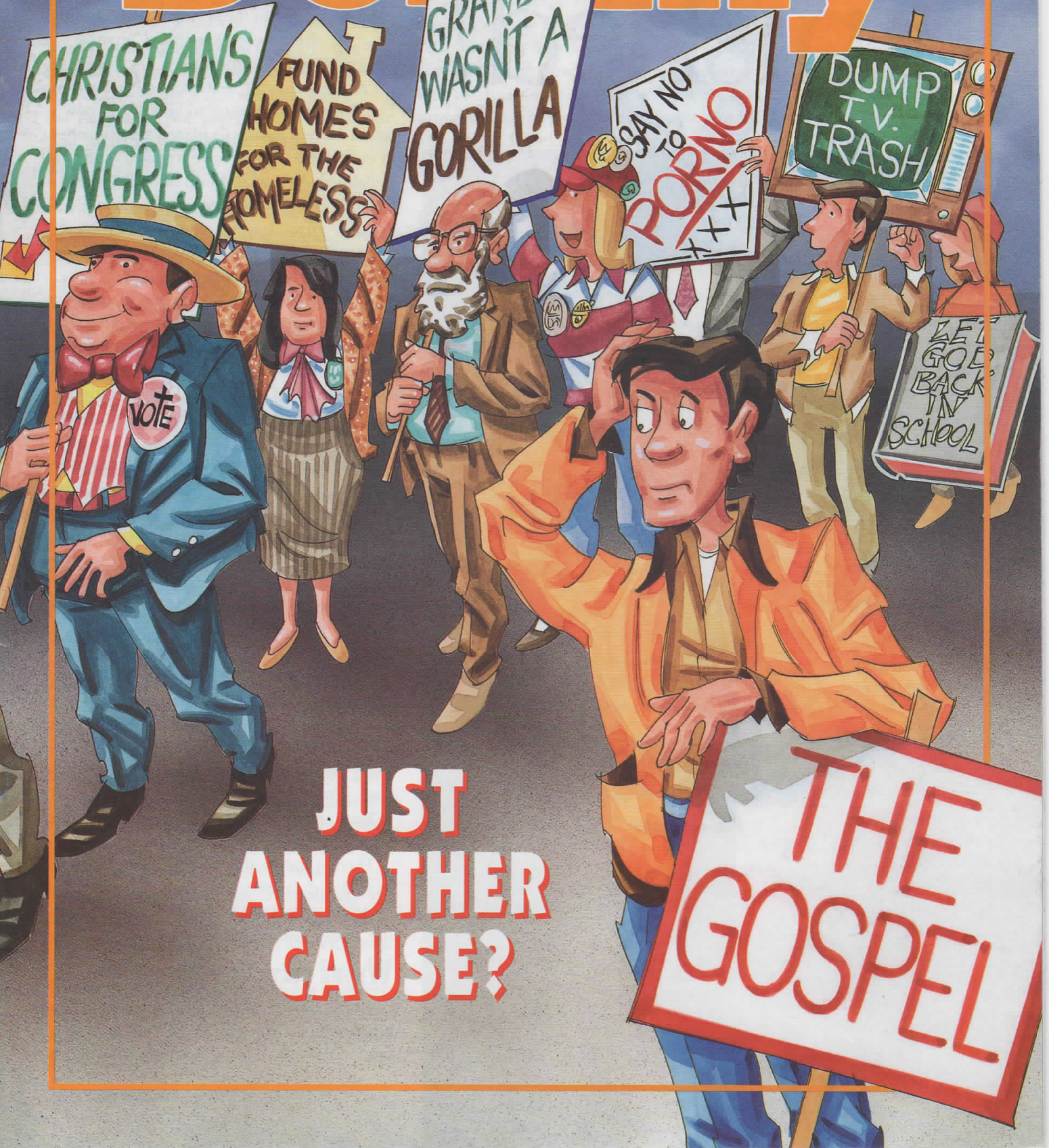


People of
Destiny[®]

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**JUST
ANOTHER
CAUSE?**

**THE
GOSPEL**

The Centrality of the Gospel

Brent Detwiler

I walked out of the lecture hall and headed slowly back to my dorm. The speaker's convictions were bouncing around in my thoughts like popcorn in hot oil. A biblical approach to economics...Christians in politics...bringing God's law to bear on society. Could it be? Was this God's primary intention for his people? The students in this particular group didn't seem to have any doubt. Maybe I was missing something.

Hours later, unable to sleep, I continued to think through the issue. "I just don't see it," I muttered. "God, I just don't see it!"

Fifteen years later, I think I'm finally beginning to sort it all out.

TAKING DOMINION (HEART BY HEART)

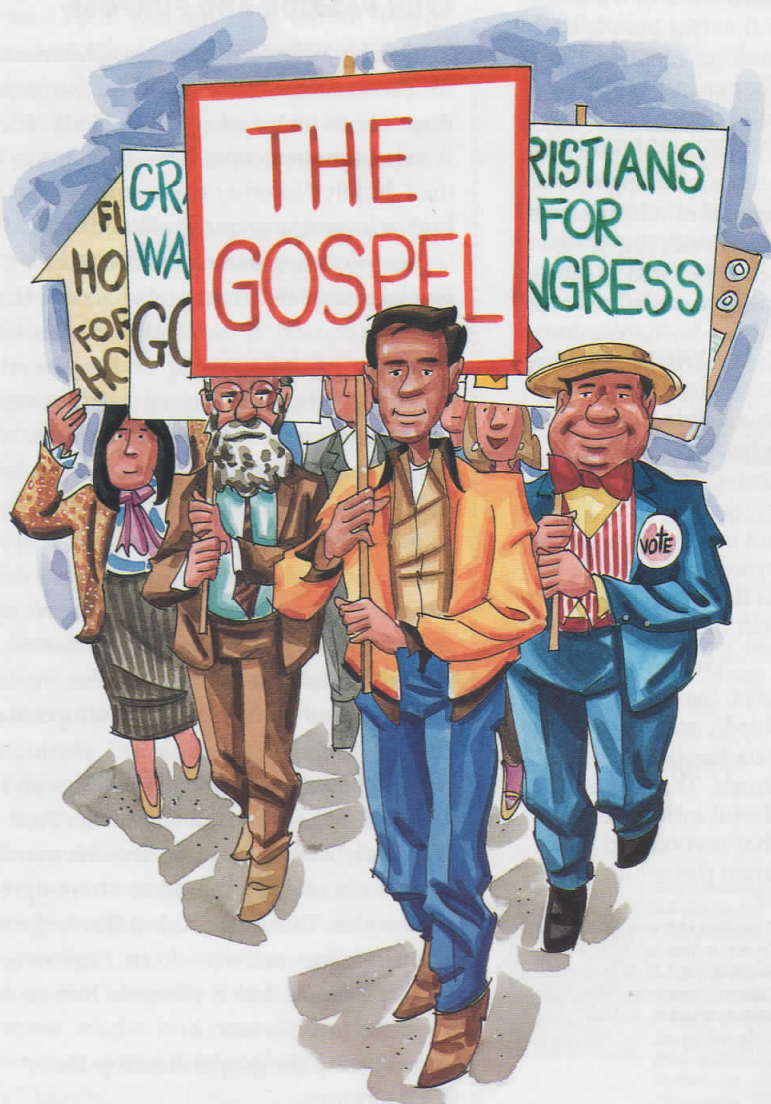
Christians are by nature a compassionate people. Christ in us causes us to care deeply about the world around us. The ugly results of sin in people's lives and in society grieve our hearts and motivate us to action.

But what action should we take? How are we to use our time, energy, gifts, and finances to accomplish the greatest good? What has God told us to do? What is our mandate from heaven? These are critical questions that require sound biblical answers.

Within the Church today, a movement exists whose influence is rapidly on the rise. It is commonly referred to as the Dominion Mandate movement. This group of zealous, highly motivated Christians believes that God calls us to take dominion over all aspects of society (entertainment, mass media, the arts, education, commerce, science, law, and government). They actively seek to reconstruct society by means of God's law.

While I admire the fervor with which these men and women pursue righteousness, I fear that some have misunderstood the dynamics of God's kingdom.

The biblical definition of Christ's kingdom refers to the rule or government of God in the life of a believer. This kingdom is inaugurated



WHAT THE GOSPEL DID IN ROCHESTER

The good news of Jesus Christ unleashes tremendous power to cleanse and reform society. Evangelist Charles G. Finney gave this account of the gospel's effect on Rochester, New York in 1830:

"[Rochester] was a young city, full of thrift and enterprize, and full of sin...but as the revival swept through the town and converted the great mass of the most influential people both male and female, the change in the order, sobriety, and morality of the city was wonderful.

"In speaking of the revival in which he was converted, [the district attorney] said to me many years afterwards: 'I have been examining the records of the criminal courts, and I find this striking fact, that whereas our city has increased since that revival three-fold, there is not one third as many prosecutions for crime as there had been up to that time.

"'Thus crime,' he says, 'has decreased two thirds, and the population has increased two thirds. This is the wonderful influence that that revival had had upon the community.'"

From *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney*, edited by Garth M. Rosell and Richard A.G. Dupuis (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, ©1989), p. 318.

by the gospel—the good news of Jesus Christ—and sustained by the Holy Spirit.

Some of those pursuing a "Dominion Mandate" rely on God's law rather than the gospel for the transformation of society. This is a fatal mistake. God's law shows us our sin and our need of a Savior. It also instructs us and restrains lawlessness. It does not, however, bring the kingdom of God to an individual, society, or nation. Only the gospel can change an individual's motives and usher in a new morality. Christ's kingdom advances heart by heart, not law by law.

Lawlessness will only increase, the Bible teaches, as the end of the age draws near (Mt 24:12 NAS). Consequently the Church of Jesus Christ will be hated and resisted by all nations. Those who put their hope and security in the reformation of society will be ill-prepared and sorely disillusioned.

OUR PASSION AND PURPOSE

The New Testament gives Christians two fundamental mandates (besides our supreme mandate to love and worship God). The first is to preach the gospel. The second is to build the Church. No other cause approaches these two in importance or significance.

Restructuring society isn't our first priority. American believers must accept the fact that this country is not, and never has been, a Christian nation. While God has certainly used America and blessed her through the positive influence of Christian values, no nation is indispensable to his purpose. Ask the Israelites!

Sadly, a large share of Christian activism—political campaigning, boycotts, and demonstrations—attempts to cure America's symptoms without recognizing her disease. The sincerity and intentions of these reformers are irreproachable. Yet in their efforts to eliminate evils like drug abuse, pornography, racism, poverty, and abortion, they can forget to address the root problem of sin. And sin is ruthlessly malignant. Cut out one manifestation of sin and it's bound to show up somewhere else. This doesn't stop the surgeon—or the Christian activist—from removing cancerous tumors, but it compels him or her to treat the root cause. And where sin is concerned, only the gospel can stop the spread of such a cancer.

A society will change to the degree that God grants the conversion of its people. As history shows, social transformation will occur spontaneously as we preach the gospel with power (see sidebar). We must not get the cart before the horse lest we veer away from God's eternal plan and priorities.

A PLACE IN POLITICS?

So what place is there for legislation, picketing, boycotts, or letter writing? Is political involvement appropriate for the Christian who wants to follow God's agenda?

Absolutely! As citizens of a democracy that allows us freedom of expression, we are responsible before God to speak out for righteousness. God has established government for the purpose of protecting its citizens, promoting order, restraining evil, and punishing evildoers. Christian citizens should do whatever they can to make sure these responsibilities are carried out faithfully and righteously by political leaders.

I've had the opportunity to participate regularly in Washington, D.C.'s annual March for Life, write to politicians about certain ungodly stands, and confront social vices in my community. From my experience, however, I've found that it's important to realize just what we're up against.

Sinful individuals produce sinful laws. Therefore, a nation's laws are only as good as the people making them. Morality may be legislated for a season, but unless revival transforms the populace, an "immoral majority" will eventually swarm the ballot boxes.

I'm sure that's why Paul's first letter to Timothy recommends that political action include prayer as a main ingredient (1Ti 2:1,2). As I understand the context of this passage (verses 1-7), our main focus as we pray for those in authority should be for their salvation, not for their political decisions. Their souls will live forever; their laws will do well to survive a few decades.

Any short-term cause, including political action, has tremendous potential to distract us from our Lord's most effective strategy: the gospel. Legitimate activities can quickly drain the resources of a church. And as the Pharisees proved, even if we succeed in creating "righteous" laws, there's no guarantee they won't become whitewashed tombs (Mt

23:27). Unless our political action serves *primarily* as a vehicle for the gospel, we could work feverishly for the rest of our lives and see little, if any, eternal fruit.

BRIGHT LIGHTS, OPEN DOORS

Should we be indifferent and hard-hearted to the needs of those around us? Of course not! Our love for God will express itself in love toward our neighbor.

We have a clear biblical responsibility to care for our brothers and sisters in Christ (Gal 6:10; 1Jn 3:16-18). The local church is the provision of God for the people of God. Only in the church will there be no needy persons (Ac 2:44-45; 4:32,34-35; 6:1).

But we're also called to serve *all* people as God gives us the opportunity and the means. When we encounter someone in need, we have the privilege and responsibility to do what we can to help him or her. Like the good Samaritan, we cannot "pass by on the other side." God is "kind to the ungrateful and wicked" (Lk 6:35). So are his people.

"Let your light shine before men," Jesus said, "that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Mt 5:16). Good deeds often open the door for us to share the gospel. These acts of kindness may precede the gospel, accompany the gospel, or follow the gospel. But if a beggar leaves us with a full stomach and an empty soul, have we made any lasting impact?

GOD'S ONLY ANSWER

All of society's problems stem from the sinfulness of man. Man's central dilemma isn't sociological, educational, political, or psychological in nature—it's moral. As sin destroys creation, our holy God pours out his judgment on sinful men.

The gospel deals with the root of this problem. It alone is the answer; it alone is the "power of God for salvation" (Ro 1:16 NAS). When peoples' hearts are changed, their society will change with them.

We must re-evaluate our priorities as individual members of the body of Christ. Does our zeal for pro-life issues exceed our zeal for winning people to Christ? Do we risk arrest in a rescue operation but fail to preach the gospel to our neighbor? Are we radical about boycotting Mennen products but pathetically

lukewarm toward involvement in a local church? Do we speak out against racial discrimination but tolerate unbiblical practices and religious sins in our churches?

Let us speak out against all manner of sin, but let's be certain to do so as committed members of authentic churches who are wholeheartedly preaching the gospel. Our zeal for preaching the gospel must never be dwarfed by an allegiance to other causes.

NARROW-MINDED PAUL

The gospel was the focus of Paul's life. As he reminded the Corinthians, "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1Co 2:2). To the Ephesians he described himself as "a servant of this gospel" (Eph 3:7). He lived to proclaim it and he eventually died to advance it. Everything he did, he did with the gospel in mind (1Co 9:23).

When Paul was brought before Festus, Felix, and King Agrippa (all political leaders in Palestine), he did more than debate legalities—he confronted them with the gospel. Their potentially adverse reaction didn't deter him for a moment.

While in the decadent city of Corinth, Paul didn't address its desperate need for moral laws. He shared the gospel. Rather than lure the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers with promises of a new philosophy, Paul presented them with the simple truth of Jesus Christ. Why did persecution dog him so relentlessly? Not because he pushed for social or political change. It's because he constantly and convincingly preached the gospel.

Like Paul, let us be faithful to proclaim the gospel and participate fully in an authentic New Testament church. Our hope is not in reforming America, but in preaching the gospel and seeing people added to a local body of believers (Ac 2:41-47). The gospel is *the* message of the church to a dying world. We don't have another.

We should each respond as God shows us unique ways to serve our neighbors and our society. Nevertheless, we'll make our greatest impact as light and salt on this nation and the world as we faithfully proclaim the incredible news of Jesus Christ and practically demonstrate a kingdom counterculture within his Church.

THE LAW VS. THE GOSPEL

We must be extremely careful not to confuse the purpose and content of God's *law* with the purpose and content of the *gospel*. If we do, we will end up with a "different gospel" (2Co 11:4).

The law of God shows us our need for salvation. It reveals the vast chasm between our wickedness and God's holiness, between man's way and God's way. But it does nothing to bridge that gap.

The gospel—the facts of Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension—brings us across to the other side. The law, with its humanly impossible demands, brings death; the gospel, through its message of grace, brings life (Ro 7:7-8:4).

If Christ's kingdom could come through the law, we'd have no need of the gospel. Jesus' death would have been unnecessary.

In our preaching we need to hold people accountable to the law of God, but the law is not our instrument for change. That role is reserved for the gospel.



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