The Seven Mountains Mandate

Exposing the Dangerous Plan to Christianize America and Destroy Democracy

MATTHEW BOEDY

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"Matthew Boedy reveals in painstaking detail . . . how the seven mountains mandate quietly became the 'dominant religious framework among American Christians' after Donald Trump's election facilitated its spread from evangelical fringes to the White House, powerful financial backers, and supporters emboldened by 'divine urgency' to enact 'God's plan.' It's a sobering assessment of the evolution of Christian nationalism."

—***PUBLISHERS WEEKLY***

"One of the most important books to come out this year, *The Seven Mountains Mandate* masterfully charts the current struggle for the American soul. Through his lucid writing and meticulous research, Boedy details the right-wing crusade to impose Christian control over government, family, religion, education, business, media, and entertainment. Is that possible? In 2024, the movement behind the mandate, decades in the making, overcame theological and denominational differences to help elect President Donald Trump. Now, with the White House on their side, activists like Charlie Kirk on the march, and Fox News creating their own reality, supporters of the seven mountain mandate are on their way to, as Boedy fears, Christianizing America and destroying democracy. If you want to understand the who, what, why, when, where, and how of white Christian nationalism, *The Seven Mountains Mandate* is where to start."

—**DIANE WINSTON**, Knight Chair in Media and Religion,
Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism,
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"Boedy offers a vital and incisive account of how dominionist ideology has saturated the political imagination of much of American evangelicalism. As a pastor who has spent years navigating the fallout of Christian nationalism in my congregation and community, I'm deeply grateful for Boedy's clarity, scholarship, and moral courage. This book is a needed resource for those seeking to faithfully resist the powers that would co-opt the way of Jesus for political domination."

—**CALEB E. CAMPBELL**, author of *Disarming Leviathan: Loving Your Christian Nationalist Neighbor*

"We cannot change where we're going without knowing where we've been, which is why Boedy's work in *The Seven Mountains Mandate* is so vitally important. With expertise and candor, Boedy illuminates the history of theocracy and antidemocracy in this country that has too often hidden underneath a thin veneer of Christian rhetoric. This book is especially important as we attempt to navigate our way through Trump's second administration and push back against the onslaught of Christian nationalism."

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"Gifted at translating the seven mountains mandate into its political and social realities, Boedy illustrates how this transformative doctrine affects the lives of believers and nonbelievers alike."

—**ELLE HARDY**, journalist and author of *Beyond Belief: How Pentecostal Christianity Is Taking Over the World*

"Boedy, a professor of rhetoric at the University of North Georgia, provides a succinct, readable overview of 7MM [the seven mountains mandate] and . . . highlighting the role of Charlie Kirk, founder and president of Turning Point USA (TPUSA)—the nation's preeminent conservative youth organization—in making 7MM 'the central organizing element of the Trump era' and thereby bringing us to 'the precipice of the destruction of our democracy.'"

—***SPECTRUM MAGAZINE***

The Seven Mountains Mandate is ideal for discussing with others. Visit **www.wjkbooks.com/SevenMountains** to access free resources, including a book club guide, an eight-session guide for using the book in adult group study at your church or organization, and videos from the author that engage each of the mountains in the seven mountains mandate.

Key Dates in the Development of the Seven Mountains Mandate Movement

1973 **R. J. Rushdoony**, Calvinist theologian known as the father of Christian Reconstructionism, publishes *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, focused on applying the Ten Commandments to institutions such as the family, education, the marketplace, and other arenas of our modern social order.

1975 **Bill Bright**, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, and **Loren Cunningham**, founder of Youth with a Mission, meet up in Colorado and share that they've each received a vision regarding seven areas or spheres of cultural influence. **Francis Schaeffer**, founder of L'Abri communities, is also associated with the 1975 vision, though he was not present in Colorado.

1981 **C. Peter Wagner,** Fuller Seminary professor and father of the New Apostolic Reformation, publishes *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel: A Biblical Mandate*, asserting that Christians are charged with Christianizing society's institutions.

1989 **John Dawson**, a former staffer with Cunningham's Youth with a Mission, publishes *Taking Our Cities for God*, a guide to spiritual mapping that emphasizes six spheres of influence in cities (media being the seventh).

2000 **Lance Wallnau**, enterprising pastor, learns about the seven spheres from Cunningham. He is introduced to Wagner's network of apostles in 2001 and soon popularizes "mountains" as the predominant metaphor for the seven spheres of society.

2008 **Wagner** publishes *Dominion! How Kingdom Action Can Change the World,* endorsing Cunningham and Wallnau's approach to installing Christian leaders atop the seven mountains of society.

2012 **Charlie Kirk** founds Turning Point USA the summer after his high school graduation, following publicity he gained writing a piece for Breitbart accusing teachers and textbook creators of liberal indoctrination.

2019 **Rob McCoy**, California megachurch pastor and local officeholder, introduces Kirk to the seven mountains mandate movement.

2020 **Kirk** speaks at the Conservative Political Action Conference and says of Donald Trump, "Finally, we have a president who understands the seven mountains of cultural influence."

2024 On the eve of Trump's second election, the *Atlantic* calls Kirk "the right's new kingmaker."

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Preface

Watching the first inauguration of Donald Trump was heartbreaking enough. A second inauguration means that by the time you read this, the worst predictions of his second term may already be coming true.

Many of those predictions came from a plan called Project 2025, which you may have heard about during the campaign and in the months following. It is a collection of actions Trump's allies wanted the new president to undertake within the first 180 days of his administration. Many of those actions became Trump's executive orders signed in his first week. Implementing fully the wide-ranging playbook would eliminate some cabinet-level agencies, slash the power of others, and erode the civil rights of many Americans. Supporters of Project 2025—which include the organization at the heart of this book—want to erase what they see as a decades-long political and social weaponization of government against conservative values.

But that massive change in government is not the only goal for the people and organizations involved in the seven mountains mandate movement. Government is just one of seven "mountains" of culture the movement wants to radically change. That more expansive strategy is grounded in an ideology called Christian nationalism. Who is included in that label, what they believe, and how deep those beliefs go was analyzed in depth throughout the 2024 campaign.

This book won't repeat that debate. What this book will do is lay out the movement's sweeping plan to Christianize America that now has its champion controlling the levers of government. But the plan long predates Trump. Since the 1970s it has been gaining ground within evangelical churches, schools, and media. And while not secret, advocates of the plan have become so despondent for total cultural power that if they lose one mountain, they revolt. See the 2021 insurrection.

Now that Trump has won again, advocates of the seven mountains mandate have success for all the mountains within reach. But Trump isn't the only reason for that. Much of the success can be linked to a conservative youth political outreach group started in a small garage in Illinois by a teen more than ten years ago. Now in his thirties and armed with boundless political influence, this man has become the mandate's heir.

Charlie Kirk, founder and president of Turning Point USA, has continued to inflame the fear of anti-Christian persecution that gave birth to the seven mountains mandate. But he isn't just repeating decades of talking points that have gained him followers and financial success. He has acted in significant ways to cement the seven mountains mandate as the central organizing element of the Trump era. During the Biden administration, this meant fighting what the movement considered a corrupt regime conspiring against God and his vision for America. Now it means policy and laws that keep the God of evangelicalism the ruler not merely of our politics but of all other cultural, economic, and business arenas. Through millions of dollars and by the power of its millions of followers, Turning Point has the nation standing on the precipice of the destruction of our democracy.

More than thirty years ago, when the seven mountains mandate movement was still in its infancy, one of the first observers of the plan asked a disturbing question about its sweeping claims and outsized goal to Christianize America. Sociologist Sara Diamond wrote that the plan may sound hopelessly unrealistic, but its early success meant we had to ask at what cost more success would come.

Now a generation later, those costs have grown exponentially. The mandate movement has the most autocratic president in American

history supporting it at every step. Supporters of the mandate like Kirk now stand ready to use and abuse the levers of democratic power to deliver on all the movement has been promising. How they are planning to do so is what this book is about.

Introduction

The Story of the Mountains

The plan to Christianize America began fifty years ago with a vision from God.

Or so the legend goes.

Bill Bright, the founder of a college campus evangelism organization, had just landed in Colorado in August 1975 to participate in an event in Boulder. But something planted deep in his spirit had made Bright desperate to talk to Loren Cunningham, a founder of another youth-oriented evangelism organization, who was on vacation in Colorado.

The vision from God that Bright had brought for Cunningham was a typed list of seven influential areas of culture. If Christians could win these seven areas for Christ, Bright said, the nation could be set right and return to its biblical origins. It would take a massive spiritual war, but ending the demonic control of these areas would have immense impact for the kingdom of God.

The problem was that God had placed Cunningham on a mountaintop near Durango on the other side of the state with no way to communicate. The man who had picked up Bright at the airport said he could get the two together. Someone got through to a ranger station in Durango, and then from there someone on horseback found Cunningham's remote location. That man took Cunningham to a borrowed plane, which flew Cunningham to meet the man who had

that urgent message from God. What Bright didn't know was that God had given Cunningham the same list, though his was sketched out on a legal pad. The two friends presented their lists to each other simultaneously. Cunningham later wrote, "Amazing coincidences like this happen all the time when Christians listen to the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit."[1]

Over the years, the story of that 1975 meeting has been told many ways, accepted not merely as gospel but a divine endorsement of the list Bright and Cunningham created. Whatever the truth of the meeting, the list has become powerful spiritual lore passed down from one generation to another in the movement born from it. That movement is intent on destroying democracy by taking dominion in these seven institutions: education, family, religion, government, business, media, and entertainment.[2] Over the decades, many have made their mark on the list by envisioning different labels for it. While Bright and Cunningham spoke of areas of influence, others have called them gates, pillars, channels, and—most commonly among the movement's supporters today—mountains. The preferred metaphor evolved over time, but the purpose of the list has remained the same: bring the kingdom of God to America by conquering each of these cultural domains.

The story of the seven mountains movement told in this book is the story of those who inspired and shaped that 1975 list. It's also about how the list has come to dominate American political life in the twenty-first century without most Americans even having heard about it. This insidious victory is the work of a new generation of believers who have pushed it with more and more aggression, pushing us closer and closer to violence, threatening our society through their claim to divine urgency. In short, this is the story of how the list became a mandate.

The spiritual energy behind this mandate pushed the list into the White House with the 2016 election of Donald Trump. From there the movement exploded beyond the fringes of charismatic evangelicalism into larger institutions, influencers, and financial backers. To a handful of experts who have followed the movement for years, it was no surprise its supporters turned violent when the 2020 election didn't go the way they wanted—the way they say God wanted. This is

where the movement has been headed. Yet even more frighteningly, since the 2021 insurrection at the Capitol, more Americans seemingly want what the seven mountains movement wants. A June 2023 survey of two thousand Americans estimated that about 30 percent "are open to" ideas associated with the seven mountains movement such as "U.S. culture is 'fundamentally Christian'" and "Christian values should be 'solely and explicitly endorsed by the government.'" Another 2023 survey found a similar percentage of Americans either adhering to or sympathetic to those ideals.[3] A second Trump administration only reinforces that.

Of course, many of the Americans in those polls are the demographic most supportive of the mandate: evangelicals. A 2024 survey showed that strong majorities of evangelicals agree broadly with the goals of the seven mountains movement. About 55 percent of evangelicals specifically agreed that "God wants Christians to stand atop the Seven Mountains of society." The survey also showed that the percentage of Christian Americans who believed in the mandate increased from just under 30 percent to 41 percent in one year.[4] The surveyors noted that "what not long ago seemed to be a marginal set of beliefs has become a dominant religious framework among American Christians."[5]

The seven mountains movement has been adopted across the religious right even by leaders who may not share its theology, because their followers are being motivated by the mandate. For example, the 2022 National Day of Prayer guide from the Southern Baptist Convention—the nation's largest Protestant denomination and traditionally one devoted to religious liberty for all—asked its congregants to pray for the "seven centers of influence."[6] Beyond religion, the seven mountains movement has become so accepted in American society that its supporters from all levels of government, from Congress to school boards, have publicly named themselves as supporters. One expert said in 2021 that it is "a heartbeat away from everything that happens in the Republican Party."[7]

The seven mountains movement is an all-encompassing strategy of a larger ideology known as Christian nationalism. The 2021 insurrection made a wider swath of Americans aware of the antidemocratic violence within that ideology. Those violent desires have

not faded even after hundreds of convictions and long prison sentences for some involved in the insurrection. The mass pardons for all involved from President Trump in his first week in office were not only a campaign promise kept but an explicit approval of those desires. It might then come as no surprise that a 2024 survey showed a majority of Christian nationalists would support a leader who is "willing to break some rules." About a third of those same people support "violence in order to save our country or to ensure that the rightful leader takes office." More than 80 percent agree that "the final battle between good and evil is upon us."[8]

After two election seasons where it was featured prominently, Christian nationalism continues to divide America. A poll of twenty-two thousand Americans in 2024 showed that "nearly four in ten residents of red states are Christian nationalists," and this "is nearly twice the proportion of blue state residents who are Christian nationalists." States with the highest levels of support for Christian nationalism range geographically from North Dakota to Louisiana.[9] Christian nationalism rests on the idea of restoring "the idea that Christian people should be privileged in the United States in some way—economically, socially, politically," according to religion scholar Bradley Onishi. "And that privilege is a result of the country being founded by and for Christians."[10] That founding mythology pushes many advocates of the seven mountains movement to demand that only Christians will have full voting rights in a nation run by the mandate.

The Heir to the List

Since the 2021 insurrection, many scholars and media outlets have brought new attention to Christian nationalism. Many examples in the expanding genre of books about the ideology have ended with warnings about the future. That future has appeared. The seven mountains movement's fathers like Bright have long since died (Cunningham died in 2023 in his nineties), and their heirs are well into senior citizen status. But just a few years ago a new heir was brought into the fold. This occurred in 2020 when a tall, thin, and well-dressed millennial in February walked onto the stage at the

powerful Conservative Political Action Conference and announced to the nation that for the first time in its history it had a president who "understands the seven mountains of cultural influence."[11]

That heir is Charlie Kirk, founder of Turning Point USA. Kirk emerged in this role because he has deep pockets and millions of followers. In the last five years he has remade his national political organization to conquer the seven mountains. His success forces those previous warnings about Christian nationalism into a different, more alarming perspective. Kirk requires a recalibration because of what he brings to the movement and what he has already accomplished. He and Turning Point have brought the seven mountains movement as close to success as it has even been.

Kirk began Turning Point in the summer of 2012, just after graduating high school. His origin story about indoctrination in his high school had gone viral that April on the leading conservative news site, Breitbart, and Kirk quickly became a Fox News darling, got funding from major conservative backers, and launched his conservative youth outreach program from his garage in a Chicago suburb. Kirk built Turning Point by hosting debate-style events on college quads where he challenged shy conservatives to boldly believe and taunted liberal students with rhetorical fights he never seemed to lose. Kirk went all in on Trump in 2016, and his summits for students headlined by political celebrities ballooned into all-age affairs, with Trump often a guest. The organization's budgets exploded year after year. Since 2016 Turning Point has raised roughly a quarter-billion dollars.[12]

Now married and in his thirties with two kids, Kirk is a fast-talking radio host and social media provocateur who operates from Turning Point's sprawling campus in Phoenix, Arizona. You might call him a new Rush Limbaugh. (The famous conservative radio host complimented Kirk in 2018 and suggested that Kirk was "running the White House." Kirk continues to play that clip at the beginning of every episode of his radio program, which replaced Limbaugh in many markets after the icon's death.) But Kirk is much more than a leading voice in conservative politics. He has made Turning Point into the indispensable organization for the seven mountains movement. In 2021 Kirk pitched to investors a plan for "seven core

outreach programs" that mirror the 1975 list. The plan painted a dire picture of America, playing off Turning Point's history attacking higher education, saying the "localized tumor of campus extremism has metastasized" and now threatens "the very life of our country." It blamed "secular elitists" for funding the left's "long march through the institutions of our society."[13]

That phrase about institutions was originally coined in the sixties by socialist countercultural writers. Turning Point has repurposed it for its goal of Christianizing America. But evangelism is not the central strategy for Turning Point and the larger movement it leads. The mandate movement operates as a minority movement. It's not counting on mass conversions. In fact, those like Kirk who want to expand Christian privilege are a shrinking minority. This status makes it a threat to democracy, but not just to the idea of majority rule. The seven mountains movement is a threat to the religious pluralism American democracy was built on.

This minority sees itself as God's chosen rulers. Many of them think reformation comes before revival, that political and social victories should lead spiritual ones. This is why so many in the seven mountains movement agree with the ideas that the church should have veto power over legislation.[14] Kirk understands the mandate movement's history, its link to Christian nationalism, and the waves of criticism and warnings since the insurrection. In response, he has recalibrated the movement. This is most obvious in how he speaks about the movement's history—or, rather, doesn't speak about it. He doesn't approach at all the divine origins of the movement itself. And he has only referred to the plan for the seven mountains publicly once—at that 2020 CPAC event. A Turning Point spokesman told NBC News in June 2024 that "Charlie probably couldn't tell you what the seven mountains are."[15]

But Kirk doesn't hide the goal of the seven mountains movement. He admits he is a Christian and a nationalist and defends the claim that people like him want to use "state power" to put Christianity in government: "I always laugh at that presupposition. We're going to put things that are right and good and beautiful and true in government. Of course we are."[16] While that may be the goal of the seven mountains movement, Kirk and Turning Point have used lies and

fear to advance the mandate. But it's more than rhetoric. As we shall see in the pages to follow, Kirk's actions already have begun to erase much of what makes America great.

Origins of the Movement

Whether God played a role in inspiring Cunningham and Bright's list, as legends often go, it's clear their ideas stem from a theological and social world that spans two continents across decades, a world that those who advocate for the seven mountains movement today want to re-create under a Christian banner.

Part of the immediate context to which Bright and others were responding was the end of the "long '60s," that era which culminated in the antiwar protests and shootings at Kent State and Jackson State. It included years of race-based violence and civil rights marches often led by younger leaders. Outside the political arena, the decade left the nation divided along many well-known cultural fault lines. The list is a response to all that we associate with that decade—from drugs to music to sex to crumbling moral standards. The list is an implicit call for a return to the decade prior.

The list is also a reversal from decades of nonengagement in the culture by Christian fundamentalism. Churches and pastors who followed this way of thinking separated from the wicked world and its evil culture but also went as far as to separate themselves from fellow Christians whom they thought were not theologically pure or too negatively impacted by culture. Fundamentalists as a sect were derided in movies such as the 1960 release *Inherit the Wind*, which dramatized the 1925 Scopes trial.

While American evangelicalism has roots in the '30s and often agreed theologically with fundamentalists, in the post–World War II era it as a movement sought new ways to engage culturally and politically in America. Those who were pursuing innovation in evangelism were sometimes labeled neo-evangelicals. In 2014 Steven Patrick Miller wrote that the '70s in particular "witnessed a boom in public evangelicalism," and evangelicals showed a "renewed conviction that faith deserves a prominent place in the 'public square.'" To make the case for a new engagement, when writing about the 1975

list Cunningham referred to Luke 19:13 in the King James Version: "Jesus told us to occupy until He came. It's not occupying the earth if we hole up in a religious enclave and let everyone outside our church walls rot away."[17]

Bright's organization, then known as Campus Crusade for Christ, and Cunningham's Youth with a Mission were a significant part of this larger change in American evangelicalism's stance toward the world. These organizations helped evangelical leaders see the next generation as essential to the future of the church and nation. That meant not shying away from the youth's changing culture. They were not the only ones. A few years before the Colorado vision, the National Association of Evangelicals called in 1970 for its member churches to "initiate a new relationship with their youth by listening to them, believing in them, responding to them and encouraging them."[18]

Two years later Bright and his organization (now known merely as CRU) helped to organize a five-day evangelical youth summit known as Explo '72. The conference drew more than 80,000 students (some estimates put the daily crowd at more than 100,000) to the Cotton Bowl stadium in Dallas in June 1972. Johnny Cash, among many others, performed. Billy Graham spoke. The conference was considered the epitome of the Jesus Movement, a self-labeled countercultural Christian youth movement that began in California. The "culture" they were countering was the original counterculture movement that brought America Woodstock, second-wave feminism, the sexual revolution, and other events and trends in the late '60s. The historian Benjamin J. Young has argued that Explo '72 "wasn't a mere revival. Instead, it was a generational hinge in the history of modern American evangelicalism."[19]

There were plenty of reasons, then, in the summer of 1975 why Cunningham was "praying and thinking about how we could turn the world around for Jesus."[20] He wrote that Satan's authority over the world needed to be deposed. This kind of spiritual war rhetoric was growing in some evangelical circles, and the strategies to meet the moment were changing. Evangelism remained important, but it also meant that the gospel should capture entire societies in a broader, institutional fashion, especially the most influential areas of

culture. Cunningham immediately put the list of seven areas to use in his organization, sharing it as early as September 1975 with British Youth with a Mission staff.[21] In 1978 Cunningham started a missionary training center in Hawaii to equip the next generation of leaders in this cultural transformation. Well into the twenty-first century, the list has remained a part of the organization's training.

Both Bright and Cunningham had started their respective organizations based on visions of global evangelism. In 1956, Cunningham had seen waves crashing ashore on all the continents. Bright's vision occurred as he was studying in seminary in 1951. God showed the young businessman how he and his generation would be used to reach all people. Bright calculated he would succeed by the late '70s. This impending deadline of sorts by the time of his meeting with Cunningham had pushed Bright to become a leader in moving evangelicals toward a more overt relationship between politics and religion.

This meant amid the religious goals, Bright had a political agenda for Explo '72. That agenda was so obvious that he had tried to get President Richard Nixon to appear at the event. The year before the mountaintop vision with Cunningham, with the aid of millions from conservative business tycoons, Bright started a publishing house whose books encouraged evangelicals to get involved in politics. He used that publisher to push a national evangelism effort that aimed to have 50,000 churches expand their congregations in eighteen major cities. A pilot program in Atlanta began in 1975. But that plan was exposed for its political undertones by a 1976 profile in a more liberal evangelical publication.[22]

Those efforts were the seeds for what came to be known as the religious right. Bright and others helped push that growing movement from supporting noted evangelical Jimmy Carter to helping elect Ronald Reagan in 1980. They soured on Carter for many reasons, but one seemed to be his support for "secular humanism," which included feminism and other trends they perceived as threatening to American families. These ideologies were among the many intellectual diseases sickening America that led Cunningham to label his seven areas "mind molders." Such ideas secured the demonic grip on American culture.

Throughout the ensuing decades, Bright kept pushing Christian leaders, especially those who had influence due to their business success, to become public advocates for Christian culture. One acolyte of Bright's says he was challenged by Bright in 1996 to start a group for business leaders in Arizona to influence the culture. Nearly thirty years later that group has chapters across the nation and is grounded in the seven mountains.[23] Bright's biographer, John G. Turner, says that Bright wanted to do more than merely evangelize individuals. He sensed that the thousands of students his organization had converted weren't turning the tide or restoring "America to its Christian roots." Bright wanted to offer "evangelical solutions to the nation's ills."[24]

Those ills were on display in Bright's 1986 book *Kingdoms at War: Tactics for Victory in Nine Spiritual War Zones*. (Bright considered sports and science in addition to his original seven.) The first chapter charts a wide-ranging opposition movement meant to defeat Christianity and America: "globalism" in education, "humanistic media programming," and a national "drift" into sexual immorality. The "next five to ten years are critical," Bright asserts, because the "anti-Christian forces have gained so much ground," a warning he had given before. Bright calls for a national change in how we "conduct business, run our government, write our laws," and manage other areas of influence. This change can only occur through victory in a war that has "ever-widening influence on the mind, on the individual, on the family, in the church, and in the various professions." And he challenges readers to choose: You serve either God's kingdom or Satan's kingdom.[25]

A Third Founding Father

Along with Bright and Cunningham, there is often a third person associated with the legend of that August 1975 meeting. In Cunningham's rendition of that meeting, he notes that a month later, his wife Darlene saw on TV (at other times he said she was listening to a radio show) one of the most well-known Christian apologists of the twentieth century, Francis Schaeffer, offer the same list of seven areas of

cultural influence. Like Bright and Cunningham, Schaeffer was also known to minister to a youth-oriented crowd. In 1955 he founded L'Abri, a Swiss-based community for seekers, skeptics, and others, usually young, who wanted answers about God. "A drop-by haven for intellectually curious evangelicals," *The New York Times* called it in a 2011 profile of Schaeffer's son, Frank.[26] L'Abri meeting houses would eventually spread globally, and millions would read the elder Schaeffer's books.

Schaeffer's cultural engagement inspired many preachers to engage in politics, including Jerry Falwell, who would go on to found the Moral Majority in 1979. In the '60s, Falwell was set against the mingling of politics and preachers, specifically criticizing Martin Luther King Jr. and his march in Selma. Schaeffer helped Falwell and his fellow conservative Christians see a broader goal beyond simply sharing the gospel. His work emphasized more systemic issues with modern America, including abortion. He called for a return to the Christian foundations he saw at the origins of the United States—and more broadly, Western civilization—by providing a history of how those origins had been abandoned.

Schaeffer was also influential on Cunningham and Bright. In 1968 Schaeffer led a training event for Youth with a Mission in Switzerland where Cunningham started its first school for evangelism. Darlene credits Schaeffer with convincing her and Loren about the importance of the lordship of Christ over all elements of culture. During a trip to Europe in 1971 to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of his organization, Bright arranged a special meeting for his son with Schaeffer. More than a decade later, Bright called Schaeffer "one of the greatest men of our times."[27]

As Bright and Cunningham met in Colorado in August 1975, Schaeffer and his wife were on a European film shoot for his tandem movie-and-book project *How Should We Then Live?*[28] That book included analysis of the kind of topics on the list Cunningham and Bright had given each other. *How Should We Then Live?* is a sweeping intellectual history of the impact of culture—from science to art to music to philosophy to capitalism to politics—on Christianity and its followers since its origin. In a previous book, Schaeffer had

outlined the "line of despair"—that point at which a cohesive or unified answer to the accumulation of cultural knowledge is untenable and so the world drifts into secular, even nihilistic hopelessness. That certainly laid the ground for fears of a satanic rule of the world à la Cunningham and Bright.

The book and movie narrated by Schaeffer "became a sensation" in American evangelicalism, historian Daniel K. Williams wrote: "Conservative evangelicals had been looking for an explanation for the secular drift of their country, and Schaeffer's diagnosis of contemporary cultural ills gave them a framework for understanding it." The impact was clear: evangelicals now understood there was a "culture war" taking place in America, "and they were determined to become active participants in it."[29]

Cunningham's criticism of religious enclaves and Bright's call to go beyond individual evangelism mirror Schaeffer's call for a wider interaction with culture. All three rejected fundamentalism's isolationist style and tone. Jimmy Draper, president of the Southern Baptist Convention from 1982 to 1984, said that Schaeffer was "the first one" to clearly lay out the growing danger to Christianity's important role in culture and to say "we need to stand for the things that God has revealed to us."[30] Previewing the stakes laid out by Bright in his 1986 book, in 1981 Schaeffer wrote in *The Christian Manifesto* that "the two world views [Christianity and humanism] really do bring forth with inevitable certainty not only personal differences, but total differences in regard to society, government, and law. There is no way to mix these two total world views. They are separate entities that cannot be synthesized."[31]

While Schaeffer died in 1984, his words remained a powerful driver of evangelical posture toward the larger culture. Before he died, Schaeffer published a scathing critique of evangelical leaders whom he thought hadn't yet taken him to heart. In *The Great Evangelical Disaster*, Schaeffer was particularly critical of Christian leaders who fell into the "blue jean" mindset, a way of accommodating to culture, not confronting it. "I do not think that the evangelical leaders in positions of influence—in schools, in publishing, in other spheres of influence—have been helpful" in confronting the "accepted thought-form of the age around us."[32]

Reconstructing the Spheres

In terms of numbers, Protestants like Bright, Cunningham, and Schaeffer didn't invent the biblical importance of seven. That number in the Hebrew scriptures often is connected to wholeness, completion, perfection, and holiness. The Christian scriptures also use the number seven symbolically, especially in Revelation. In terms of the areas of influence on the original 1975 list, as far back as 1917 theologians noted "five basic institutions of society."[33] In the second half of the twentieth century, sociologists often named family, education, religion, government, and the economy as having a powerful impact on society. Introductory sociology textbooks in the '60s listed those along with science and labor. The *Encyclopedia of Education* in 1971 said these institutions were "discernible in every society, regardless of its degree of complexity."[34]

In 1974 Schaeffer used the label of "spheres" for these social institutions in his keynote presentation at the first global evangelism conference in Lausanne, Switzerland. There Schaeffer framed the gospel as an individual choice but Christianity as a cultural system that claims dominion in all spheres: "If Christianity is truth as the Bible claims, it must touch every aspect of life. If I draw a pie and that pie composes the whole of life, Christianity will touch every slice. At every sphere of our lives Christ will be our Lord and the Bible will be our norm."[35]

Schaeffer was drawing from a broad theology known as Christian reconstructionism, which was forcing the American church to take similar stands on the choices framed by Schaeffer. The movement had as its goal reconstructing for modern use the sets of laws that governed Israel under its kings as laid out in the Jewish scriptures. The group's most well-known publication came two years prior to Bright and Cunningham's meeting with *The Institutes of Biblical Law* by R. J. Rushdoony in 1973. While the book was organized around the Ten Commandments, Rushdoony applied those laws to institutions such as the family, education, the marketplace, and other arenas of our social order.

Rushdoony's impact on Schaeffer, Bright, and Cunningham is clear. A key book by Bright's publishing house—*One Nation under God*

by Rus Walton, published in 1975—cited Rushdoony's books and laid out how Christians could apply God's laws to civic life. Schaeffer himself taught one of Rushdoony's early books at L'Abri as early as 1964.[36] As for Cunningham, he began to study reconstructionism in the '80s "with the intent of incorporating" its theology into the training given to his missionaries.[37]

Rushdoony had been writing about the Christian impact on the spheres of cultural life since the early '60s. In 1964 he published a book about the Christian origins of America in which he argued these spheres each had a separate law. This meant that in God's earthly kingdom, "neither church nor state has any right to rule over the spheres, since each is directly under God and equally in the kingdom."[38] This was a direct but uncited reference to a Dutch politician and theologian from the nineteenth century, Abraham Kuyper, from whom Schaeffer also drew. Schaeffer wrote in his 1970 book *Pollution and the Death of Man* that Kuyper taught Christians to see themselves as living in many spheres: "The man in the state, the man who is the employer, the man who is the father, the elder in the church, the professor at the university—each of these is a different sphere. But even though they are in different spheres at different times, Christians are to act like Christians in each of these spheres."[39]

The List Becomes a Mandate

The genealogy of the list is clear. But the ascendancy of the list wasn't always a straight line. The legend of Bright and Cunningham's meeting was born long after it happened. It's always been a curiosity as to why Bright and Cunningham waited more than a decade to write about their lists (and why only the latter ever mentioned in print the 1975 meeting). It could be that by the late '80s when both published their books, others were suggesting similar ideas along with a strong claim to divine approval. One of these was Fuller Seminary professor C. Peter Wagner, a leader in what was then known as the "church growth" movement—a loose collection of pastors and seminary professors who promoted ideas on how to bring new people into the church. As he became popular in the growing field, Wagner turned from a separatist stance against culture to concluding that Christians

are God's "chosen agents" to change society. They had a "cultural mandate" to Christianize institutions.[40]

Wagner was not the first to use that phrase. He wrote that he first came across it while reading a 1968 article. It has roots in the Genesis creation story, where God commands the first humans, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Gen. 1:28). Most interpreters focus on humans' power over nature. Kuyper and others defined that call more broadly as a responsibility to maintain cultural goodness, which would impact non-Christians. This is often labeled "common grace."

But Rushdoony and Wagner and their acolytes went even further. Understanding the verse as a Christian social responsibility to serve the poor or feed the hungry wasn't enough. Rushdoony thought his elders in the Reformed movement didn't emphasize enough the power of God's law. And as an emerging charismatic, Wagner said Kuyper erred when he failed to consider the spiritual dimensions of social transformation. Wagner and Rushdoony turned to another translation of the word "rule" in some versions of the Genesis verse: "have dominion."

For Wagner and the charismatics who in the '90s began to form networks with him, having dominion over the world meant identifying demonic institutions and the ideologies—including everything from gang violence to higher education—and making them targets of spiritual warfare, "spiritually mapping" cities to identify areas under satanic influence. Such warfare was conducted through activities like prayer marches through identified areas and calling on demons to leave. The mapping and warfare were empowered by the 1975 list, which Wagner began to mention in his books. He described areas of influence dominated by what he called territorial spirits. These spirits could overcome buildings, seats of government, and neighborhoods, and as sin-filled strongholds they could affect a whole city. Some of the reports Wagner used in his 1995 book about these spirits came from Cunningham's ministry.

Wagner's role in the growth of the seven mountains movement also highlights how the movement has brought together two

powerful but often disagreeable Protestant traditions: the Reformed movement led by Schaeffer and Rushdoony and the charismatic movement that included Cunningham and Wagner. Wagner himself said he joined the charismatic camp as he also turned toward the cultural mandate. His new colleagues convinced him the movement needed spiritual leaders who acted like the apostles from the first century of Christianity. Those apostles—named by Wagner as the New Apostolic Reformation—have been instrumental over the years in spreading the mandate movement. To be sure, there were deep divisions in Reformed Christianity over Rushdoony's ideas as well. And Rushdoony also had a falling out with his most prolific follower and son-in-law, Gary North. But whatever their sizable differences in many areas of theology, especially when it came to eschatology (how the world will end), the two groups mingled together in conferences, publications, and desires for dominion in the '80s and '90s. They came to share the list and its mandate.

Heirs Appear

If the plan to Christianize America started with a divine appointment between Loren Cunningham and Bill Bright, the list they created entered the twenty-first century still searching for success—and a consistent metaphor. Then God put Cunningham in another serendipitous meeting. At a conference in British Columbia in 2000 designed to help Christians create wealth, Cunningham ran into a struggling former pastor named Lance Wallnau looking for divine ways to understand the marketplace. Cunningham told Wallnau about his 1975 vision and meeting with Bright. A year later Wallnau met Wagner at another conference and was introduced to Wagner's vast and growing network of apostles and prophets who had begun predicting great societal change.

It is Wallnau who popularized mountains as the dominant metaphor for the movement. Precisely how he came to see that as the needed label is lost in the many versions of the story that Wallnau has told. One version is that a few months prior to speaking with Cunningham, Wallnau heard about a Georgia state senator's deathbed vision of mountains, though Wallnau at times discredits his own

telling of that story. And one should not discount the reality that the location in British Columbia where Cunningham and Wallnau met is Kelowna, a city in a valley surrounded by mountains.

Because of the mountain metaphor, Wallnau has long been credited with resurrecting the mandate movement, especially when he took on the leadership of the movement after Wagner died in 2016. Wallnau wrote a book that year about Donald Trump, framing his candidacy as part of a movement to bring a "wrecking ball to political correctness." He followed that up with a similar book in 2020 that claimed to use a biblical "code" to understand contemporary America. He's traveled the globe appearing with a ubiquitous whiteboard covered in the summits of the seven mountains and sells books and videos about the seven mountains on his website. In a 2022 book, Christian nationalism expert Andrew Seidel called Wallnau the "father of American Dominionism."[41] In 2023 Wallnau added an eighth mountain, what he named the "mountain of me," or self-mastery.[42]

Wallnau spent much of 2024 headlining Trump-supportive campaign events with Charlie Kirk. This tour of swing states was not surprising. Wallnau had long supported Kirk as heir to the seven mountains movement. Wallnau said the tour in part happened because he wanted to defend Kirk, who had faced criticism because he was, in Wallnau's words, "the face of Christian Nationalism."[43]

To understand the power of that statement, among others naming Kirk as the heir to the seven mountains movement, one must understand the context of the thoroughly surprising statement Kirk made at that CPAC event in 2020. It was surprising not just because Trump has never mentioned the seven mountains or its mandate in any public manner, but because—up to that point—neither had Kirk.

Kirk has always identified himself as an evangelical Christian. But Turning Point's messages early on were consistently secular, mainly focused on free market values and economic issues, and shying away from any culture war hot buttons like abortion, though he relied early on from donors who wanted to push those buttons.[44] Turning Point and Kirk broke on to the national scene in 2016 with campaigns attacking higher education and the federal government; even

then Kirk kept the organization from religion. While Kirk nodded to the Bible in his 2016 debut manifesto, *Time for a Turning Point*, he also claimed that politically aggressive Christian leaders throughout the '70s and '80s tried to wrongly impose their beliefs through government policy. Rather than replicating those errors, Kirk said he advocated for his political positions through a secular worldview because the government established by the founders was also secular. Responding to an interviewer's observation in 2018 that Kirk doesn't proselytize, the young activist said he talked about his faith when asked, but that he saw his job as the face of Turning Point as no different from being a plumber or electrician, who likely doesn't tell everyone they meet about their religion.[45] In 2019 in the premiere episode of his self-named (and now top 10 in downloads) podcast, Kirk denied overlap between his religion and politics: "I'm very careful not to have my religious views and my faith inform my political decisions."[46]

That same year, however, Kirk met a California megachurch pastor named Rob McCoy. McCoy himself was also a convert to the seven mountains movement. Kirk said that over a series of conversations, the pastor began to challenge him to rethink his position separating politics and religion. By April, Kirk and McCoy began sharing stages together, first in California, then nationally in other churches in the Calvary Chapel network, which had been hosting advocates of the seven mountains as far back as 2010. And the mandate movement embraced Kirk just as quickly. Wallnau began promoting Kirk on Twitter, and Kirk had Wallnau on his show. Then came the 2020 CPAC speech in which Kirk linked Trump with the seven mountains movement. Pastors and spiritual advisors around Trump also began claiming Kirk, and by 2021 Kirk began appearing at seven mountains–themed summits and conferences.

Riding the Wave

Turning Point has always had tremendous support from conservative power players. GOP donors Bill Montgomery and Foster Friess were among Kirk's earliest supporters. Ginni Thomas, wife of Supreme Court justice Clarence Thomas, was an early Turning Point advisory

board member. But Kirk knew also that the GOP had radically changed when Trump won the nomination in 2016. That summer Kirk befriended Donald Trump Jr. and spent months campaigning with him. That paid off in a massive way. When the elder Trump became president, Turning Point's fundraising skyrocketed. In 2018, according to InfluenceWatch, Turning Point raised over $28 million, compared to $10 million the previous year. According to NBC News, by 2021 Turning Point was reporting $55 million in revenue. Since 2018, Turning Point has hosted Trump fourteen times.

The Biden administration was also great for the group's fundraising. In June 2023, Turning Point reported more than $80 million in revenue, according to tax records. Its political arm, Turning Point Action, began in late 2019 and by 2020 was running a highly sophisticated social media campaign that downplayed the COVID pandemic and sowed doubt about the upcoming election. It ramped up spending in the 2022 election cycle and hosted several conferences and rallies. By 2024 it could be said Turning Point was ruling the party as a whole. Politico noted that long-standing groups such as CPAC had "lost their pull," barely filling their convention ballrooms, while Kirk played a key role in usurping the chairwoman of the GOP, Ronna McDaniel.[47] On the eve of the 2024 election, in which Kirk and Turning Point played essential roles putting Trump back in the White House, the *Atlantic* called Kirk the right's new kingmaker.[48] At a Turning Point fundraiser at Trump's Florida estate in December 2024, Donald Trump Jr. said, "Charlie runs truly one of the finest operations, not just in modern politics, but perhaps ever."

Since embracing the seven mountains movement, Turning Point is no longer merely a youth-oriented group. It has an army of staff in every major city to reach all ages. It has widely expanded its content creation and media capabilities. It hosts women's conferences and men's summits. Turning Point Action has gone on to run multimillion-dollar canvassing campaigns in several election cycles. In 2021 Kirk and McCoy started Turning Point Faith, a branch that targets pastors and their congregations. That has made inroads in charismatic and Baptist churches, two significant parts of the broader American evangelical landscape. And Turning Point Academy has started schools, giving out free curriculum thanks to generous donors.

Kirk has done all this to make Turning Point the indispensable organization for the seven mountains movement. By each of its arms at the same time, Turning Point is fulfilling the mandate. As Kirk said in 2021, "Winning very simply for us is restoring the American way of life."[49] Kirk's plan for restoration is well underway. The picture of victory outlined through each chapter in this book lays bare the danger our nation faces.