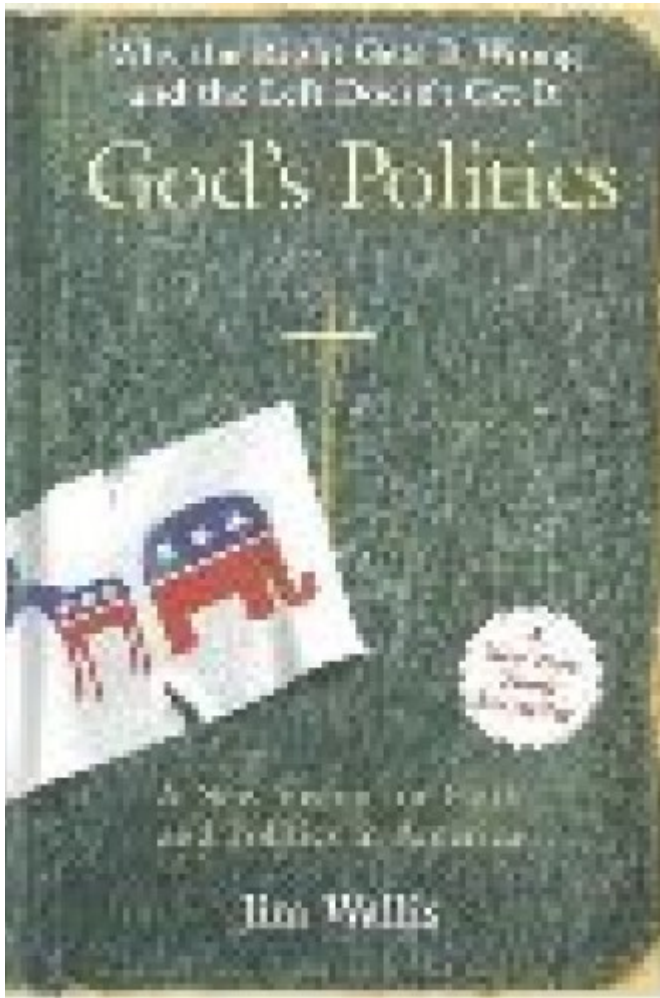


A politics of hope

By [Peter Storey](#) in the [July 26, 2005](#) issue

In Review



God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It

Jim Wallis
HarperCollins

Throughout the years when the religious right was plotting for political power, there was a quietly subversive countermovement among evangelicals proclaiming a more authentic, biblical social witness. While the theocratic fundamentalism of Robertson, Falwell and Dobson grabbed headlines, evangelicals like Ron Sider, Tony Campolo and *Sojourners'* Jim Wallis were taking a radically different position. Wallis in particular has modeled a contrasting politics. As a writer, preacher, activist and advocate for the poor, he represents that most formidable of transformational forces—an evangelical with a social conscience. His call for the evangelical faith to reclaim its prophetic place in the public square, and his tireless organizing to make it happen, is receiving increasing attention.

God's Politics may not be Jim Wallis's best book, but it is his most important. *The Soul of Politics* was better crafted than this volume, which would have benefited from tighter editing, fewer personal references and less archival material from *Sojourners*. But its timing is right on target. It arrives in an America more feared and yet more fearful, more arrogant and less trusted than at any time in its history. It speaks to a church where concerned Christians are increasingly wondering where to locate their faith. Christians who are disgusted by the theocratic powermongering of the religious right, irritated by the militant secularism of the left and uninspired by vapid, politically impotent feel-goodism in much of the mainline center, and who believe that Jesus came not to establish a religious club but to transform the world will be encouraged and energized by this book.

God's Politics is a sweeping exploration of the geography of America's spiritual and political soul. With a style that is seldom denunciatory, Wallis operates with refreshing evenhandedness as he probes the spiritual blind spots of both right and left. He invites us to take back the faith not only from the rigidity of the right, with its privatized God and its propensity toward theocracy, power and violence, but also from the "secular fundamentalism" of the left, with its knee-jerk determination to exclude religious values from public discourse.

This is not to suggest that Wallis offers a mushy centrism. He has been in the struggle for peace and for the poor long enough to know—with William Sloane Coffin—that God's heart is, as all hearts should be, "a little to the left." He is relentlessly tough on President Bush's economic choices, calling down shame upon an "outrageous bias toward the rich," and he strongly refutes the administration's nationalist religion, which confuses God's purposes with "the mission of American

empire.”

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out who would have the most to lose in this country if the priorities of Jesus were truly heeded, but here's the rub: Do the rich and powerful have ears to hear? Wallis's words will likely mean little to those who dress up ideology as theology, using religion to further their political aims. As Desmond Tutu used to say of white racists in South Africa, “The only people you can't wake up are those pretending to be asleep.” Nevertheless, there is a significant constituency of sincere conservative believers who would move in a direction much more hospitable to Jesus' values of compassion, justice, concern for the poor and peacemaking if there were a political home that was less dismissive of some of their faith convictions.

Wallis strongly chastises those on the left for their elitism, their stubborn denial of the significance of faith in national life and their refusal to make any space at all for persons who have more conservative views on issues like abortion. Wallis also unmasks the “subtle racism” that tolerates religious language when it is invoked by black civil rights leaders but attacks other political figures who dare to speak from their religious convictions. He is less than complimentary to liberal theologians whose “cultural conformity and creedal modernity . . . erode the foundations of historical biblical faith.”

The question for Wallis is not whether but how to “insist on the deep connections between spirituality and public politics, while defending the proper boundaries between church and state.” He reminds us that although the American republic is secular, most Americans are not, and that large numbers of them care about God and public policy. Ranging across issues as diverse as warmaking in Iraq, racism as America's original sin, sex and rampant materialism on TV, AIDS in Africa, the G-8's development goals, same-sex marriage and the morality of the federal budget, he invites us to take a fresh look at our personal, national and international dilemmas through the prism of a “prophetic politics.”

The heart of his argument, “the integral link between personal ethics and social justice,” will appeal to people who “refuse to make the choice between the two.” Wallis believes that a politics that is progressive on issues of economic and racial justice, ecology, corporate accountability and international peace, as well as being strong on issues of family and personal ethics, responds to deeply held passions in people who locate themselves uncomfortably on one side or the other of the red-

blue deadlock. His treatment of some passionate culture-war issues, such as abortion and same-sex marriage, leaves as many questions as answers, but he is consistent in searching for ways of moving out of the impasse and into dialogue and discovery of new—and higher—ground.

Hopefulness of that kind is a characteristic of this book. Wallis regards hope as a decision, not simply a feeling, and he believes that the choice between hope and cynicism is weighted with political consequence. Wallis has witnessed some of history's great tipping points, such as the coming of freedom in South Africa, and they have left him confident that with God nothing is impossible. But he has also been around the block enough to know that such transformations most often happen through hundreds of small, incremental moments of struggle, courage and grace, in which ordinary people decide to be part of a new thing God is doing. *God's Politics* is rich with stories of those ordinary people doing extraordinary deeds, giving hope that (to use Wallis's metaphor) growing numbers of people of faith will no longer merely hold up a finger to test the wind, but will become determined to change the wind itself.