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Contrasting Appeals for Christian Public Service

by
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Michael Schluter and John Ashcroft, eds., *Jubilee Manifesto: A Framework, Agenda and Strategy for Christian Social Reform* (Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press, 2005).

Ronald J. Sider and Diane Knippers, eds., *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005).

Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005).

One British, two American, three books. One goes back to the Torah, one to the Prophets, one to Evangelical concern. Three different perspectives on government and politics.

Jubilee Manifesto comes from the Jubilee Centre in England, where for 30 years Michael Schluter, an agricultural economist by training, has been promoting the development of a "relational" approach to social and political life. Eight different authors make contributions on topics ranging from the ethical authority of the Bible to finance and welfare, from nationhood to criminal justice and international relations. Part of the book's distinction is that its mostly British authors, almost all with Ph.D.s, share a common point of departure and all have read and discussed one another's contributions. There is a school of thought behind this book.

Toward an Evangelical Public Policy is a different kind of cooperative venture. The originating force behind the book is Ron Sider, the indefatigable director of Evangelicals for Social Action and professor at Eastern Baptist Seminary (Philadelphia) who wants Evangelicals to grasp and act on the connection between evangelism and social action, between the Bible and careful factual analysis. He and the late Diane Knippers, who served as president of the Institute for Religion and Democracy, with encouragement from leaders of the National Association of Evangelicals, invited a wide spectrum of

Evangelicals to contribute essays of an historical, methodological, and thematic nature to show why those who believe in Jesus Christ should be concerned with human rights and justice, with the sanctity of life and poverty, with peace and environmental sustainability. In this case, 22 authors—including Richard Cizik, John Green, Dennis Hollinger, Joseph Loconte, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Nigel Cameron, Stephen Monsma, and Paul Marshall—contributed essays that exhibit different points of view.

God's Politics, quite in contrast to the first two books, is one man's story, admonition, appeal, critique, proposal, platform, agenda. That man is Jim Wallis, editor of *Sojourners Magazine*. The book is selling big and Wallis spent the first half of 2005 on the road promoting it. TV and radio talk shows draw him in. An evangelical figure who represents a significant contrast to the Religious Right is now in demand. *God's Politics* is filled with letters to presidents and newspaper editors, quotations from lectures, and signed petitions—almost all of them by Wallis, the editor, perpetual traveler, commentator, and spokesman for counter-cultural causes. This book, too, ranges widely over war and peace, poverty and welfare, morality and prophecy, as *Sojourners* has done for years.

My aim in this review essay is to compare and contrast these books along three lines. First, how do they appeal to God and use the Bible? Second, what are they after? In other words, what do they want to inspire or cause to happen? And third, what do they tell us about the quality and potential of Christian citizenship in the United Kingdom and America—as well as other parts of the world—today?

God and the Bible

For Wallis, the God who needs to be heard is the God of the prophets. This God stands above partisan politics but calls us, nevertheless, to "God's politics," the kind that "reminds us of the people our politics always neglects—the poor, the vulnerable, the left behind." The suggestion here is that the prophetic voice always stands in critique of human politics and Wallis wants to be such a prophet to American leaders. Yet through most of the book Wallis does not stand above human politics but tries to inspire "a new vision for faith and politics in America." In other words, he believes God's politics can be our politics if we will only heed the prophets. The challenge, he writes, is not *whether* to bring God into politics but *how* to do so. Prophecy, in the sense of protest and critique, "is not enough anymore, and truly prophetic religion must always have better alternatives to offer."

The problem this approach creates for Wallis is that he spends much of his book criticizing the Religious Right for talking and acting as if it has God on its side, leading to "triumphalism, self-righteousness, bad theology, and, often, dangerous foreign policy." Instead of claiming that God is on his side, Wallis wants Christians and other Americans to ask whether they are *on God's side*. Yet if one religious group claims that fighting poverty in a particular way puts God on their side and another group claims that fighting poverty in a different way puts them on God's side, whose is the humblest claim? And perhaps even more important, how does one know when a particular public policy is in tune with God's prophetic voice? If, as Wallis says at the outset, God's politics always stands in critique of our politics, then can any human effort represent God's politics or claim to be the right way to bring God into politics?

The weakness of Wallis' approach shows up in the fact that he never does tell us much about the Bible's prophetic messages or about what they meant in their own times. He selectively quotes Isaiah, Micah, and other prophets, but uses the quotations as direct admonitions to Americans. "Isaiah's Platform," for example, makes clear that the U.S. federal budget is skewed. Amos' words, as Wallis hears them, leave no doubt that God is scandalized by the Enron scandal. Surprisingly, however, when Wallis turns to discussions of race relations, the politics of parenting, and "gay marriage," he has no quotations from the biblical prophets. He is convinced that we must continue to try to overcome racism in America. He is sure that long-term gay and lesbian partnerships should be "afforded legal protections in a pluralistic society no matter what our views on the nature of marriage are," and that "same-sex couples should be granted the rights of 'civil unions'" even if those unions are not called marriage. But why is Wallis so sure that this is what prophetic politics demands? Why does he believe that these recommendations put us on God's side?

Without intending to do so, *Jubilee Manifesto* shines a bright light on Wallis' predicament. Biblical politics, according to Schluter and company, does not, after all, begin with the prophets. A modern American (or a citizen of the U.K. or of any other country) is not free simply to coopt a few prophetic utterances for contemporary political use and call it God's politics. No, the biblical prophets were, first of all, God's messengers to expose Israel's (and other nations') violations of God's covenant with Israel. God's liberation of Israel from Egyptian bondage and God's law given through Moses came first. If one is going to appeal to the prophets, one must come to grips with God's law-covenant to which the prophets constantly appealed. To be sure, the God of the covenant was concerned that the poor not fall between the cracks and that Israel not become prideful about its military victories. But that same God also commands harsh penalties for sexual sins and blasphemy and often does not sound like the God of whom Wallis speaks.

Here is where *Jubilee Manifesto* does the hard work that Wallis slights or overlooks. Many of its essays dig deeply into the biblical texts, explaining and expounding the Torah, the Prophets, and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Many essays in the book show Israel in its own context and then try to draw out implications for the shaping of modern laws and social practices. Later in the book Schluter writes that their method of applying the biblical text "is to consider contemporary society from the perspective of the major normative themes from the biblical social framework and then discuss how society today might be made to conform more closely to those norms." The whole Bible must be studied and heeded, not just one part of it. "Social Reform [in Great Britain and the world] is needed," he and coeditor Ashcroft write. "Pressured, broken and dysfunctional relationships are both a symptom and cause of social, economic and political problems. The focus of reform should therefore be interpersonal, group and organizational relationships." The model or framework they put forward for examining what's wrong with our societies is Israel's social order built around families—extended families—and the way economic and other patterns contributed to the strengthening of those relationships. "Transforming society is about getting relationships right," they argue.

This is also where a positive comparison can be drawn between *Jubilee Manifesto* and some parts of *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy*. The latter volume does not display the intellectual coherence of *Jubilee Manifesto*, but essays by Ron Sider and Nicholas Wolterstorff, in particular, go to great lengths to expound Scripture and relate it to contemporary society and politics. However, the weakness of the Sider-Knippers

volume, compared to *Jubilee Manifesto*, is that it lacks a common point of view with respect to God and the Bible, even though the authors all write with evangelical commitment and concern. The whole Bible, not just the prophets or the Gospels or the epistles, are appealed to. And the authors are generally inclined not to claim either that God is on their side or that they are on God's side. Yet some of the authors sound like they would be very sympathetic to Wallis while others would stand far from him. The perspective on government, human rights and justice offered by Sider and Wolterstorff does not guide all or even most of the other writers in *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy*.

Toward What End?

What do these books want to accomplish? All three say, in one way or another, that they want to rise above secular political agendas of the right and the left and inspire renewed civic responsibility. Beyond that goal, what do they aim for?

For Sider and Knippers the aim is to address the need for deeper and more careful thought among Evangelicals about these matters. "Partly because we lack this kind of extended, careful reflection on politics, recent evangelical political engagement has too often been unbalanced, inconsistent, and ineffective," they write. Three things are essential in order for Evangelicals to "use our vast political potential to shape better societies around the world." "First, our politics must be grounded in our faith in Christ. Second, we must do far more sophisticated study. Third, we need to discover how to listen to and cooperate with each other and other Christians." *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy* shows that a group of serious thinkers can agree to write essays together even while still differing on policy prescriptions, in order to listen to one another in the spirit of submitting "our thought and action unconditionally to Christ our Lord and the Bible, God's revealed truth."

The Sider-Knippers volume is thus intended to promote discussion and further thought among Evangelicals, and for that reason it includes as an appendix a short document titled "For the Health of the Nation," an evangelical call to civic responsibility. That 13-page call has also been printed as a separate pamphlet for use in discussion groups. It includes short sections on the basis, method, and principles of civic engagement along with declarations of commitment to work for the protection of religious freedom; for the nurturing of families and the protection of children and the vulnerable; for justice and compassion for the poor; for protection of human rights and the restraint of violence; and for the protection of God's creation. The document does not represent a strategy for political action or a policy agenda.

Jubilee Manifesto is similar to the Sider-Knippers volume in emphasizing the need for a new way of envisioning and thinking about society and politics. In the end, says Schluter, "there are ways to introduce relational ideas in the family and the local church. Those in paid employment can also seek to transform their workplace with relational thinking, using, for example, Relational Health Audit tools [available from the Jubilee Centre: info@jubilee-centre.org]. Those employed in teaching, hospitals, primary health care, social services and criminal or civil law have special opportunities to challenge the current materialistic philosophies underpinning their areas of work with biblical and relational ideas. . . . In the world of politics, too, Relationism offers a wide range of policy options which Christians can seek to incorporate into party political statements and actions."

The Wallis book has the initial feel of a far more activist plea to the reader. One feels like one is following Jim Wallis from meeting to meeting, speaking engagement to speaking engagement, confronting political reality. Yet in the end, *God's Politics* is like the others in calling for a new point of view and a movement against the status quo. There is no strategy of action or organizational means put forward. Wallis' concluding chapter urges hope against cynicism, and the reader knows from the book that the author heads up a movement with the name Call for Renewal. That effort is a mobilization campaign, not a political organization, a permanent lobby group, a policy-development organization, or a leadership training center.

The Quality of Christian Citizenship Today

These three books show the extent to which contemporary Christians have inherited centuries-long traditions of civic practice that have little coherence from a Christian point of view. Some of the authors refer to the breadth of Catholic Social Teaching or to the Kuyperian tradition of reformation in all areas of life. But those are recent traditions that started late in the 19th century, and by that time Christians in the West had already settled into habits of political thought and action guided by nationalism, liberalism, progressivism, and socialism that paid little attention to biblical texts and Christian distinctives.

In face of today's national and global crises—ideological, ecological, spiritual, and institutional—these books show that some Christians are struggling to find a more solid place to stand from which to offer a public witness to the ways of God on earth. *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy* works to locate itself historically by opening with essays on the history of public policy resolutions of the National Association of Evangelicals, on evangelical denominations, on the contributions of mainline Protestant churches to American public life, and on Catholic social ethics and political participation. These historical essays make manifest the disconnections, the splinteredness, the coopted condition of American (and some other) Christians in the political arena. The book's editors and authors recognize that they are feeling their way toward something more coherent, something more Christian and in tune with the Bible. But what that something, in the form of a philosophy, strategy, and agenda, is still in the distance.

Jubilee Manifesto also takes a look back through history, but it conveys a greater confidence that it has found a standpoint in the idea of "relationism." Human relationships and the relation of humans to God, as presented in the Bible, are serviceable for a complex modern society, the authors argue. Yet even here, where a definite school of thought has emerged, the authors realize that they have only gotten started. Relationism often sounds like a slogan begging for structural content. Too few Christians have heard the Jubilee Centre's call to action or begun to engage in conversations and hard work to develop and implement the ideas they are developing.

God's Politics conveys the greatest sense of optimism that a renewed politics, which aims to be on God's side, is about to be born in the United States and around the world. Wallis' book conveys immediacy and a sense of immersion in the dynamics of the moment. The book does not spend much time looking back or trying to place Christian weaknesses and perplexity in historical perspective. Wallis frequently refers to "the prophets of our traditions," implying that people of many religions can find a

way of working together politically if they will only listen to their prophets. Could it be that Wallis, the supposed counter-culturalist, is actually the most optimistic about the emergence of a new religious (if not distinctively Christian) politics today that can radically change the shape of American government and society?

A major question that hangs over these books is whether each in its own way has adequately come to grips with the two most influential Christian movements in the United States. The first movement is dispensational Protestantism which approaches American politics with a primary concern for the fulfillment of end-times biblical prophecies. These are Christians who give little attention to the wide scope of government's responsibility but believe that the United States must remain absolutely independent of international organizations like the U.N. in order to be able, independently if necessary, to defend the state of Israel. The formation of the state of Israel is, for them, an important indication that history is nearing its end and that the United States has an important supporting role to play in God's world-historical purposes, if it will only remain steadfast in protecting Israel regardless of what Israel's own policies are.

The second major movement is the one represented in the writings of Stanley Hauerwas and Richard Hays (two Duke University professors indebted to John Howard Yoder), who call for the church to take its stance as an independent, non-violent community—a counter-polis (political community) to the violence-laden political powers of this world exemplified most audaciously by the United States. From their point of view, there can be no “Christian politics” or “evangelical politics” other than that which is internal to the Christian church as non-violent community.

Perhaps we should not be surprised to discover that *Jubilee Manifesto* does not address these two movements, which may not be strong in the U.K. Yet that book does not do enough to locate “Christian social reform” in the context of the larger Christian story of God's restoration of creation in anticipation of the climactic revelation of the glory of God in the new heavens and new earth. It is largely a book of social ethics, which presumes that political responsibility outside the church does belong to Christians and that such responsibility has to do with more than family policy and the future of the state of Israel.

One essay in *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy* does deal with the Hauerwas/Hays point of view by way of a discussion of John Howard Yoder. It is “Theological Foundations for an Evangelical Political Philosophy,” by Nicholas Wolterstorff. That essay draws a clear and sharp contrast between the view that government lies entirely “outside the perfection of Christ” (Yoder, Hauerwas, Hays, and company) and the view (which is Wolterstorff's) that the calling of government stands under Christ's authority. As for how to contend with the biblical interpretation and political views of dispensational Protestants, these books have little to say.

Wallis' use of the biblical prophets in *God's Politics* raises yet another question. Wallis, whose prophetic counter-culturalism might suggest that he belongs in the Hauerwas camp, frequently sounds more like a civil-religionist of the left. That is to say, his use of the prophets, in the spirit of Martin Luther King Jr., echoes themes from the Social Gospel movement of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The religious movement that Wallis hopes is now arising is one that will transform America in the here and now. At one point Wallis quotes from one of Micah's end-times visions (4:1-4), which speaks

about the Lord judging and arbitrating among the nations with the consequence that “they shall beat their swords into plowshare, and their spears into pruning hooks; . . . neither shall they learn war any more.” In Wallis’ estimation, the United States does not seem to be directing its foreign policy in tune with Micah, but it should be doing so. More than that, Micah’s promise is that all people, under the Lord’s rule, will be able to “sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees.” So the conclusion Wallis draws for American policy is that “military solutions are insufficient to bring peace and security,” and only when all people on earth “have some share in global security” will they be able to beat their swords into plowshares. The wisdom of Micah, writes Wallis, “is both prophetic and practical for a time like this.” Wallis has no hesitation about deriving public policy ideas from eschatological prophesies and does so as easily as the pro-Israel lobby of Evangelicals draws its policy ideas from other prophetic passages. Does either side do justice, however, to the prophets or to the formation of sound public policy?

Wallis does a similar thing with quotations from Isaiah and Amos. Prophetic anticipations of the coming day of the Lord, when there will no longer be hunger and all of God’s people will enjoy the work of their hands, become, for Wallis, anticipations of the work that the religious community in America can accomplish. “We must ensure that all people who are able to work have jobs where they do not labor in vain, but have access to quality health care, decent housing, and a living income to support their families.” How can that be done? And what role does government have in trying to make it happen? Wallis avoids the hard work that groups like the Jubilee Centre and some of the authors in *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy* are doing to try to develop policy proposals that can make a difference in a still fallen, selfish, and fractured world. Wallis’ language sounds utopian, in part because the biblical savior, judge, and lord whom the biblical prophets anticipated is the Messiah of God, not ourselves. In the passages referred to above, the prophets were speaking of what God would do in fulfilling his promises, not describing the outcome of human self-salvation.

The way Wallis reads the prophets leads him to an ambiguous conclusion. He recalls in his epilogue the obviously loving ministry of a colleague of his who died of a rare heart ailment. Lisa Sullivan was frustrated that new religious leaders of the quality of Martin Luther King Jr. are not arising to lead us to ever greater achievements of justice and peace. But one day it dawned on her that “We are the ones we have been waiting for!” Now, as a moral statement of human responsibility, this is a perfectly appropriate conclusion for any of us to reach. We all need to get up and get to work together to fulfill human responsibilities in this world. We shouldn’t sit around waiting for someone else to come along to lead the way. But that conclusion is a long way from the words of the prophets when they were seeing visions of the coming of God’s Messiah who would do what only God can accomplish. The prophets were not anticipating just another temporary leader who would leave the world still unreformed when he passed on. Wallis seems to merge these two lines of thought. Lisa’s “deep affirmation of hope” is, he says, what the biblical prophets had in mind. Lisa’s words amount to a commission, a “calling the prophets knew.” And it is that calling that we too should follow. Who are we waiting for in hope, as we seek to follow Jesus Christ, the Messiah of God? Are we the ones we are waiting for, or is it the return of the risen Jesus we are waiting for even as we labor by the power of his Spirit to serve our neighbors without giving up?

For all that is good in these three books, they help to expose great weaknesses in the Christian community today, perhaps especially the Christian community in the

United States. We exhibit little public unity even in our understanding of how the prophetic messages relate to God's covenant with Israel and to the Messiah of Israel, Jesus Christ. Beyond that, we exhibit little consensus around even the most basic of political philosophies. We should not be surprised, consequently, to find that we have difficulty achieving a consensus on particular public policy issues and on the responsibility government bears for any number of needs and problems people face. There is much in these books that provides food for thought and motivation for taking civic life more seriously. What is needed beyond that, however, are real organizational efforts that can bring Christians together in political service.

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