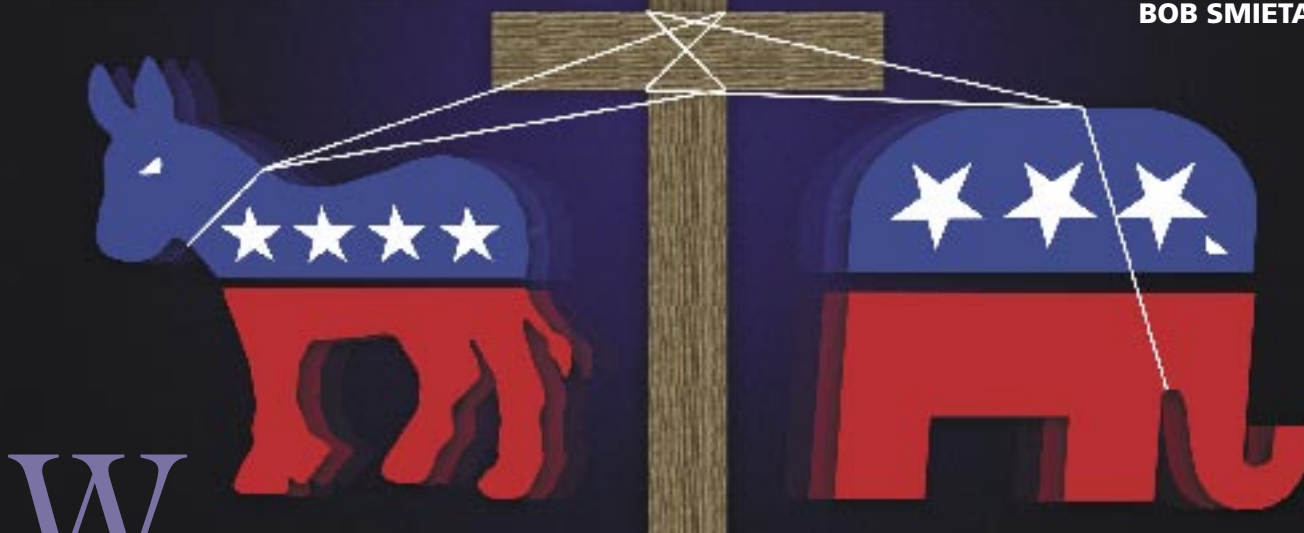


Jim Wallis says that by going back to the Bible, Christians can change the way Washington does business.

# God's Politics

BOB SMJETANA



When he was six years old, Jim Wallis gave his heart to Jesus at the prompting of a Plymouth Brethren preacher, who warned Wallis that Jesus might come at any moment and leave him behind, and a mother who—instead of “preaching the wrath of God to a little boy”—told him that God loved him and wanted him to be a child of God.

“So I repented of the sin and degradation of my first six years—which was substantial,” Wallis says, “and signed up.”

At first, Wallis was content going to Sunday school and youth group at his church. Then he did the most dangerous thing a young Christian can do. He started reading the Bible.

The more he read, the more he noticed that the world around him didn't match up to what he saw in the Bible and what he heard in church. So he began to ask questions. Like, “If Jesus loves the little children, red and yellow, black and white, why are there no black children in our church?” And, “Why is life seem so different in the black and white neighborhoods of Detroit?” In Wallis's neighborhood, everyone

had jobs and homes and enough to eat, while a few miles away, in a black neighborhood, that was not the case.

The questions didn't go over too well, says Wallis. “Christianity has nothing to do with racism,” a church elder told him. “That's political. Our faith is personal.”

Wallis also got a warning: “Keep asking those questions, and you're going to get into trouble.”

“That turned out to be true,” says Wallis, editor-in-chief of *Sojourners* magazine and author of the *New York Times* bestseller, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*, who was a featured speaker at 2005 Midwinter Conference for Covenant ministers.

Wallis has spent most of his life getting into trouble for trying to convince Christians, especially evangelicals, to take the Bible seriously; especially when it strays from personal topics like sex and stealing and into the public arena, addressing politics, race, economics, and war and peace.

In a conversation with the *Companion* following his Midwinter speech, Wallis argued that both Christian con-

servatives and “secular fundamentalists” have turned faith into a “purely private matter,” while ignoring what the Bible says about God.

“The privatization of God is the greatest heresy of the twentieth century,” Wallis says. “God is personal, but never private.”

Instead, God has something to say about every aspect of life. Just read the Bible, especially the Old Testament prophets.

“In the prophets,” Wallis says, “the public God's topics are labor, capital, equity, justice, fairness—his targets are princes and rulers, employers and judges. He lifts up widows and orphans and workers. This God is a public God. Our job is to offer relationship with God and then to enlist the converts in the agenda of a public God.”

In his new book, Wallis turns to the examples of the evangelicals of the nineteenth century, who were “revivalists and reformers.” Charles Finney was the “Billy Graham of his day,” who invented the altar call so he could “get the names and addresses of his converts” and “sign them up for the anti-slavery movement.” Those early evan-

gelicals also helped lead the fight for women's votes and to establish child labor laws.

The legacy of public Christianity seemed to disappear after the civil rights movement of the 1960s. What remains is a battle over private Christianity: with some on the left wanting to banish the Bible from the public square, and others on the right limiting biblical morality to sexual sins.

*God's Politics* takes both Democrats and Republicans to task. Democrats, Wallis says, have taken the constitutional idea of the separation of church and state to extremes. "I believe in the separation of church and state," he says, "but it does not mean the segregation of moral values and religious language from public life."

Republicans, especially those affiliated with the religious right, Wallis says, seem to believe that God is on their side and that Christians have a duty to vote Republican. That duty is based on two moral issues: abortion and gay marriage. Wallis, who is pro-life and opposed to gay marriage, still asks: "Are there really only two moral issues?"

"I am an evangelical and I find 3,000 verses on the poor in my Bible," he says, "so fighting poverty is a moral value. Caring for God's creation, the environment is a moral value. Talking about how, when, and whether we go to war is a moral value too. And telling the truth about going to war is a moral value too."

Wallis attempts to reach beyond the ideologies of the right and the left, and bring the Bible to bear on all aspects of life. He fears that Christians have been seduced by the Washington "blame game," which seeks power instead of finding solutions to pressing human needs.

"Here's how Washington works for both Democrats and Republicans," he says. "You take a problem, and try and figure out who is to blame, who you can pin it on. Then you take a poll—the election is just the last poll—and see if your spin [on an issue] won."

The blame game also takes hot-but-

ton ideological issues—like gay marriage—and uses them to stir up angry debate, which takes time and energy from solving more pressing problems. "The right acts like gay marriage is the end of civilization as we know it," he says, "but it's hard to see how that would end civilization as we know it or cause all of the families to unravel around the block."

On the other hand, Wallis adds, "the left sees it as the premier civil rights issue of our time, like apartheid or the Holocaust, something worth dividing churches over. I don't see that either. I don't think this should be a faith breaker."

While the ideological battles rage, children, like the ones in the impoverished Columbia Heights neighborhood where Wallis has lived for thirty years, "fall through the cracks." He sees a family crisis in the United States that goes far beyond gay marriage—a breakdown in marriages and families stressed to their limits that puts entire communities at risk. He agrees with groups like Focus on the Family that addressing family breakdown is absolutely critical.

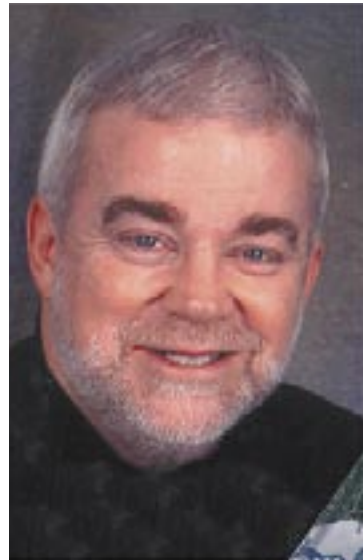
"Parenting has become a counter-cultural activity in America," he says. "Liberal or conservative—we've got a family crisis, we've got family breakdown, we have an unraveling of marriage and family and the kids are falling between the cracks. Unless we reweave the bonds of family and community and extended family, the kids are just going to be lost."

Finding solutions to the family crisis requires an intensive "focus on the family," that emphasizes "family values" and provides concrete support for families. Wallis criticizes shows like Fox's reality series *Temptation Island* as the kind of cultural influence that

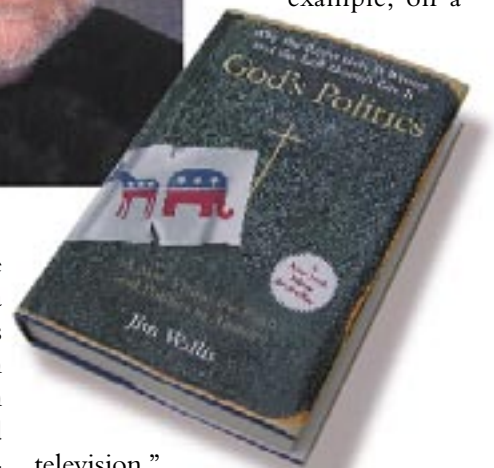
undermines families. On the show, a group of couples were taken to a remote island with the hopes that they would cheat on one another.

"Infidelity, betrayal, broken relationships, and casual sex are undermining the health and integrity of our society,"

Wallis writes in *God's Politics*. "... The real enemy isn't sex, but rather the commodification of everything—turning values into market values, gutting the world of genuine love, caring, compassion, connection and commitment, for what will sell, for example, on a



Jim Wallis



television."

Still, what Wallis longs for are Christians who will "treat both *Temptation Island* and child poverty as morally offensive."

That's unlikely, Wallis says, as long as Christians buy into partisan politics, and continue to separate the personal aspects of the faith from the public faith, with liberal Christians neglecting the personal and focusing on the public, and conservatives trumpeting personal morals and ignoring social responsibility.

"Ideology has seduced us," Wallis says. "It has seduced the churches by squeezing us into narrow political categories, creating ideological religion, and robbing the nation of prophetic faith."

One way out of the ideology trap is

Bob Smietana is features editor of the *Companion*.

to set aside partisan concerns and focus on finding some common ground. “Poverty is a common ground,” says Wallis. “Parenting is a huge common ground. Those are two of the biggest common ground areas I can find. Doing something about poverty, seriously, and doing something about supporting parents, that would bring lots of people together across the dividing lines.”

Helping families trapped in poverty has been a major theme of Wallis’s long career as a Christian social activist. Some of that comes from the lessons his mother taught him. Phyllis Wallis told her five children (including Wallis’s brother Bill, a member of Trinity Church, a Covenant church in Livonia, Michigan, and his sister, Marcie, whose is helping plant Life Covenant Church in Canton, Michigan, with her husband, Alex Rahill) that they had two jobs at school. First was to make sure “nobody gets left out”—so if there was a kid who was an outcast at school, the Wallis kids were to befriend him or her. The second was to always to stand up to bullies.

Those lessons were reinforced by an experiment that Wallis took part in while at Trinity Evangelical Seminary in Deerfield, Illinois. A group of his classmates took scissors and cut out every reference to the poor, the outcast, the widows and orphans, the oppressed, and foreigners and aliens in the Bible. Out went the Prophets, most of the Psalms, much of the Law of Moses, along with long sections of the teaching of Jesus. Left behind was a Bible full of holes. Wallis often carried that tattered Bible with him on speaking trips to make a point—most Christians in the U.S. have a similar Bible full of holes.

At the heart of Wallis’s concern for the poor is an overwhelming conviction about the love of God. “Jesus says the very hairs on our head are numbered—this God knows us, this God knows everything about us—this God loves us—and wants a relationship with us,” he says.

If that is true, then God numbers

## **“God’s politics reminds us of the people our politics always neglect—the poor, the vulnerable, the left behind.”**

the hairs on the heads of every child in the world; including those who live in poor families in the U.S. and around the world. Too many of God’s children, says Wallis, start life behind the eight ball—in the U.S. because of poverty, failing schools, and crumbling neighborhoods; and around the world because they happened to be born in a country where basics like food, clean water, and health care simply are not available.

While speaking at the 2005 Covenant Midwinter Conference, Wallis referred to what David Beckmann calls the “silent tsunami”—the estimated 30,000 children who die each day from hunger or disease caused by a lack of clean water. Quoting from Gordon Brown, the British chancellor of the exchequer (the equivalent of the U.S. treasurer), Wallis said that “for the first time in history, we have the wherewithal to really do something about extreme poverty,” to help “the three billion people who are living on less than \$2 a day.”

What is lacking, Brown told Wallis during a meeting, “is the moral and political will” to address global poverty.

“That’s your job,” Brown told Wallis and a group of church leaders.

Wallis’s activism has him on the road, speaking at churches and universities, and, on a recent book tour, to *Meet the Press* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, where he presses a vision of “the common good”—a politics that is concerned about the welfare of all of God’s children. In recent years, it’s brought him into contact with a number of prominent politicians, including several meetings with President Bush. He says that he’s been impressed by the sincerity of the president’s faith, but pushed him to go deeper in the Scriptures to address issues like terrorism.

“Until you fight poverty and terrorism equally, you won’t beat either one,”

he told the president during a one-on-one exchange.

The concern over terrorism is a daily reality for Wallis, who lives about twenty blocks from the White House with his wife, Joy, an Anglican priest, and their boys, Luke, six, and Jack, almost two. While Wallis argues that “war is a last resort” for Christians, he believes there are times when military force is necessary. Even then, he believes that Christians must love their enemies, even when those enemies are terrorists. Our enemies are still created in the image of God. That’s what the Bible teaches us, says Wallis.

“The words of Jesus are either authoritative for Christians or they are not,” he says. “And they are not set aside by the very real threats of terrorism. . . . The threat of terrorism does not undermine Christian ethics.”

Some critics have dismissed Wallis as too idealistic, that he insists on biblical ideals which won’t work in the real world. He refuses to believe that, insisting that the church has a vital role to play in politics.

“The best contribution the church can make is to be independent, to challenge both sides,” he says. “God’s politics challenge everything about our politics. God’s politics remind us of the people our politics always neglect—the poor, the vulnerable, the left behind. God’s politics challenge our narrow ethnic, economic, and cultural self-interest.”

That kind of approach to politics, he believes, can get politicians less focused on consolidating their own power, and put them to work solving societal ills.

Not that Wallis has put all of his faith in politicians. Instead, he hopes to build a movement of people who are dedicated to a biblical vision of the common good and who are sustained by their faith in God.

“My Bible says faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen,” he says. “My best paraphrase of that passage is this: ‘Faith is believing despite the evidence and watching the evidence change.’” □