

Kingdom come: The public meaning of the Gospels

by [Nicholas Thomas Wright](#) in the [June 17, 2008](#) issue

In his new book, *The Great Awakening*, Jim Wallis describes how as a young man growing up in an evangelical church, he never heard a sermon on the Sermon on the Mount. That telling personal observation reflects a phenomenon about which I have been increasingly concerned: that much evangelical Christianity on both sides of the Atlantic has based itself on the epistles rather than the Gospels, though often misunderstanding the epistles themselves.

Indeed, in this respect evangelicalism has simply mirrored a much larger problem: the entire Western church, both Catholic and Protestant, evangelical and liberal, charismatic and social activist, has not actually known what the Gospels are there for.

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are all in their various ways about God in public, about the kingdom of God coming on earth as in heaven through the public career and the death and resurrection of Jesus. The massive concentration on source and form criticism, the industrial-scale development of criteria for authenticity (or, more often, inauthenticity), and the extraordinary inverted snobbery of preferring gnostic sayings-sources to the canonical documents all stem from, and in turn reinforce, the determination of the Western world and church to make sure that the four Gospels will not be able to say what they want to say, but will be patronized, muzzled, dismembered and eventually eliminated altogether as a force to be reckoned with.

The central message of all four canonical Gospels is that the Creator God, Israel's God, is at last reclaiming the whole world as his own, in and through Jesus of Nazareth. That, to offer a riskily broad generalization, is the message of the kingdom of God, which is Jesus' answer to the question, What would it look like if God were running this show?

And at once, in the 21st century as in the first, we are precipitated into asking the vital question, Which God are we talking about, anyway? It is quite clear if one reads

Christopher Hitchens or Friedrich Nietzsche that the image of “God running the world” against which they are reacting is the image of a celestial tyrant imposing his will on an unwilling world and unwilling human beings, cramping their style, squashing their individuality and their very humanness, requiring them to conform to arbitrary and hurtful laws and threatening them with dire consequences if they resist. This narrative (which contains a fair amount of secularist projection) serves the Enlightenment’s deist agenda, as well as the power interests of those who would move God to a remote heaven so that they can continue to exploit the world.

But the whole point of the Gospels is that the coming of God’s kingdom on earth as in heaven is precisely not the imposition of an alien and dehumanizing tyranny, but rather the confrontation of alien and dehumanizing tyrannies with the news of a God—the God recognized in Jesus—who is radically different from them all, and whose inbreaking justice aims at rescuing and restoring genuine humanness. The trouble is that in our flat-Earth political philosophies we know only the spectrum which has tyranny at one end and anarchy at the other, with the present democracies our dangerously fragile way of warding off both extremes. The news of God’s sovereign rule inevitably strikes democrats, not just anarchists, as a worryingly long step toward tyranny as we apply to God and to the Gospels the hermeneutic of suspicion that we rightly apply to those in power who assure us that they have our best interests at heart. But the story that the Gospels tell systematically resists this deconstruction—for three reasons having to do with the integration of the Gospel stories both internally and externally.

First, the narrative told by each Gospel—yes, in different ways, but in this regard the canonical Gospels stand shoulder to shoulder over against the Gospel of Thomas and the rest—presents itself as an integrated whole in a way that scholarship has found almost impossible to reflect. Attention has been divided, focusing either on Jesus’ announcement of the kingdom and the powerful deeds—healings, feastings and so on—in which it is instantiated, or on his death and resurrection. The Gospels have thus been seen either as a social project with an unfortunate, accidental and meaningless conclusion, or as passion narratives with extended introductions. Thus the Gospels, in both popular and scholarly readings, have been regarded either as grounding a social gospel whose naive optimism has no place for the radical fact of the cross, still less the resurrection—the kind of naïveté that Reinhold Niebuhr regularly attacked—or as merely providing the raw historical background for the developed, and salvific, Pauline gospel of the death of Jesus. If you go the latter

route, the only role left for the stories of Jesus' healings and moral teachings is, as for Rudolf Bultmann, as stories witnessing to the church's faith, or, for his fundamentalist doppelgänger, stories that proved Jesus' divinity rather than launching any kind of program (despite Luke 4, despite the Sermon on the Mount, despite the terrifying warnings about the sheep and the goats!).

Appeals for an integrated reading have met stiff opposition from both sides: those who have emphasized Jesus' social program lash out wildly at any attempt to highlight his death and resurrection, as though that would simply legitimate a fundamentalist program, either Catholic or Protestant, while those who have emphasized his death and resurrection do their best to anathematize any attempt to continue Jesus' work with and for the poor, as though that might result in justification by works, either actually or at the existentialist meta-level of historical method (Bultmann again, and Gerhard Ebeling and others).

The lesson is twofold: (1) Yes, Jesus did indeed launch God's saving sovereignty on earth as in heaven; but this could not be accomplished without his death and resurrection. The problem to which God's kingdom-project was and is the answer is deeper than can be addressed by a social program alone.

(2) Yes, Jesus did, as Paul says, die for our sins, but his whole agenda of dealing with sin and all its effects and consequences was never about rescuing individual souls *from* the world but about saving humans so that they could become part of his project of saving the world. "My kingdom is not from this world," he said to Pilate; had it been, he would have led an armed resistance movement like other worldly kingdom-prophets. But the kingdom he brought was emphatically *for* this world, which meant and means that God has arrived on the public stage and is not about to leave it again; he has thus defeated the forces both of tyranny and of chaos—both of shrill modernism and of fluffy postmodernism, if you like—and established in their place a rule of restorative, healing justice, which needs translating into scholarly method if the study of the Gospels is to do proper historical, theological and political justice to the subject matter.

It is in the entire Gospel narrative, rather than any of its possible fragmented parts, that we see that complete, many-sided kingdom work taking shape. And this narrative, read this way, resists deconstruction into power games precisely because of its insistence on the cross. The rulers of the world behave one way, declares Jesus, but you are to behave another way, because the Son of Man came to give his

life as a ransom for many. We discover that so-called atonement theology within that statement of so-called political theology. To state either without the other is to resist the integration, the God-in-public narrative, which the Gospels persist in presenting.

Second, the Gospels demand to be read in deep and radical integration with the Old Testament. Recognition of this point has been obscured by perfectly proper post-Holocaust anxiety about apparently anti-Jewish readings. But we do the Gospels no service by screening out the fact that each of them in its own way (as opposed, again, to the Gospel of Thomas and the rest) affirms the God-givenness and God-directedness of the entire Jewish narrative of creation, fall, Abraham, Moses, David and so on. The Old Testament is the narrative of how the Creator God is rescuing creation from its otherwise inevitable fate, and it was this project, rather than some other, which was brought to successful completion in and through Jesus. The Gospels, like Paul's gospel, are to that extent folly to pagans, ancient and modern alike, and equally scandalous to Jews. We gain nothing exegetically, historically, theologically or politically by trying to make the Gospels less Jewishly foolish (or vice versa) to paganism and hence less scandalous, in their claim of fulfillment, to Judaism.

Third, the Gospels thus demonstrate a close integration with the genuine early Christian hope, which is precisely not the hope for heaven in the sense of a blissful disembodied life after death in which creation is abandoned to its fate, but rather the hope, as in Ephesians 1, Romans 8 and Revelation 21, for the renewal and final coming together of heaven and earth, the consummation precisely of God's project to be savingly present in an ultimate public world. And the point of the Gospels is that with the public career of Jesus, and with his death and resurrection, this whole project was decisively inaugurated, never to be abandoned.

From the perspective of these three integrations, we can see how mistaken are the readings of both the neo-Gnostic movement that is so rampant today and the fundamentalism that is its conservative analogue. Indeed, if an outsider may venture a guess, I think the phenomenon of the religious right in the U.S. (we really have no parallel in the United Kingdom) may be construed as a clumsy attempt to recapture the coming together of God and the world, which remains stubbornly in scripture but which the Enlightenment had repudiated, and which fundamentalism itself continues to repudiate with its dualistic theology of rapture and Armageddon.

It is as though the religious right has known in its bones that God belongs in public, but without understanding either why or how that might make sense; while the political left in the U.S., and sometimes the religious left on both sides of the Atlantic, has known in its bones that God would make radical personal moral demands as part of his program of restorative justice, and has caricatured his public presence as a form of tyranny in order to evoke the cheap and gloomy Enlightenment critique as a way of holding that challenge at bay.

The resurrection of Jesus is to be seen not as the proof of Jesus' uniqueness, let alone his divinity—and certainly not as the proof that there is a life after death, a heaven and a hell (as though Jesus rose again to give prospective validation to Dante or Michelangelo!)—but as the launching within the world of space, time and matter of that God-in-public reality of new creation called God's kingdom, which, within 30 years, would be announced under Caesar's nose openly and unhindered. The reason those who made that announcement were persecuted is, of course, that the fact of God acting in public is deeply threatening to the rulers of the world in a way that Gnosticism in all its forms never is. The Enlightenment's rejection of the bodily resurrection has for too long been allowed to get away with its own rhetoric of historical criticism—as though nobody until Gibbon or Voltaire had realized that dead people always stay dead—when in fact its nonresurrectional narrative clearly served its own claim to power, presented as an alternative eschatology in which world history came to its climax not on Easter Day but with the storming of the Bastille and the American Declaration of Independence.

Near the heart of the early chapters of Acts we find a prayer of the church facing persecution, and the prayer makes decisive use of one of the most obviously political of all the Psalms. Psalm 2 declares that though the nations make a great noise and fuss and try to oppose God's kingdom, God will enthrone his appointed king in Zion and thus call the rulers of the earth to learn wisdom from him. This point, which brings into focus a good deal of Old Testament political theology, is sharply reinforced in the early chapters of the Wisdom of Solomon.

Psalm 2 also appears at the start of the Gospel narratives, as Jesus is anointed by the Spirit at his baptism. Much exegesis has focused on the christological meaning of "Son of God" here; my proposal is that we should focus equally, without marginalizing that Christology, on the political meaning. The Gospels constitute a call to the rulers of the world to learn wisdom in service to the messianic Son of God, and thus they also provide the impetus for a freshly biblical understanding of the

role of the “rulers of the world” and of the tasks of the church in relation to them. I have three points to make in this regard.

First, it is noteworthy that the early church, aware of prevailing tyrannies both Jewish and pagan, and insisting on exalting Jesus as Lord over all, did not reject the God-given rule even of pagans. This is a horrible disappointment, of course, to post-Enlightenment liberals, who would much have preferred the early Christians to have embraced some kind of holy anarchy with no place for any rulers at all. But it is quite simply part of a creational view of the world that God wants the world to be ordered, not chaotic, and that human power structures are the God-given means by which that end is to be accomplished—otherwise those with muscle and money will always win, and the poor and the widows will be trampled on afresh. This is the point at which Colossians 1 makes its decisive contribution over against all dualisms which imagine that earthly rulers are a priori a bad thing (the same dualisms that have dominated both the method and the content of much biblical scholarship). This is the point, as well, at which the notion of the common good has its contribution to make. The New Testament does not encourage the idea of a complete disjunction between the political goods to be pursued by the church and the political goods to be pursued by the world outside the church, precisely for the reason that the church is to be seen as the body through whom God is addressing and reclaiming the world.

To put this first point positively, the New Testament reaffirms the God-given place even of secular rulers, even of deeply flawed, sinful, self-serving, corrupt and idolatrous rulers like Pontius Pilate, Felix, Festus and Herod Agrippa. They get it wrong and they will be judged, but God wants them in place because order, even corrupt order, is better than chaos. Here we find, in the Gospels, in Acts and especially in Paul, a tension that cannot be dissolved without great peril. We in the contemporary Western world have all but lost the ability conceptually—never mind practically—to affirm that rulers are corrupt and to be confronted yet are God-given and to be obeyed. That sounds to us as though we are simultaneously to affirm anarchy and tyranny. But this merely shows how far our conceptualities have led us again to muzzle the texts in which both stand together. How can that be?

The answer comes—and this is my second point—in such passages as John 19 on the one hand and 1 Corinthians 2 and Colossians 2 on the other. The rulers of this age inevitably twist their God-given vocation—to bring order to the world—into the satanic possibility of tyranny. But the cross of Jesus, enthroned as the true Son of God as in Psalm 2, constitutes the paradoxical victory by which the rulers’ idolatry

and corruption are confronted and overthrown. And the result, as in Colossians 1:18-20, is that the rulers are reconciled, are in some strange sense reinstated as the bringers of God's wise order to the world, whether or not they would see it that way. This is the point at which Romans 13 comes in, not as the validation of every program that every ruler dreams up, certainly not as the validation of what democratically elected governments of one country decide to do against other countries, but as the strictly limited proposal, in line with Isaiah's recognition of Cyrus, that the Creator God uses even those rulers who do not know him personally to bring fresh order and even rescue to the world. This lies also behind the narrative of Acts.

This propels us to a third, perhaps unexpected and certainly challenging reflection that the present political situation is to be understood in terms of the paradoxical lordship of Jesus himself. From Matthew to John to Acts, from Colossians to Revelation, with a good deal else in between, Jesus is hailed as already the Lord of both heaven and earth, and in particular as the one through whom the Creator God will at last restore and unite all things in heaven and on earth. And this gives sharp focus to the present task of earthly rulers. Until the achievement of Jesus, a biblical view of pagan rulers might have been that they were charged with keeping God's creation in order, preventing it from lapsing into chaos. Now, since Jesus' death and resurrection (though this was of course anticipated in the Psalms and the prophets), their task is to be seen from the other end of the telescope. Instead of moving forward from creation, they are to look forward (however unwillingly or unwittingly) to the ultimate eschaton. In other words, God will one day right all wrongs through Jesus, and earthly rulers, whether or not they acknowledge this Jesus and this coming kingdom, are entrusted with the task of anticipating that final judgment and that final mercy. They are not merely to stop God's good creation from going utterly to the bad. They are to enact in advance, in a measure, the time when God will make all things new and will once again declare that it is very good.

All this might sound like irrationally idealistic talk—and it is bound to be seen as such by those for whom all human authorities are tyrants by another name—were it not for the fact that along with this vision of God working through earthly rulers comes the church's vocation to be the people through whom the rulers are to be reminded of their task and called to account. We see this happening throughout the book of Acts and on into the witness of the second-century apologists—and, indeed, the witness of the martyrs as well, because martyrdom (which is what happens

when the church bears witness to God's call to the rulers and the rulers shoot the messenger because they don't like the message) is an inalienable part of political theology. You can have as high a theology of the God-given calling of rulers as you like, as long as your theology of the church's witness, and of martyrdom, matches it stride for stride.

This witness comes into sharp focus in John 16:8-11. The Spirit, declares Jesus, will prove the world wrong about sin, righteousness and judgment—about judgment because the ruler of this world is judged. How is the Spirit to do that? Clearly, within Johannine theology, through the witness of the church, in and through which the Spirit is at work. The church will do to the rulers of the world what Jesus did to Pilate in John 18 and 19, confronting him with the news of the kingdom and of truth, deeply unwelcome and indeed incomprehensible though both of them were. Part of the way in which the church will do this is by getting on with, and setting forward, those works of justice and mercy, of beauty and relationship, that the rulers know ought to be flourishing but which they seem powerless to bring about. But the church, even when faced with overtly pagan and hostile rulers, must continue to believe that Jesus is the Lord before whom they will bow and whose final sovereign judgment they are called to anticipate. Thus the church, in its biblical commitment to “doing God in public,” is called to learn how to collaborate without compromise (hence the vital importance of common-good theory) and to critique without dualism.

In particular, as one sharp focus for all this, it is vital that the church learn to critique the present workings of democracy itself. I don't simply mean that we should scrutinize voting methods, campaign tactics or the use of big money within the electoral process. I mean that we should take seriously the fact that our present glorification of democracy emerged precisely from Enlightenment dualism—the banishing of God from the public square and the elevation of vox populi to fill the vacuum, which we have seen to be profoundly inadequate when faced with the publicness of the kingdom of God. And we should take very seriously the fact that the early Jews and Christians were not terribly interested in the process by which rulers came to power, but were extremely interested in what rulers did once they had obtained power. The greatest democracies of the ancient world, those of Greece and Rome, had well-developed procedures for assessing their rulers once their term of office was over if not before, and if necessary for putting them on trial. Simply not being reelected (the main threat to politicians in today's democracies) was nowhere

near good enough. When Kofi Annan retired as general secretary of the United Nations, one of the key points he made was that we urgently need to develop ways of holding governments to account. That is a central part of the church's vocation, which we should never have lost and desperately need to recapture.

All this, of course, demands as well that the church itself be continually called to account, since we in our turn easily get it wrong and become part of the problem instead of part of the solution. That is why the church must be *semper reformanda* as it reads the Bible, especially the Gospels. Fortunately, that's what the Gospels are there for, and that's what they are good at, despite generations of so-called critical methods which sometimes seem to have been designed to prevent the Gospels from being themselves. Part of the underlying aim of this essay is to encourage readings of the Bible which, by highlighting the publicness of God and the gospel, set forward those reforms which will enable the church to play its part in holding the powers to account and thus advancing God's restorative justice.

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