# In, But Not Of, by Hugh Hewitt and Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose, by Brian J. Mahan

reviewed by Cary McMullen in the October 4, 2003 issue

There's an old saying that if you want to be a Methodist bishop, you shouldn't look like you want to be a Methodist bishop. That kind of disguised ambition illustrates a dilemma for Christians, especially those of manifest abilities. Naked ambition, of the kind that vaulted Julius Caesar from successful general to emperor, has always been considered contrary to the gospel spirit of humility that Jesus exemplified. When James and John asked to sit on Jesus' right and left when he entered the kingdom, he replied, "You know that among the gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all" (Mark 10:42-44).

One needn't desire to be Caesar, or even a bishop, to grapple with this dilemma. Winning tenure, winning an argument or even just being first in the shower in the morning can be enough to test our ambitions. If some disguise their ambitions to appear humble, others try to renounce ambition altogether. And Christians like Hugh Hewitt resolve the problem by saying, in effect, "Want to be emperor? No problem."

Hewitt is a law professor and host of a syndicated radio talk program, a man with solid evangelical and Republican credentials. He is concerned that the church is in retreat from public and political life and that those who remain in it "are often incompetent, sometimes fanatical and usually inconsequential." This is a problem because in order to advance Christianity and combat "alternative ideologies" such as secular leftism and Islamism, there must be Christians who can enact the policies necessary for religious liberty--the sine qua non for the spread of the Kingdom. Talented young people must not only be willing to "get in the game" but know how to play it. Hewitt's little how-to book is not, he writes, "for the fainthearted who think worldly ambition is itself evil."

In a guileless, authoritative style that one can easily imagine characterizing his law school classes, Hewitt doesn't try to argue biblical or theological foundations. He simply points to examples of Christians who had abilities and ambition and used both in the service of Christ. Whether those he names, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, John Paul II and William Wilberforce, would willingly fit into Hewitt's conception of the aims and uses of power is debatable. The Christian statesman--Wilberforce or Sir Thomas More--appears to be the ideal. And for those who are contemplating less visible forms of service to Christ, Hewitt warns that the choice of a retiring life "may simply be cowardice dressed up as prudence."

Hewitt's prescriptions for people who don't want the coward's way out constitute the majority of the book's short chapters. A sampling:

- The pedigree of your college education matters. Attend one of the handful of top-flight schools. Earn a postgraduate degree; the only ones that matter are law, medicine or business. Don't become a pastor.
- "Master at least one area of passing interest to powerful people." You could learn to play golf, for example.
- Live in New York, Los Angeles or Washington, D.C. These are the centers of influence, and "lessons learned in Chicago cannot be easily transferred."
- Practice altruism, not only because it's right, but because it's in one's own interest: "Every time you give an assist to another's career, you advance your own."
- "Don't trust contentment. It anesthetizes ambition."
- Landing the kind of job that leads to influence is "simply the intersection of diligent search and luck." (One of Hewitt's favorite phrases is, "It's just that simple.")

This kind of advice is not particularly new or surprising, but it is astonishing that counsel this nakedly calculating would be given so unapologetically as a Christian manifesto. It does not seem to have occurred to Hewitt that Wilberforce or Bonhoeffer might have wanted to resist their leadership roles but accepted them because they discerned in humility that this was God's will for them. Or that being fat (against one of Hewitt's rules) would not prevent a person from being used by a God who "can raise up from these stones children of Abraham."

Hewitt does acknowledge some truths. "No one is as powerful as he thinks he is," he writes. "Power fades." But the irony of the book lies in its title. Hewitt willingly--even

eagerly--accepts culture's rule book for gaining influence (with slight modifications in the more egregious methods) and assumes that this does not contradict the gospel, since the power and influence gained are to be used in Christ's service. He takes Paul's admonition to be "in the world" as a license to use both the aims and the techniques of the world. A little better grasp of Paul's thought might have shown Hewitt that Paul wants us to live in the midst of the world in imitation of Christ, using the methods as well as the aims of the gospel. In Hewitt's scheme, Jesus would fail to be influential on just about every count.

Hewitt at least forces us to deal with the question of ambition. If playing by the world's rules compromises the gospel, what are we to do with our abilities in the service of Christ? On this point, the very different approach of Brian Mahan, assistant professor of Christian education at Emory University's Candler School of Theology, can help us. Mahan is a Catholic layman who combines a kind of Ignatian approach to self-examination with a grasp of literature and philosophy and a clever, self-deprecating wit. After Hewitt's lectures, Mahan's book is a welcome breath of calm.

Mahan begins by presenting Pam, a student who chooses to enter the Peace Corps rather than attend Yale Law School. He tries out Pam's decision on other students and on us. Why would she trade a sure ticket to success for a period of relative poverty, albeit in the name of altruism? Not surprisingly, Pam's fellow students tend to be cynical about her decision. "Maybe she was afraid she couldn't cut it at Yale," was one conclusion, reminiscent of Hewitt's accusation of cowardice.

For Mahan, ambition--he refers to it as a life "scripted" by the world--is not something to be taken lightly. Even the notion that it can be harnessed is dangerous, for it is both powerful and subtle, and its primary danger is not that it will overwhelm us so much as that it will distract us from what is important.

There is an abundance of examples. Mahan ranges from William James to the protagonist of Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* to Watergate figure John Dean to demonstrate the nature of ambition and how we rationalize it. Yet his approach is heuristic rather than prescriptive. Instead of presenting a manual on how to avoid ambition, Mahan leads us through these test cases, posing questions and providing exercises along the way to help us discover for ourselves what all this might mean in our lives.

He uses a hilarious passage from Walker Percy's *Lost in the Cosmos* to illustrate how the attachments and preoccupations of socially successful people, and the jealousy they can provoke, limit our capacity for compassion. Mahan writes, "Percy is neither celebrating nor condemning the dark impulses of the human heart already unearthed for us by Merton and Tolstoy; he is simply inviting us to do what they did: catch them, study them, and by way of indirection move past them. He is pointing to the secret fountains and gardens of our inner life; he is flushing them out of their hiding place; and he is teasing us, good-naturedly enough, into admitting how we've often provided them with cover and a credible alibi."

Rather than trying to deny or repress the ambition that lurks within us, Mahan suggests that it can be "transmuted" into vocation, in which we are used in service to the world. Ambition, in his scheme, is the "raw material" of vocation, and it is refined through the process of studying it. Mahan suggests that what he calls "formative remembering" is the means by which ambition can be transmuted into vocation. By this he means "our intentional, ritualized, and repeated attempts" to "remember and resist"--remember those times when we have forgotten our self-interest while in the service of compassion, and resist the temptations of our culture to place self-interest ahead of everything else. He quotes with approval Frederick Buechner's famous definition of vocation: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose is not without its weaknesses. At times Mahan's approach seems too inductive. In his desire not to be moralistic or directive, he too often questions his own arguments. One longs for at least a touch of Hewitt's imperiousness. It is also not always entirely clear for whom the book is intended. Mahan occasionally lapses into an academic style that suggests he has let his (self-acknowledged) ambition to be taken seriously get the better of him. And though he writes mostly as a confessional Christian, he sometimes appears to be aiming at a secular audience, perhaps the result of his having taught at a public university. But these are minor complaints. In the face of unrelenting counsel on all sides urging us to indulge our desires for money and influence, it is bracing to hear Mahan telling us to question these desires.

Pretending that we don't have ambitions is useless, and often, like James and John, we have to find out the hard way what Jesus thinks of them. Hewitt would try to put a Christian bridle on them and ride like the wind. Brian Mahan would have us examine them, recognize them for the dangers they are and let God refine them into

something more noble and fit for his service. Following Hewitt's script might get you elected anything from bishop to president. Mahan's approach is more profound, more clear-eyed about our true natures and therefore more courageous. It looks a lot more like the gospel.