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Stars Forever A Book Review

by

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The much-discussed boost to the reelection of George W. Bush provided by “values voters” and conservative Christians returned to office a leader dedicated to key policies supported by many practicing Christians (and Jews). Yet the election represents a troubling aspect for the evangelical community. For one thing, it remains debatable just how much of a role “Jesusland” voters actually played in the victory. For another, the blustering of several evangelical leaders about keeping Bush on a short leash is unseemly and likely counterproductive.

But most troubling are two other phenomena. One is the increasing political polarization along religious lines: regularly practicing believers are by and large on the Republican side while those who pay no or only loose attention to religion are on the Democratic side.¹ To the extent that the polarization reflects greater clarity on where the parties stand and on the implications of their commitments, the development is positive. Yet it is obvious that America’s multiple communities of conviction do not divide evenly into camps that fit the two parties. If evangelicals and practicing Catholics, for instance, are becoming ever more Republican, that has as much to do with a growing distrust of the Democratic Party as with satisfaction with everything Republican. The other problematic aspect is the temptation to regard Bush’s reelection as a last chance to restore America’s greatness, or America’s moral foundations, or America’s Christian heritage. That hope accords too much scope to political decisions and too large a consequence to an electoral outcome.

But it won’t do simply to deflate politics as something unimportant in contrast to saving souls, building up the church, or changing the entertainment and media industries, because important dimensions of living together in human

society require political action. And it won't do merely to bemoan the political polarization, because practical politics requires careful attention to, and productive engagement with, the bipartisan structuring of executive and legislative bodies.

So what to do? In a new book, *Like the Stars, Leading Many to Righteousness* (iUniverse, 2004; printed on demand; paperback, \$11.95), the author, Glenn Parkinson, recommends to evangelical Christians the opposite of the advice that savvy campaign strategists dole out. When the battle for votes gets tough, the latter always recommend: Go negative! Parkinson, addressing believers who fear the long-term erosion of Christian influence in America, says: Go positive! If we're losing the culture war, it's because we got caught up in fighting it. Instead of reacting with hostility to each negative development, we should regain the biblical perspective that emphasizes persuasion, prayer, and a positive witness through good works and an appealing way of life.

His is explicitly not a call to abandon political action, nor is it an argument that saving souls alone will save the nation. Rather, Parkinson places political participation (and evangelism) within the broad setting of how societies change for good as they are influenced by people who follow the King of Kings. Defending essential rights of Christian believers and institutions is vital, and some goods can only be gained, and some evils only defeated, by means of laws and political action. But laboring in the arenas of law and politics is not the only or the highest way to wrestle on behalf of the good. Winning political battles, when possible at all, will turn out to be hollow victories if, in the meantime, people outside the faith have come to regard believers as bent on dominance and not interested in the welfare of their neighbors.

"There was a day," Parkinson writes, "when serious, Bible-believing Christians were respected in America. No more. There are many reasons for the change, but one reason is that we have marginalized ourselves by adopting a strategy of antagonism and conflict, exchanging Christ's mission to reach out to people for a holy war to drive them back."

The goal of this short book, based on a sermon series, is to explore biblical teaching about how believers can have a positive influence on the world outside the church. Parkinson is the senior pastor of Severna Park Evangelical Presbyterian Church (PCA), near Annapolis, Maryland. He urges Christians to live as positive witnesses to biblical truth, shining like stars with the "brightness of the heavens," and thus able to "lead many to righteousness," as it says in the Daniel 12 passage from which he takes the book's title.

Parkinson explores a range of themes or strategies drawn from biblical episodes and teachings: choosing leaders committed to a biblical stance; displaying godly wisdom in our positions of responsibility such that others are attracted by our excellence; praying for those in authority; refusing to hide our Christian identity when we are raised to leadership. These and other themes are developed with great biblical and cultural insight. Two examples of how Parkinson shapes his plea for winsome rather than negative strategies will illustrate his approach.

In one chapter, Parkinson explores the society-changing consequences of true conversion by reflecting on the New Testament episode of the silversmiths who roiled the city of Ephesus, claiming that the apostle Paul was undermining their trade and the worship of the goddess Artemis. Paul, Parkinson points out, isn't recorded as having preached against the idol worship. Rather, he preached Christ. Of course, those who embraced Christ had no more use for Artemis. You might call it a non-confrontational way of confronting a societal evil. "Wherever larger numbers of people become serious Christians," Parkinson concludes, "the larger culture changes." But the key is that believers are "serious." In America, however, rather than Christians converting the culture, "the relativism and materialism of the world" is taking over the church; "more and more, the practical religion of this country is a lightly Christian-flavored secularism."

What would be the cultural impact if Christians became serious again about their beliefs? Parkinson lays down two challenges: first, let our earning, saving, and spending be guided by biblical values, thus releasing vast wealth for the good news and good works; and second, actually live out Christian convictions about thriving marriages rather than simply yelling at others who see no reason to profess those convictions.

In a crucial chapter, "Seek the Peace of the City," Parkinson asks about the right way for Christians to identify with Old Testament Israel. One way is to try to emulate Israel's period of conquest, when God's people were sent into battle against the nation's enemies. That's a strong temptation, especially when the opposition seems so mighty, but it has to be resisted. The church is the new Israel, not the old, and has been dispersed into the world so that it knows no political boundaries and can win no victories through political conquest by making unbelievers yield to the point of the sword.

The appropriate Old Testament model, instead, is that of Israel in exile. *Inside* the church, Parkinson says, "we celebrate Christ's conquest—but it is a conquest over us!" *Outside* the church, "we are strangers and resident aliens in the world." As such, "our calling is to bless our surrounding culture, not conquer it." "[P]eople in exile are not called to *fight* the surrounding nations; instead, they are called to *do them good*." What must we do? "The way we will get along and prosper, keep our faith, grow in numbers, influence our host nations for good and share Christ, is to be a blessing to them." Rather than try to compel others to adhere to our biblical agenda, the church should focus on "being the best blessing it can possibly be for the wounded and sick societies we live in." That doesn't mean dropping our standards and aspirations; it means seeking to win others rather than conquer them.

Here's Parkinson's challenging question: "What if, in our society, the term *evangelical Christian* was used by the media and the people on the street to refer to *good people* who do *good things* to make our suffering world a better place in which to live—strangers and pilgrims who claim to belong to another kingdom, but who make it their business to be this world's greatest blessing?" As he emphasizes, doing good works, manifesting good character and excellence, and sharing the gospel are not substitutes for political action where political decisions have to be made. But "going positive" will set a productive context for public confrontations when we act to honor God and serve our neighbors rather than merely to throw our weight around.

In publishing this sermon series, Parkinson has added a brief introduction and epilogue and included with each chapter a set of questions to stimulate reflection and application. The book is a “print on demand” publication. Go to barnesandnoble.com or booksamillion.com and search on “Parkinson and Stars” to order the book, and a copy will be produced just for you.

The book will be readily and appropriately used in adult and college small-group discussions. Make it a thought-provoking gift to any of your acquaintances who are evangelical culture-warriors, especially the ones caught up narrowly in partisan battles. Read it yourself, to remind you of the broad setting within which Christian believers are called to act and to make a difference.

Undoubtedly we will be hearing more in the days ahead about the “power of evangelicals,” a power that some hope will lift up the nation to make it a shining city on a hill, even as others fear it will send the nation into a new dark age. Christian voting power will do neither. To learn what we might actually do to be a greater influence for good and for the glory to God, a careful reading of this book is highly recommended.

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Notes

¹ For a provocative and illuminating analysis of the causes and development of this religious polarization in partisan politics, see Louis Bolce & Gerald De Maio, “Our Secularist Democratic Party,” *The Public Interest*, Fall 2002 (go to <http://www.thepublicinterest.com/>, select The Archive, and locate the Fall 2002 issue).

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