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Book Review: Religion and Politics: A Volatile Mix



by K. Daniel Glover
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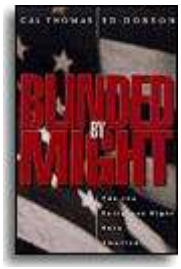
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A review of *Blinded by Might: Can the Religious Right Save America?*
by Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson
Zondervan Publishing House, $19.99, 282 pages



Blinded by Might: Can the Religious Right Save America?

Confession is supposed to be good for the soul, so my soul should feel quite healthy after this painful admission: I voted for Bill Clinton.

I only voted for our disgraced president once, and then only because I did not care much for George Bush as president and was just plain scared of Ross Perot. Yet I still must bear the guilt of having elected to our world's highest office a man who has no scruples.

That is a heavy burden for someone like me, a Christian whose political philosophy is guided by moral conservatism, and that burden becomes greater whenever I confess my democratic "sin" to brethren. First, I get the "you did what?" blank stare from people who sincerely believe you cannot be a Christian and a Democrat (which I am not). Then the only half-joking question: Did you repent?

I play along, saying that indeed I did repent -- so much so that I did not vote for any presidential candidate in 1996 because they all demonstrated wishy-washy morality. But in the back of my mind, I always wonder this: Can any Christian truly believe God favors one politician, one party or even one country over another?

Co-opting God for political purposes

Syndicated columnist Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson, the minister of Calvary Church in Grand Rapids, Mich., apparently have been wondering the same thing. And their wonderment moved the two former leaders of Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority to write a book on the spiritual dangers of mixing politics and religion.

The tome -- *Blinded by Might: Can the Religious Right Save America?* -- is part personal confession and part public (albeit gentle) rebuke of the comrades in faith who Thomas and Dobson believe have sacrificed their spiritual leadership to gain political power. In the process, the duo argue, men like Falwell have lost sight of their mission -- preaching truth to the lost -- and gained nothing in return.

If the underlying aim of conservative religious leaders engaged in politics has been a transformation of American culture, Thomas and

Dobson write, they have failed miserably. Why? Because they have come to believe government, rather than God, can help them accomplish their spiritual goals. Because they have more confidence in the legislative process than the power of the gospel and of prayer. And because they are more determined to work their own will than to understand God's.

Thomas and Dobson spare none from their rhetorical sword. They criticize Falwell, televangelist Pat Robertson and just-announced 2000 presidential candidate Gary Bauer, as well as Bill Clinton, Al Gore and Jesse Jackson.

Dobson, of Irish ancestry, faults both the Protestants and Catholics for the religious/political warring in his homeland. Thomas, meanwhile, chastises his fellow journalists for their willful ignorance of the Bible in an era when many pseudo-spiritual politicians regularly quote the Bible inaccurately or out of context.

The two authors, who quote numerous Bible passages in the book, save their strongest rebuke for the newest player in the world of religion and politics. "The most blatant attempt to co-opt God is the Christian Coalition," Dobson writes. "The very name places the divine stamp of approval on their agenda."

Like a three-hour sermon

Blinded by Might explains the crusades of today's "religious right" -- against abortion, homosexuality and pornography, and for school prayer and "family values" -- in the context of past religious movements. Dobson's cogent analyses of the monumental *Scopes* decision on the teaching of evolution in the schools and of the Prohibition era are particularly noteworthy.

Thomas and Dobson also deserve commendation for giving voice to those who disagree with them. After making their own case of why religious conservatives should abandon the political racket and go back to the pulpit, they dedicate the last 85 pages of the book to interviews with folks like Falwell, Robertson and even self-proclaimed liberal politician George McGovern.

The writing styles of the two authors -- the sound-bite journalistic lingo of former NBC broadcaster Thomas and the more scholarly, sermon-like approach of Dobson -- are a good mix that should please readers with varying tastes. Yet after the first few chapters, the book loses some of its zest.

Thomas and Dobson often repeat not only each other but also themselves. By the end of their treatise, readers may feel as if they have sat through a three-hour sermon that would have been more effective, and certainly less monotonous, if delivered in a half-hour.

The book also raises a few questions about the authors' understanding of the Bible. Thomas and Dobson clearly know the fundamentals, but they stumble on the finer points.

Dobson, for instance, recounts his "ordination" as a minister. Yet nowhere does the Bible authorize earthly organizations to ordain preachers. Both authors also refer to preachers as "pastors," but the Bible teaches that pastors (also known as elders, bishops and presbyters in the New Testament) and preachers serve entirely different purposes within congregations.

'The church' and the Christian

Ironically, Thomas and Dobson question the logic of Christians who put too much faith in government, yet they seem to put as much faith in "the church." "The church can do what politics never can do," Dobson writes, and he and Thomas sprinkle examples -- things like organizing abortion support groups and providing child care for single parents -- throughout the book.

The problem: The authors hold to the denominational concept of the church as a bureaucratic organization, with various levels of authority, rather than the biblical concept of the church as a collection of individual saints who organize themselves into locally autonomous congregations.

Many of the works Thomas and Dobson describe are noble and perhaps ones individual Christians should pursue, but the function of local *churches* is narrow in scope. Their primary mission is to teach the lost and edify their own members. The authors fail to realize that the bureaucratic denominational church can be, and is, just as misguided and "blinded by might" as the bureaucratic government.

Those criticisms aside, *Blinded by Might* is a book worthy of praise, if only because Thomas and Dobson urge the religious-minded to contemplate their faith and confirm their understanding of biblical truths. That is something the Bible teaches that every Christian should do every day.

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How, if at all, have conservative Christians been corrupted by the political process? Has the Christian Coalition "co-opted God"? What is the mission of the church? Who is winning the culture war, and why?

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