

Second thoughts

reviewed by [Keith J. Pavlischek](#) in the [May 19, 1999](#) issue

Blinded by Might: Can the Religious Right Change America?

By Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson. Zondervan, 282 pp.

Paul Weyrich, the conservative activist who coined the term "moral majority" for Jerry Falwell, created a minor controversy in January by urging conservatives to abandon attempts to win the culture war through electoral politics. *Blinded by Might* is the evangelical equivalent to Weyrich's letter and has evoked a similarly heated response among religious conservatives.

Ed Dobson, a fundamentalist pastor, and Cal Thomas, an evangelical journalist and columnist, both worked intimately with Falwell and the Moral Majority in the early 1980s. Each writes alternating chapters in which they discuss how they became involved with Falwell, why they left him and how they eventually became disenchanted with the strategy and politics of the Christian Right. They also take an unconvincing stab at articulating an alternative approach to politics. The book concludes with brief interviews with former Senators Bill Armstrong, George McGovern and Mark Hatfield and current Senators John Ashcroft and Rick Santorum, as well as with Falwell, Pat Robertson, Kay James, Norman Lear and Representative Tony Hall.

As Dobson quite correctly observes, "the Moral Majority was founded as a reaction against a secular society that was increasingly hostile to conservative Christians." If conservatives did not stand up, they believed "they would be buried by the secularists and humanists." But, he insists, the Moral Majority "was a fortress to protect, not a battleship to attack."

In hindsight, Dobson and Thomas can see that the effort was all for naught. In fact, things are now worse, they argue, because the political engagement corrupted the evangelical church. Thomas concludes, "The importance and irrelevance of the Christian Right were demonstrated on the day William Jefferson Clinton was inaugurated." And Dobson, after running through the typical litany about the increase in crime, pornography, abortion and homosexuality, concludes that

measured by "every plank of our [Moral Majority] platform we have failed from a legislative and judicial perspective."

"We failed," says Thomas, "because we were unable to redirect a nation from the top down. Real change must come from the bottom up or, better yet, from the inside out." While agreeing with conservative leaders who decry the condition of this country, Thomas says it is time "to admit that because we are using the wrong weapons, we are losing the battle."

Like Weyrich, the authors insist that "separation does not mean disengagement." Thomas protests that James Dobson, head of Focus on the Family, unfairly accused him of advocating a withdrawal from the political arena "as if I had advocated a return to the catacombs." According to Thomas, such distortion of his view stems from James Dobson's tendency to see everything in black and white and his hatred of political compromise—a not so implausible charge.

Still, the withdrawal charge is understandable. The problem is that while Thomas and Ed Dobson oppose disengagement, they offer only the most superficial guidance as to what responsible Christian political engagement and statecraft might look like. Part of the reason for their failure is that they are preoccupied with the excesses of fundamentalist pastors. To their credit, they try to figure out what a proper pastoral role might be, but unfortunately they seem to be groping in the dark and offer little in the way of constructive alternatives to what is essentially a low-church clericalism. Thomas and Dobson all but assume that Christian laity will get their civic education and mobilization orders from pastors. They never come to grips with the role of lay Christian officeholders and the task of nonecclesiastical civic education.

Their most important point is their rejection of the notion that America has "most favored nation" status with God or that it was once a "Christian nation." "The Christian Right," they assert, "set America apart and above all other nations. This is heresy." Indeed. But having come to the belated recognition that America is not God's new Israel and that politics and statecraft are a matter of less than ultimate concern, the authors leave us with superficial advice about political engagement. Rather than issuing a wake-up call to a more authentic form of Christian political involvement, the book administers a tranquilizer. Since politics can no longer usher in the kingdom, it is now simply about "power"—a power that distracts Christians from the purity of the gospel. As Yogi Berra would say, this is déjà vu all over again.

Ed Dobson refers us to a book he wrote in 1988, after he left the Moral Majority, in which he said that evangelicals needed to develop a public philosophy. It's now 1999, and he simply restates this need. In a chapter titled "Religion and Politics: What Does the Bible Say?" he tells us little more than that we are to pray for government leaders, submit to government leaders and honor government leaders. This stance leads to the momentous decision not to listen to or tell jokes that demean the president and his family.

When Thomas takes up the issue of a "new agenda," we get this as advice for "temporary citizens of a temporary kingdom": vote intelligently, pray for those in authority, pay attention to what elected officials are doing, write letters to the editors of newspapers and support columnists and ideas you agree with. Last and "perhaps most important," he adds, "we really need to have a happier countenance." This piece of analysis is not exactly right up there with, say, the Catholic social encyclicals.

Blinded by Might does not display the political maturity one might expect of Christians involved in political life for almost 20 years. The book is little more than a reaction against an original reaction. Thomas and Dobson remain at least as intellectually and morally culpable as the leaders of the Christian Right whom they criticize. To the extent that the evangelical audience they intend to reach hears this as a call to withdraw from the work of politics and hence a summons to withdraw from the Lord's call to do justice, they will be even more culpable.