

WHERE THE ACTION IS

*Since the time of Bacon the world has been
running away from, rather than toward,
first principles, so that, on the verbal level,
we see "fact" substituted for "truth."*

Richard Weaver

As I travel around the country and speak to different groups, I am often asked what I think is the greatest threat to the integrity and security of American life and culture. I suppose that those who ask the question expect me to name one of the many humanistic juggernauts that seem to be forever laying siege to justice, mercy, and humble faith.

Perhaps they expect me to name the American Civil Liberties Union. And for good reason. There can be little doubt that the ACLU has subverted justice in this land to an extraordinary degree. With more than six thousand cases in the courts each year and with a blatantly political agenda, the vast reach of the organization has tragically affected virtually every community and every family in America. But I don't think that it actually poses the gravest threat to our culture today.

Perhaps they expect me to name Planned Parenthood. And for good reason. There can be little doubt that the organization has subverted mercy in this land to an extraordinary degree. With nearly two hundred affiliates and more than eight hundred clinics nationwide, the multi-billion-dollar abortion and sex education conglomerate has defiled the minds of children, exploited the predicaments of the needy, and appropriated the resources of tax-payers in horrifyingly unprecedented ways. But I don't think that it actually poses the gravest threat to our culture today.

Perhaps they expect me to name the National Education Association. Again, for good reason. There can be little doubt that the NEA has subverted humble faith in this land to an extraordinary degree. Now controlling more than 90 percent of the government schools in America, the organization and its army of lobbyists, bureaucrats, and activists are largely responsible for the profound failure of public education today—its ideological extremism, its lack of academic achievement, its brutal administrative centralization, and its insensitivity to the unique integrity of families, schools, or communities. But I don't think that it actually poses the gravest threat to our culture today.

Perhaps they expect me to name some homosexual activist group like Act-Up, an environmentalist group like Greenpeace, a globalist group like the United Nations, or a New Age group like Tikkun. And certainly each of these organizations ought to raise our alarms and cause us great concern. But I don't think that any of them actually poses the gravest threat to our culture today.

In fact, all of these groups taken together still do not seriously threaten justice, mercy, and humble faith. They are merely symptoms of a deeper problem. Even with their access to billions of corporate philanthropy dollars and tax revenues, their huge professional staffs, their monolithic control over the

major media outlets, and their stranglehold on the apparatus of cultural power, they do not have the wherewithal to wreak havoc on the essential fabric of our society.

Only one earthly institution has that kind of power: the church.

It is only when the church fails to fulfill its calling in this poor fallen world that we have to really worry. It is only when the church fails to uphold the standards of justice, mercy, and humble faith that the onslaughts of the enemies of truth can possibly have their intended ill-effects. It is only when the church creates a vacuum by its own inactivity and impiety that the minions of this world have the opportunity to exploit the innocent, the foolish, or the inattentive.

That is one of the reasons this book has not been filled with war stories, horror stories or heart-tugging tear-jerking and soul-searching stories. I didn't want to leave the impression that the ACLU is to blame for the obvious deterioration of justice today, or Planned Parenthood for the absence of mercy, or the NEA for the subversion of humble faith. Because they're not.

The only reason these groups have been able to make headway with their vile plans is that the church has not been all that God has called us to be or done all that God has called us to do. G. K. Chesterton once quipped that any new book of modern social inquiry is bound to be all too predictable in both its form and function:

It begins as a rule with an analysis, with statistics, with tables of population, decrease of crime among Congregationalists, growth of hysteria among policemen, and similar ascertained facts; it ends with a chapter that is generally called *The Remedy*. It is almost wholly due to this careful, solid, and scientific method that the remedy is never found. For this scheme of medical question and answer is a blunder; the first great blunder of sociology. It is always called stating the disease before we find the cure. But it is the whole definition and dignity of man that in social matters we must actually find the cure before we find the disease.

This book is obviously born of a concern for the disease of moral and social disintegration in our time. But as Chesterton has said, we need not approach our subject medically—which might lead us to trust mere institutional or political remedies. Thus, I have taken the tack of essentially announcing the cure rather than offering yet another diagnosis or description of the malady.

And the cure is simply the church adhering to its essential calling. It is found when the elect of God yield to their divine mandate in every aspect and in every detail of their lives.

A Culture War Maelstrom

One of the greatest men and most brilliant minds Africa ever produced was Augustine of Hippo. He was born in 354 at Tagaste—in present-day Algeria—of a pagan father and a Christian mother. He was brought up as a Christian but not baptized.

He studied rhetoric at the great university in the city of Carthage in order to become a lawyer, but later gave up his plan for a career in teaching. His study of philosophy—with an emphasis on Platoism and Manichaenism—resulted in a complete renunciation of Christianity. He lived a self-confessedly debauched life—including keeping a mistress for fifteen years by whom he had a son.

In pursuit of opportunities to improve his academic standing he took teaching posts—first in Rome and later in Milan. It was in this latter city that he fell under the sway of the great bishop and rhetorician Ambrose. After a long and bitter battle of the soul—described in his classic work *Confessions*—Augustine was converted under Ambrose's ministry and was baptized in 386.

After some two years of intensive discipling and catechizing, he returned to Africa and established a quasi-monastic community in Hippo. There he founded his famous *Classicum Acadmae*—devoted to study, writing, and the work of cultural transformation. The school was famed for its emphasis on art, music, politics, and ideas.

In 391 Augustine's steadfastness, holiness, and giftedness were recognized, and he was ordained against his own objections. In 394 he was elevated as coadjutor in the diocese. And in 396 he was elevated to the bishopric of the city.

Most of his quite brilliant writings have endured the test of time—I have eight thick volumes that sit on my desk—and are widely read to this day. His commentaries—on Genesis and Psalms particularly—are of inestimable value. His apologetics—like his *Contra Manichae* or *Contra Pelagae*—continue to set the standard for orthodoxy. And his didactae—such as his *Sanctus Dei* or *De Trinitate*—formed the first, and arguably the best, systematic theologies the church has ever produced.

But he is perhaps best known for—and made his greatest contribution with—his analysis of the culture war here on earth and its relation to the war in the heavenlies. Entitled *De Civitate Dei*—or *The City of God*—the book continues to define the terms of the debate better than any other work written before or since.

According to Augustine, culture is not a reflection of a people's race, ethnicity, folklore, politics, language, or heritage. Rather, it is an outworking of a people's creed. In other words, culture is the temporal manifestation of a people's faith. If a culture begins to change, it is not because of fads, fashions, or the passing of time; it is because of a shift in worldview—it is because of a change of faith. Thus, race, ethnicity, folklore, politics, language, or heritage are simply expressions of a deeper paradigm rooted in the covenantal and spiritual matrix of a community's church and the integrity of its witness.

The reason he spent so much of his life and ministry critiquing the pagan philosophies of the world and exposing the aberrant theologies of the church was that Augustine understood only too well that those things matter not only in the realm of eternity determining the spiritual destiny of masses of humanity, but in the realm of the here and now determining the temporal destiny of whole civilizations.

Augustine recognized that people's dominant worldview inevitably shapes the world they have in view. And he also recognized that the church is the starting point for the development of that worldview as it faithfully fulfills its calling to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with Almighty God.

Tiny Pushes

Bridging the gap between activism and devotion, the Micah Mandate describes a comprehensive and integrated worldview of vital faith and meaningful activity for the church. It presents what C. S. Lewis called "Mere Christianity," what John Stott called "Basic Christianity," and what William Wilberforce called "Real Christianity." It delineates the ingredients of a balanced Christian life. It provides us with an incentive to walk in the footsteps of those uncommonly common heroes who have gone before us—to

get our priorities straight, to put first things first, and to emphasize what really matters most. It outlines a strategic plan for us to begin to do what God wants us to do and to be what God wants us to be.

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It offers the church a model not only of fealty and faithfulness—but of anticipation and hopefulness as well.

After all, the future of our culture does not depend upon political messiahs or institutional solutions. Neither does it depend on the emergence of some new brilliant spokesman or inspiring leader who has the strength or ability to overcome the forces of darkness.

Instead, the future of our culture depends upon ordinary men and women in the church who are willing to live lives of justice, mercy, and humility before God. It depends on people like you and me who determine to live balanced lives in accord with the good providence of God before a watching world.

Writing to one of her many literary friends, the remarkable blind-deaf-mute, Helen Keller said:

I long to accomplish a great and noble task, but it is my chief duty to accomplish humble tasks as though they were great and noble. The world is moved along not by the mighty shoves of its heroes, but by the aggregate of the tiny pushes of each honest worker.

Now it is time for all of us who comprise the aggregate to begin to live out the prophetic implications of that kind of faith ourselves by accomplishing the humble tasks of the church's ministry to the world—as though they were great and noble. It is time for us to change the world with our tiny pushes of justice, mercy, and humble faith.