing issue in our country. Over 50,000 women and girls are trafficked into the United States every year and enter
into lives of prostitution. These numbers are horrifying, but all three of these issues are responsive to changes in public policy and to pressure or changes in social institutions.

Violence is an issue on which both feminists and Calvinists can join together without controversy. Decreasing family violence and sexual assault meets the feminist goal of justice for women, and it also meets the Calvinist’s goal of strengthening families and caring for the vulnerable.

In this hypothetical coffee between a feminist and a Calvinist, my hope would be that the two would find that though they might have different motives, they also have much in common in objectives. Calvinists in the Twenty-first Century should embrace feminists and be eager to work with them for mutually compatible goals.

Endnotes

5. All statistics on violence are drawn from the American Bar Association’s domestic violence report. new. abanet.org/domesticviolence/Pages/Statistics.aspx.
Graduates, family, friends, faculty, and staff of Dordt College: I consider it an honor to speak to our graduates for a few minutes—in a sense to give the last word to them as they leave us. Graduates, I am happy to be part of your exciting day, and I congratulate you.

When you graduates first came to Dordt College as students, you were required to take a course called “Kingdom, Identity, and Calling,” known at that time as Gen. 100. Some of you were in my class, and it gives me great joy to see you here today. In that course, you were asked to study Dr. Hielema’s book, Deepening the Colors. Although you might not all have agreed at the time, this is a very good book. The book begins with the story of God’s Kingdom and moves from there to consider who we are—as image-bearers—within that kingdom, that is, who we are called to be. As you worked through the course and the book, you were invited “to examine the colors of your own life as the light of Jesus shines on them, and to seek the deepening of these colors through following where Jesus leads.” We looked at the needs of the world, we asked you to discover your talents and passions, we examined truth-walking habits, we tried to write our story within God’s story, and finally we asked what we were supposed to do. Dr. Hielema asked us to think of ourselves as the faint beginnings of our New Jerusalem colors. Today I want you to think again for a few minutes about those colors. What colors will the world see when they look at you? What gem will you be—a ruby? An emerald? An onyx? Or will you only be a stone that reflects no color?

Throughout your years at Dordt College, your professors sought to help you become the person you are called by God to be. Always they went back to the theme of considering how your talents would intersect with the needs of the world. That point, as you know, is where God is now calling you to work. To shine the light of Jesus to those in need surely would deepen the colors of what people will see in your life. In order to most clearly shine the light of Jesus, you must be a diamond.
A few of you have heard me speak of diamonds, and I want to do so again today—for all of you. A diamond is one of the most precious gems. We use diamonds for some of our most challenging tasks, like using diamond-coated tools to perform some of the most difficult cutting. In our culture they symbolize the highest and most intense relationships—engagement and marriage. When a young woman gets engaged, she loves to show off her diamond ring! Remember, too, that God’s covenant is his marriage to his people, but instead of a ring on the finger, he makes you the diamond.

Just as a diamond expert cuts the gem into a particular shape and polishes it, so God shapes and polishes us through many life experiences, some of which seem to be very cutting. He is working to form us as sparkling gems for his crown. The pressures of life are used by God to increase the brilliance and clarity of who we are. Diamonds, we are told, are forever. So, too, human beings are created with eternity in their hearts.

When we go to a jeweler to shop for diamonds, we see many different shapes and sizes. If they were all the same, shopping for a diamond would be far less exciting. All are beautiful. So it is, or should be, with people. When we see all the different shapes, sizes, and faces, our response should be that they are all beautiful. How many facets does a diamond have? Usually more than we count. The more we study a diamond, the more we realize its many sides. Likewise with people, the more we get to know them, the more we realize the many facets to their lives. How often we say, “I didn’t know he could do that.” The more we study people, the more interesting they become.

Notice that a diamond has no color of its own. It gets its brilliance and its color from the light, most dramatically from the sunlight. On cloudy days, assuming for a moment we do not have artificial lights, a diamond can hardly sparkle. Since we are created in the image of God and called to image Him in our daily walk, we should be like diamonds in God’s world. He is the light, and we are called to refract his light and spread color to all of our neighbors. But one cannot show the beautiful colors of God if one is not in touch with the Light. If we let the light of God shine through us, we can imagine the beauty that will be displayed all around us. We can also imagine that the beautiful colors we display will be much larger than what we are. People turn to view the color rather than the diamond, and so should it be. If we are true diamonds for God, we will be instruments for displaying his rainbows throughout the world, and people will bring the praise to Him. Even a very tiny diamond can demonstrate the beauty of God.

Diamonds have great value: they are perhaps the most precious of gems. If we were to lose a diamond, we would be broken-hearted. How much more we break the heart of God when we slip away from Him! This is the challenge of your life: to stay with God. Consider how much he paid for us! Surely he regards each of us with more value than a diamond. In the same way, we also should value one another. By his grace we can become, as the Apostle Peter says, living stones (I Peter 2:4). Peter says, “As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

As you consider your calling in life this day, I want to ask you to think of yourself as a beautiful diamond created by God to be used for his glory. As a nurse on the night shift, you can be a light in the night. As a mother, you can bring the sunshine of God’s word to the children. As a farmer, you can plant a field that becomes a rainbow of color for God. As a teacher, you can take God’s word and turn it into insights for the students. As a business manager, you can reflect the soft light of care for your employees. The face of a social worker should shine because she or he belongs to Jesus. The counselor brings color into the dark lives of those who hurt. You may fill in the blanks with your own profession by asking yourself this: “How can I be a diamond for Jesus this day by reflecting his light in this world?”

But staying in touch with the light of Jesus is no easy task. The empires of this world do all they can to be attractive while at the same time throwing dirt over the diamonds for Jesus. Pastor Mark Verbruggen, from First Christian Reformed Church here in Sioux Center, often warns us about selling out to the empires of our age. Beware of the
empires who seek your allegiance. You cannot trust institutions: they are far too fragile to hold you. Look how quickly institutions of Wall Street fall. Large corporations go bankrupt. Businesses fail. The government promises solutions it cannot and does not deliver. Too many colleges have slipped away from their Christian mission. Even the instituted church too often caters to worldly formulas rather than the Word of God. Can one always go back to the family for security? No, it, too, is faulted and often fails.

More than institutions, other empires seek your allegiance. Consider materialism and consumerism: they look attractive. But they are a cancer that is never satisfied and continues to demand more flesh to devour. Materialism will not be satisfied until it has taken over your life. It will do all it can to cover your diamond status so that the light of Jesus is not seen.

Consider entertainment as an empire that would draw you away from your calling. Many temples to the gods of sports are being built: race tracks with stands for a hundred thousand and more, football stadiums that are packed on weekends, computer games that suck hundreds of hours away from constructive work, second homes on the lake that draw many away from church on Sunday. And then there are all the toys which take huge amounts of money that is needed elsewhere. These are all empires of this world that can draw you away from your mission. Can you withstand these? When you begin to serve these empires, the light of Jesus grows dim.

Now, I suppose you might be saying with holy resolve, “No, I will never give in to those empires.” But refusal is not that easy. These empires are like magnets. Almost before you know it, you can be pulled away from your mission.

The only way you can stay true to your mission of serving as an image bearer in the kingdom is by staying in touch with the light, which is Jesus Christ. Let Him polish you and make you shine. Then you can face those empires with a prophetic voice—calling all institutions to bow before our Father. The kingdom requires your voice. In the words of Dr. Gordon Spykman from this very spot a generation ago: “Nothing matters but the kingdom of God, but because of the kingdom, everything—literally everything—matters.” Go where He calls. Bring His light to all corners of the Kingdom.

Remember those truth-walking habits we talked about in Gen. 100? We talked about daily devotions, about eating together as family, about remaining part of the Christian community, about staying in tune with the needs of the world, and the list went on. Those truth-walking habits are aimed at keeping us in close touch with God. The lessons we learned about being children of the light were good lessons, even though we didn’t always do our homework. As you now begin a new, significant chapter in your life, consider once again those truth-walking habits: eating together, daily reading the Bible, praying without ceasing, caring for others around you, and enjoying with thanks the life God is giving you. These habits may not be easy, but they are worth the effort. These habits will help keep you in touch with the Light of Jesus.

There is nothing that gives a professor greater joy than to have a graduate come back to tell the story of how he or she is faithfully working in God’s kingdom—caring for new children, being busy in the church, honestly working at a profession, and remaining faithful in marriage. This faithfulness is the deepest desire of our hearts.

And now, here is the good part: God’s covenant with us is a marriage, and He does not divorce His people. He will give you all that you need to bring His light to the world. Remember that He also calls us to be faithful. He gives all and He asks all.

By his grace, you, graduates, now leave here with a mind that is well-trained for service. As the colors of your life deepened through your education at Dordt College, you are now equipped to bring the glory of God to this world. Let those colors continue to deepen. Go with His blessing. In the words of the Lutheran Vespers benediction, I ask that God go before you to show you the way, that He go above you to watch over you, that He walk beside you to encourage you, that He go behind you to give you strength, and that He be within you to give you peace. Walk as children of the Light!

Author Richard Stearns begins *The Hole in our Gospel* by recounting his personal journey from successful corporate CEO to the president of one of the largest Christian relief and development organizations, World Vision. His decision to lead World Vision and leave behind the more lucrative corporate world was a culmination of his maturation as a Christian, his sense of God’s call in his life, and a number of not-so-subtle nudges by fellow Christians and family members who challenged him to make the change. Part 1 covers the journey that Stearns himself takes in discovering the hole in his understanding of the Gospel. He becomes convinced of the social and global implications of a Gospel meant for the whole world. The book’s message is directed primarily towards Christians and the church in North America and includes practical steps for those inspired to take further action. For those who have read extensively on global poverty, the statistics and current realities to poverty are not new, and yet *The Hole in our Gospel* offers new insights and conveys urgency to the problem of poverty while making a convincing argument that the problem is not just the poor’s but ours.

In Part 2, “The Hole Gets Deeper,” Stearns argues that the primary hole in our gospel is our tendency as Christians to understand faith as only a personal salvation issue without considering larger implications for behavior towards our families, civil society, or the world. Stearns uses such passages as Isaiah 58 and Matthew 25 to argue that “God expects our lives—our churches and faith communities too—to be characterized by these authentic signs of our own transformation: compassion, mercy, justice, and love—demonstrated tangibly” (57). This tangible demonstration of the Gospel is often ignored or overlooked by many Christians despite repeated calls in the Bible for followers of Jesus Christ to do justice and love mercy. Stearns considers our non-response to be a sin of omission and uses the parable of Lazarus and the rich man as illustration. The rich man, who ended up in the torments of hell, walked by Lazarus every day at the gates and ignored him: “He was aware of the beggar’s plight, had the power to relieve his suffering—and yet chose to do nothing” (187).

Throughout, Stearns gently urges us to honestly evaluate our response and our view of the Gospel. In Part 3, “A Hole in the World,” he also urges us to acknowledge and understand the need in the world. Though historically inadequate communication systems, lack of technology and travel opportunities, and proper disbursement of medication slowed down our response, these impediments have lessened considerably in the last half of the twentieth century (101-104). But even with these advancements, the response has been slow. One reason for our slow response is a simplistic view of the causes and solutions of poverty. Americans believe that poverty is an “absence of things” or a lack of knowledge (125) and that once equipped, the poor will no longer be poor. Systematic corruption and oppression and their effects are often not considered. Finally, believing that poverty is a result of sinfulness, many do not realize that many of the world’s poorest people are Christians, no more sin-ridden than the rest of us (126). In contrast to this simplistic understanding of the problems and solutions, Stearns offers a comprehensive explanation of the interconnected and complex factors that affect the global poor. For example, the AIDS epidemic is not only a health issue but also has devastating social and economic impacts on families and communities. Education can be threatened when teachers die from AIDS or when children quit coming when their parents are stricken with the disease. Stearns appropriately describes the compounding and complicated issues as a spider web.

Stearns conveys a sense of urgency and timeliness for action by North American Christians, showing first the relatively recent and growing inequality between the world’s rich and the world’s poor:

According to Jeffrey D. Sachs, in 1820 the difference in per capita income between the wealthiest region and the poorest was perhaps four to one. Compare that to the seventy-five to one cited by President Carter in 2002. Prior to 1800, disease and inadequate health care were facts of life that affected all people. (100)

The industrial revolution and technological advancements sparked rapid advancement and improvement in quality of life in only some countries and became a major contributor to the growing inequality. With this growing gap between rich and poor, there exists a moral dilemma, Stearns argues, for those who are wealthy in comparison to the one billion people who live on less than one U.S. dollar a day. But Stearns shows that there is hope; progress has been made with significant improvements in health, life expectancy, literacy, and quality of life for many. Although we often despair and are immobilized by the sheer size of
need, Stearns offers three simple principles for Christians to embrace: “Every one of these hurting people is created in God’s image and loved by him. Every one of these challenges has a solution. Every one of us can make a difference” (162). The technology and resources exist to drastically change the circumstances of the world’s most vulnerable, but a concentrated and significant movement of will is needed. The remainder of the book shifts focus toward the response of the church and individuals in repairing the hole in the world and in our gospel.

The most powerful and convicting parts of in The Hole in our Gospel are Parts 4 and 5: “The Hole in the Church” and “Repairing the Hole.” Stearns makes a convincing and passionate argument that Christians can and should be the ones who lead the change to change the world. The American church is the wealthiest group of Christians in history (216). He calculates that if all churchgoers committed to tithing their full ten percent, there would be an extra $168 billion per year: “If every American churchgoer tithed, we could literally change the world. In fact...$65 billion—less than 40 percent of the extra $168 billion—could eliminate the most extreme poverty on the planet for more than a billion people” (218). Instead of being known by what we are against, the church needs to be known by our successful efforts to change the world (228). Instead of being comfortable with the American Dream (individual hard work bringing individual success), we should find comfort in belonging to God and being entrusted with, not entitled to, His resources (207).

Stearns laments the failure of the church’s full participation in major social change efforts:

If the Church is indeed a revolutionary kind of institution, called to foment a social revolution by promoting justice, lifting up the sanctity of human life, fighting for the underdog, and challenging the prevailing value systems in our world, then it seems we should be out in front on social justice issues rather than bringing up the rear” (190).

He shows how the church has lagged behind by citing enslavement of blacks and treatment of Native Americans as examples (190-202). Although his argument is valid, the assumption that the institutional church acts in concentrated ways is questionable. On any issue, there seems to be wide and diverse response within the body of Christ. The church certainly should move together to respond to the vast need in the world, but it seems Stearns even agrees that this response really begins with individuals and small groups of committed people. He mentions Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., William Wilberforce, and others as examples of those who have fought against social injustice and inspired others to join the effort. The chapter “A Tale of Two Real Churches” gives us examples of how local churches saw the need around them and responded with action (231-241). World Vision and other development organizations serve as powerful examples of the impact and influence that a few committed Christians can have in inspiring organizations that do a great amount of good.

Stearns presents a compelling case for the urgency of Christians to “repair the hole” in the world. The final section of the book turns the challenge to us, asking what we are going to do with our time, talent, and treasure. Stearns reminds us again that each of us has a responsibility to act and live out the whole Gospel in a world full of need. He does not argue that everyone should join the mission field but rather that each should give of what he or she has and use influence and resources to make a difference. Interspersed throughout the book are stories of inspiring people and churches that have done amazing things to respond to various problems in their neighborhoods and around the world. One small group of people can change the world. The Hole in our Gospel contains an inspiring and convicting message, and Stearns pushes us to imagine a world where a concentrated effort of the church makes a drastic difference in the lives of the world’s most vulnerable people.


When and how did liberty arise? How did we arrive at multi-party, wide-franchise, secret-ballot elections for determining who shall hold office as a legislator? How did we arrive at contemporary democracy with all its faults and blessings? These closely related questions, and others like them, have been posed repeatedly by politicians, lawyers, and historians alike. In the West, as public life over the last two hundred years has lost clear contact with the Christian religion (though is not a whit less religious for all that), the tendency has been to answer these questions by ascribing a pivotal role to the American and French revolutions. Certainly, the period 1763 to 1799 is of central significance, as any careful reader of Robert R. Palmer’s now classic The Age of the Democratic Revolution (1959-64) will appreciate. The question is this: do we owe the things that we prize—when we speak of liberty, democracy, and free elections—pre-eminently to the French Revolution and the frequently anti-Christian (and especially anti-Catholic) teachings of
the so-called “enlightenment,” which were its guiding principles, or must we look elsewhere for the historical roots of what we have come to associate with “liberty”? Historians still offer divergent, though not necessarily totally contradictory, replies to such questions. This may be said of The Reformation of Rights, by John Witte, and Jonathan Israel’s A Revolution of the Mind.

English-born Jonathan Israel is one of the most accomplished scholars working on enlightenment studies in North America. He was appointed Professor of Modern History at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, in 2001. He has to his credit a wide-ranging and massively detailed work on the Netherlands: The Dutch Republic, Its Rise, Greatness and Fall, 1477-1806 (1995). He is an authority on Baruch Spinoza (1632-77) and is currently at work on a comprehensive three-volume work on the “radical” enlightenment, destined to stand alongside the work of Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945), and Peter Gay (b. 1923). Two immense volumes have appeared so far: Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750 (2001), and Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752 (2009).

Israel’s much shorter A Revolution of the Mind may be read as a kind of interim report on the entire project as it approaches completion. Israel insists that we distinguish between a “moderate” enlightenment, which sought gradual improvement, and a “radical” enlightenment, which stood more stolidly for the sovereignty of reason and, if need be, for the implementation of sweeping programs of change (Israel 3, 15, 19). The distinction is fundamental (94-6), the radicals emerging as deeply anti-hierarchical, without being socialists or communists (97). He sees Spinoza at the head of the “radicals” and Pierre Bayle (1647-1706) heading the “moderates” (239-41). In the crucial period from the 1760s to 1790s, the elites of the ancien régime rebuffed the advocates of gradualism (34-36). The greater the delay in the substantive rectification of grievances, the more convincingly became the call of the radicals for a “revolution of the mind” (38). Here the Dutch Patriotten find their context (39, 66-68, 235). As other writers have emphasized, they were a harbinger in the Netherlands of what was to come in France. Edmund Burke (1729-97) turned against them in 1787, prior to the revolution in France (142). According to Israel, the cahiers of 1789 testify to the reality of such a “revolution of the mind” in the thinking of many (198, 229). For him, Voltaire (1694-1778) with his critique of radical writers, including Spinoza (208-14, 217), Thomas Reid (1710-96) with his focus on the senses (179), and even Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) with his emphasis on “sentiment” (157), fail to make the cut as “radicals” and are therefore numbered among the assorted “moderates” (218-220).

There is much that is provocative in all this. In my judgment, Israel is right to point to the question of slavery before 1776 (42-44), as well as to draw attention to the shifting meanings of the word “tyranny” (89, 91). He acknowledges that recent history-writing on the intellectual origins of the French Revolution does not reflect the fundamental moderate/radical distinction he posits (221-5, 231). Beyond these points, as Israel acknowledges, “The Revolution came and went. It proclaimed liberty, equality, and fraternity but failed to establish a viable democratic republic” (230). This statement leaves the way open for Israel to suggest that after early 1793 “the darker side of the French Revolution” emerged, represented by Maximilien Robespierre (1758-94), who “was inspired by the Rousseauist tendency,” Indeed, the “Jacobins did not hesitate publicly to condemn all the philosophes and the whole Enlightenment” (231). Israel would have us ascribe the worst crimes and outrages of the French Revolution to its “moderates” rather than to its “radicals”—an argument that can be expected to stir the scholarly pot. However, although the tables turned yet again with the fall of Robespierre, it was the radical agenda that managed to survive, emerging, Israel asserts, as “the official values of a major part of the world after 1945.” Anglo-America, influenced by Locke and others, tended to remain “implacably hostile” to the “radical” legacy (235).

Israel’s arguments, while not conclusive, are constructively provocative. The complexities of the late enlightenment and tortuous course of the French Revolution call for a carefully nuanced approach. And this is certainly what is required when assessing the presentation and utilization of “the revolution” in the Stone Lectures on Calvinism, offered by Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) in 1898. It is not always clear to readers how Kuyper can laud the Dutch struggle against Spain (1568-1648) and the British “Glorious Revolution” (1688-90) and the American struggle for independence (1776-83) and yet be so emphatically anti-revolutionary in regards to France. Kuyper bracketed the Dutch, British, and American developments together and contrasted them strongly with the French Revolution, while many others—including many in the 1780s—saw great continuities between the American and French events. Persons adopting the latter standpoint tend to see democracy arising in the 1770s and ‘80s.

Others, like John Witte, will adopt a less convulsive and more gradualist view of historical change. His focus is the long-term pre-French revolutionary and partly pre-enlightenment reformed struggle for religious rights. This author will be known to some Pro Rege readers as a student of the late H. Evan Runner and as a prolific author in the fields of jurisprudence and the history of law, not least on the relationship of religion to law in regards to marriage and the family. In 2002 he published Law and Protestantism: The Legal Teachings of the Lutheran Reformation. The work now before us, The Reformation of Rights, is essentially a continuation of the earlier work, but with the emphasis on the Calvinistic reformation and particularly on its leading public-legal consequences. Witte is Jonas Robitscher Professor of Law and Director of the Center for the
Study of Law and Religion at Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

Witte’s purpose is to explore how the Calvinistic reformation, notwithstanding its original orientation towards religious uniformity, became an early-modern “midwife,” ushering in the kind of law-state which supported or opened the way for significant measures of legally recognized religious diversity (Witte 1-5). His intent is to make more explicit the seriously neglected part played by Calvinists, Huguenots, Puritans, and Covenanters in this process (20 ff.). The groundwork is first laid by considering the initial Calvinistic reformation—“the original Genevan experiment” (39 ff.). Of course, in the complexities of historical change, intentions and outcomes are rarely identical. Calvin, like the other early reformers, never advocated what later generations would call “freedom of religion” or “principled pluralism.” In the context of the times, Geneva steered a course between Lutheran tendencies toward subordination to the civil authority and the Anabaptist depreciation, avoidance, and even sometimes repudiation thereof (4, 43). Calvin’s “two-kingdoms” were not those of either (43-45). Of central significance was Calvin’s insistence on the clear distinction between church and the civil authority—“two clear distinct areas of responsibility” (75). This, of course, had the effect of placing such reformed churches in the way of any monarchy (Catholic or Protestant) that presumed to lay down the law to the church in matters intrinsically ecclesiastical.

In the central part of his work, Witte explores how successive generations of reformed advocates and apologists developed arguments doctrinal, legal, and historical in order to gain from princes and jurisdictions the public-legal space necessary to worship and live with a good conscience. He does so with successive discussions of “those figures who stood tallest in times of crisis and challenge” (19). They were Theodore Beza (1519-1605), Johannes Althusius (1563-1638), and John Milton (1608-74) of the Commonwealth of England (81-275). From the English Puritans, Witte transitions to a consideration of the New England Puritan thinking that provided the basis and framework of the reflections of men such as John Adams (1735-1836) and his associates (277-319). This central portion of the book is rich in detail and lush with insight, especially on Beza and Althusius, providing the Anglophone reader with a depth of discussion not readily available elsewhere. A gem from Beza begs for quotation: “The people are not made for rulers, but rulers for the people” (7, 139). One is tempted to add for the twenty-first century: “People are not made for the market, but markets for the people” (cf. Mark 2: 27).

Witte’s expositions are at once adroit and judicious—as in his discussion of Milton’s theology (230-34, 271-2). And there is much here that will repay further exploration. For Witte, it was the Saint Bartholomew’s Day massacre (1572) that prompted Calvinist jurisprudence to focus on “law and religion, authority and liberty, rights and resistance” (85 ff.). In the writings of George Buchanan (1506-82) and François Hotman (1524-90) we encounter an approach to the legal past (136-7) synchronous with the orientation of the (original) “Society of Antiquaries” founded in England around 1572 and regarded by Herbert Butterfield as central in the establishment of the initial version of the protestant and Whig interpretation of history. Witte’s topic, therefore, plays into the history of the interpretation of history, itself a central theme in the history of historiography.

While each book stands alone, both are parts of larger projects. There is more than enough in A Revolution of the Mind for us to look forward keenly to the third volume of Israel’s magnum opus on the radical enlightenment. Although it is not his intention, his work may prove invaluable in identifying and elucidating the problems surrounding Kuyper’s characterization of both American and French revolutions in his Stone Lectures. Witte certainly feels the pull of Kuyper on his study, but the remarks that he offers here focus on Kuyper’s view of the American experience rather than on his presentation of the French Revolution (321-9). However, Witte hints at “a later volume or two” where we might expect Kuyper and his successors to receive fuller treatment (19). The forthcoming work of both scholars will be eagerly anticipated. In differing ways they can be expected to enhance our reading of Kuyper’s famous lectures.


In their short and easy-to-read paperback book When Helping Hurts, Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert leave no doubt about two of their primary beliefs: that Christians need to be more concerned about the poor, and that they need to change many of their well-intentioned but counter-productive methods of helping the poor. Given the credentials and experience of these two Covenant College professors, the Christian community and especially those who work directly with disadvantaged groups would be well advised to consider their words. Steve Corbett is a Community Development Specialist for the Chalmers Center for Economic Development and the former Regional (Central and South America) Director for Food for the Hungry International. Dordt graduate
Brian Fikkert holds a Ph.D. in Economic Development from Yale University and is the Founder and Executive Director of the Chalmers Center. Both have had extensive contact with the urban and rural poor in North America and in other parts of the world and with individuals and organizations dedicated to helping them.

Without deprecating the many ways that we are called to help the poor (e.g., government, NGO’s) the book clearly targets the response of individual Christians and small groups through their local church congregations. Aimed at spurring and changing specific poverty-alleviation efforts, the authors make it very clear up front that they want their readers to engage the post-chapter “reflection questions and exercises,” and they provide suggestions and web page links for discussion facilitators and those interested in digging deeper. These additions make When Helping Hurts a good choice for a Sunday school class, small group discussion, service or missions team members, or individuals (who have the discipline to appropriately reflect on the questions and exercises).

The book has three parts (each of which includes three chapters) titled “Foundational Concepts for Helping Without Hurting,” “General Principles for Helping Without Hurting,” and “Practical Strategies for Helping Without Hurting.” The authors do an excellent job of convincing readers of the importance of the topic, in part by effectively using Scripture to give readers a balanced perspective on poverty, wealth, human nature, cultural differences and other relevant topics. Two strengths of the book are its many true-story illustrations and its unwillingness to let the non-poor set the agenda. Refreshingly, the authors inform readers by sharing the insights and words of the poor themselves. Refusing to define poverty narrowly or through the biased eyes of helpers, the authors wisely identify poverty as going far beyond material deprivation. They also helpfully elaborate on Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen’s definition of poverty as “the inability to make meaningful choices.” They do this largely by recognizing poverty as the result of neglected or broken relationships—which effectively lead to multiple poverty of “being,” “community,” “stewardship” and “spiritual intimacy.” The conclusion is that people of all income levels can and do live in poverty and that lasting solutions to poverty can be obtained only when people’s worldviews are reoriented with respect to self, others, the material world, and God. But they do not stop at diagnosing problems. They also suggest how shalom might be restored by addressing personal tendencies, the groaning creation, negative peer influences, and broken systems.

When the authors focus more specifically on those in poverty as a result of global hunger and catastrophes, they provide helpful distinctions among relief, rehabilitation, and development. Generally speaking, they see a much more limited role for relief efforts than is usually practiced, and they caution well-intentioned “outside” helpers to recognize that paternalism can be “poisonous” when “relief” continues beyond its useful life. They do this, in part, by explaining how unwarranted help can impede the development of good judgment, self-discipline, and an orientation to the future, all of which better equip the poor to lift themselves out of poverty. Corbett and Fikkert also make the case for how anti-wealth biases hurt the poor. They note that asset ownership is an important part of pulling people out of poverty, since the accumulation of assets like homes, business equipment, or cash may not only be an indicator of responsible savings habits but will also enhance people’s earning potential, give them the opportunity to exercise management and stewardship skills, and encourage them to develop these skills. Assets also give the materially poor a cushion for weathering economic uncertainties and catastrophes. Because of these things, “helpers” who favor those who have not accumulated any assets over those who have may inadvertently reward behaviors that keep people in poverty.

The authors also make it much easier for the well-off to identify their own poverty. Once again, by closely listening to the voices of the poor, rather than by accepting the perceptions wealthy people have of the poor, they are able to give particularly useful advice to the large numbers of people who participate in service or missions trips. By recognizing the role that shame and a sense of inferiority play in the lives of the materially poor and identifying the serious poverties of self and relationship that afflict many wealthy people (which includes most North American Christians), the authors deftly illustrate how what they refer to as a “God complex” can easily lead to poverty alleviation efforts that make both rich and poor “poorer.” Additionally, when the authors list ways that helpers inadvertently contribute to situations where “locals” seem reluctant to take charge, they provide valuable information for the many North American Christians who engage in “service” or “missions” trips. Corbett and Fikkert also offer many suggestions for improving poverty-alleviation efforts, such as Asset-based Community Development (ABCD) and other strategies for enabling people in poverty to help themselves. The chapter on short-term missions’ trips is especially helpful for those who would more effectively structure, recruit, screen, train, and raise funds for these efforts.

If there is a weakness in When Helping Hurts, it is that the authors do not adequately deal with biblical texts that have strongly shaped our response to the poor—“Sell everything you have and give to the poor”; “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth”—or that might call into question the authors’ line of thinking and that may have influenced people to help in ways that have hurt. Also, even though most of the book flows logically and seems clearly focused on the goals and target audiences set forth in the forward, in the final chapter the authors move into microfinance and “business as mission” (BAM) and seem to gear their comments more toward business, finance,
James Davison Hunter’s *To Change the World* is a provocative book that everyone interested in the relationship of Christianity and culture should read. A University of Virginia sociologist of religion with a particular interest in the “culture wars,” Hunter has an acute awareness of the decreased cultural power of Christianity; as a Christian, he seeks to rethink Christian cultural activity in a post-Christian culture. Rejecting the dominant Christian view on culture-changing, Hunter contends that “cultures are profoundly resistant to intentional change—period” (45).

The dominant Christian view of culture, Hunter contends, is that culture is that which is found in the hearts and minds of individuals—so-called “values”: “By this view, a culture is made up of the accumulation of values held by the majority of people and the choices made on the basis of those values” (6). According to this view, changing culture requires changing hearts and minds, or the worldview that shapes those hearts and minds; the choices will then be different. He gives three subsequent beliefs of this view: “First, real change must proceed individually—one by one. …Second, cultural change can be willed into being. …Third, cultural change is democratic—it occurs from the bottom up” (16).

Hunter contends that this view of culture-changing relies on “specious social science and problematic theology” (5) and thus is “almost wholly mistaken” (17) and bound to be ineffective in changing culture (32). His contention is borne out by the fact that “in America today, 86-88 percent of the people adhere to some faith commitments. And yet our culture—business culture, law and government, the academic world, popular entertainment—is intensely materialistic and secular” (19). How can this be true if culture is simply the accumulation of values? In fact, culture often seems quite independent of majority opinion (22). Hunter repeatedly says he does not want to reject evangelism, political action, and social reform movements; these are indeed good things. But, he says that they do not change the culture (18).

Hunter contends that the dominant view goes awry in its assuming that ideas move history and that conflicts over culture are conflicts between worldviews (25). What the predominant view fails to take into account is the complexity of cultural production: culture is embedded in, and is a product of, language, history, and institutions. Culture exists where ideas, individuals, and institutions interact (34-35); cultural change flows from elite institutions and impersonal forces such as the market, not grassroots political action or individual action, and takes place over a long period of time (42-43, 46). He explains that Christians are largely “absent from the arenas in which the greatest influence in the culture is exerted” (89): the elite universities, the leading publishers, the leading venues of the fine arts, and so forth. In fact, the church’s absence from these areas is an indicator of the church’s lack of health; it is not exercising itself in all areas of life (95). The dominant view also involves the questionable assumption that we can “know God’s specific plans in human history and that one possesses the power to realize those plans in human affairs” (95).

Law and a common culture are sources of social solidarity, and, as Hunter notes, the one increases as the other decreases; the proliferation of legislation and litigation in recent decades is an indicator of the declining commonality of our culture. The state, as promulgator and adjudicator of law, is now seen as the locus of the public weal, its reach touching on every aspect of life. The public and the political are seen as coterminous (102-105). Hunter worries about the politicization of modern society; that is, all problems are seen as having a political solution, when in fact no such thing is true (171). Hence, Christian cultural engagement winds up being confined solely to political activism with the intent of controlling and deploying the coercive power of the state. Christian activism then becomes functionally Nietzschean: all about the will to power motivated by a resentment grounded in a perceived victimization (107). Hunter describes three main American Christian approaches to cultural engagement: the Christian Right, the Christian Left, and the neo-Anabaptists, each with their particular “myth and history” of contemporary America. The Right and the Left seek to acquire political power, while the neo-Anabaptists describe the church’s witness, using the language of politics. In all three cases, they fall victim to understanding modern society in terms of politicization.

Given that we should reject the dominant and mistaken view of cultural change, how should Christians seek change in the late modern world of consumerism, democracy, and technology? Hunter points out two major challenges of the modern world: “difference” and “dissolution”; these are aspects of modernity that Christians have not
adequately understood (199-200). Regarding difference, past cultures lived in relative isolation, but today’s globalized societies are constituted by cultural pluralism; in America today, there is no dominant culture, and it is highly unlikely there will be one. There is a fragmentation of worldviews as well as social structures supporting the worldviews. The other challenge, dissolution, relates to the deconstruction of the most basic assumptions about reality; there is no longer an assumption that words reliably refer to reality. For example, Hunter does not think of today’s controversy over whether the law ought to recognize certain same-sex relationships as marriages. Essentially, the debate is over to what state of affairs the term marriage refers; a hundred years ago there would be no question of its referent. How does one adjudicate the meaning of the term marriage among multiple cultural discourses, each of which provides an alternative context for understanding its meaning?

What shall we do then? Hunter’s central argument is this:

God, then, does not speak through empty abstractions or endless circumlocutions. Rather, in every instance, God’s word was enacted and enacted in a particular place and time in history. In all, presence and place mattered decisively. Nowhere is this more evident than the incarnation.

Word and world, then, come together not so much because words describe the world accurately or because words correspond to reality. Rather, word and world come together through the word’s enactments—both the fact that God’s word is always enacted but also in the way his word is enacted.

This, in short, is the foundation of a theology of faithful presence. It can be summarized in two essential lessons for our time. The first is that incarnation is the only adequate reply to the challenges of dissolution; the erosion of trust between word and world and the problems that attend it. From this follows the second: it is the way the Word became incarnate in Jesus Christ and the purposes to which the incarnation was directed that are the only adequate reply to the challenge of difference. For the Christian, if there is a possibility for human flourishing in a world such as ours, it begins when God’s word of love becomes flesh in us, is embodied in us, is enacted through us and in doing so, a trust is forged between the word spoken and the reality to which it speaks; to the words we speak and the realities to which we, the church, point. In all, presence and place matter decisively. (240-241; italics in original)

Hunter believes that American Christians today have much faith but have been formed by the larger post-Christian culture of modernity, which increasingly does not resemble the biblical vision of human flourishing: shalom. In response, the church, in both its local and universal manifestations, must embody this shalom (227). Hunter suggests that Christians relate to the world through a twofold dialectic of “affirmation” and “antithesis”; the Christian affirms that which is good in the world, while refusing that which is not (231). “Faithful presence” is Hunter’s term for the church’s critical but constructive resistance to the institutions of late modernity:

In our present historical circumstances, this means that the church and its people must stand in a position of critical resistance to late modernity and its institutions and carriers; institutions like modern capitalism, liberalism, social theory, health care, urban planning, architecture, art, moral formation, family, and so on. But here again, let me emphasize that antithesis is not simply negational. Subversion is not nihilistic but creative and constructive. Thus the church—as a community, within individual vocations, and through both existing and alternative social institutions—stands antithetical to modernity and its dominant institutions in order to offer an alternative vision or direction for them. Antithesis, then, does not require a stance that is antimodern or premodern but rather a commitment to the modern world in that it envisions it differently. Such a task begins with a critical assessment of the metaphysical, epistemological, and anthropological assumptions that undergird modern institutions and ideologies. But the objective is to retrieve the good to which modern institutions and assumptions implicitly or explicitly aspire; to oppose those ideals and structures that undermine human flourishing, and to offer constructive alternatives for the realization of a better way. (235-6)

What does this look like concretely? Hunter gives examples such as the following (266-269):

- An automotive company that asked itself “what do we owe our customers and employees?” and as a result lowered prices at its inner city dealerships as well as creating a college tuition fund for children of all employees.
- A Washington, D.C., art gallery that believed that “people with the greatest need had the greatest need for beauty” and sponsored an art exhibit which featured DC artists’ paintings and sculptures about an impoverished and crime-ridden section of the city.
- A music, film, and culture magazine that avoided the focus on “artistic and moral squalor” often featured in the popular culture press and “celebrated musical quality and promoted cultural products that embodied the human spirit.”

Hunter concludes by contending that the paradigm of faithful presence is the exiled Jews in Babylon, who are counseled to seek that city’s peace (276ff). Hunter’s approach to Christian cultural engagement is broadly Reformed, using concepts such as the cultural mandate, common grace (affirmation)/antithesis, and a creation-fall-redemption motif. However, given his account of cultural
change, he is very skeptical of the language of “redeeming culture.” Essentially, Hunter promulgates what might be called “Niebuhrian neo-Calvinism.” While mentioned only in passing, the ghost of Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) looms on these pages, intentionally or not. One reason for Niebuhr’s enduring appeal (President Obama cites him as a favorite) is his emphasis on the limitations of politics. For Niebuhr, politics can only be ameliorative, not redemptive. This idea had particular resonance in the mid-twentieth century as the Western democracies faced messianic ideologies such as communism that sought to wholly reshape societies and even human nature itself. While today we do not face totalitarian messianism, there is still the temptation to see politics as the solution to everything; it is this politicization of modern society that Hunter bemoans. Niebuhr also emphasized the inescapability of power in political and social life. Of course the words irony and tragedy found in the subtitle are very Niebuhrian. What is not particularly Niebuhrian is the note of critical resistance to the late modern world.

There is much to commend in this volume. The book is accessible to a non-specialist audience and would be excellent for college courses or church discussion groups. It is a very good orientation to the key approaches of Christian cultural engagement found in America today.

Nevertheless, I was left with some questions. Hunter defines power as “coercion or the threat thereof” (101), yet later in the book he refers to Jesus’ non-coercive power, which we are to imitate (191, 247). How these are to be reconciled is not made clear. Elsewhere, in passing, he seems to say that the concept of power is useless (256). However, Hunter contends that our imitation of Christ does not translate into pacifism. Power must be wielded. Coercion is inevitable on some occasions as the lesser of two evils, but it cannot be considered as bringing about the kingdom of God (192-193). Hunter is wary about salvific or redemptive ideas of “building the kingdom of God” (233) since working within institutions to achieve a goal means the use of power, which is potentially corrupting. Yet his idea of faithful presence uses terms such as “foretaste” of the kingdom. Why is a foretaste, but not building, acceptable? Elsewhere, he says faithful presence is transformative of culture (253, 269). Hunter does not make clear how this notion of transformation fits with his earlier statement that “cultures are profoundly resistant to intentional change—period.”

Another difficulty is that Hunter seems to overestimate the amount of common ground that Christians have with non-Christians. For example, Hunter states that politics ought to be pursued in the light of the justice of God (253) and that we ought to try to create conditions in social structures that are conducive to the flourishing of all (247). Yet what the justice of God is and what human flourishing looks like are controversial, even among Christians, not to mention those who are not Christians or those who are atheists.

Overall, I am not clear on whether Hunter offers a genuinely alternative vision for Christian cultural engagement or simply a more modest one. My questions aside, Hunter’s book is an excellent entry into the “Christ and culture” genre. Hunter’s warning against simplistic conceptions of culture-changing is welcome and ought to prompt Christians to the careful study of power structures and cultural production. To Change the World is a book that all Christians ought to read.
Submissions

We invite letters to the editor and articles, of between 2,500 and 8,000 words, double-spaced, using MLA or Chicago Style Manual documentation. Subjects should be approached from a Reformed Christian perspective and should treat issues, related to education, in the areas of theology, history, literature, the arts, the sciences, the social sciences, technology, and media. Please include a cover letter with your e-mail address and a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Send your submission to the following:

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