

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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God and politics



Many Christians say politics has nothing to do with God. They say church officials shouldn't take sides with regard to candidates for political offices or to current issues like budgets, war, or how to deal with poverty. These Christians say pastors shouldn't mention such things in sermons. They say these issues are secular, not religious, or that views about them should remain private.



Yet in the Bible we see many God-inspired leaders speaking publicly about such issues. They're speaking not only to their fellow citizens but also to kings, pharaohs, and other rulers. Most obvious in this regard are the prophets we read about in the Old Testament, but Jesus also spoke often about economic matters and other issues we think of as secular. That apparently means such issues are important for Christians to examine carefully, talk about openly (even in church!), and have a prominent voice in deciding.



Ironically, some of the same Christians who say that church leaders shouldn't get involved in politics support the government leaders who are using their official positions to promote their personal religious views. That doesn't make sense to me.



Turned off by both parties

I'm not a member of any political party. I always vote, but sometimes for Republicans and sometimes for Democrats. I used to be sympathetic mainly to Republicans' positions, but lately I identify more often with what Democrats advocate. I'm so turned off by so much of what each party does, however, that when I hear about their maneuverings I want to say in Shakespeare's words, "A plague on both your houses!"



An exciting study



Twenty-three *Connections* readers and I are in the midst of an exciting study that I want you to know about. I'll probably write more about it when we've finished, but I'm mentioning it now in case you're not aware of it and want to consider doing it in your area this fall. It's called "Living the Questions." You can get information and see samples of its materials at www.livingthequestions.com.



A safe place for questions

The course's publishers call it "a progressive alternative for Christian invitation, initiation, and spiritual formation." It aims to provide "a safe environment where people have permission to ask the questions they've always wanted to ask but have been afraid to voice for fear of being thought a heretic." It's addressed, its authors say, to people who know that at its core Christianity has something good to offer the human race, but who feel they are almost alone in being thinking Christians. Some, the authors find, even see salvaging Christianity as a hopeless task.

Beyond where churches get stuck

"Living the Questions" explores "beyond the traditions and rote theologies in which so many people and local churches seem to be stuck." It has 12 weekly 2½-hour sessions. Each includes a shared meal, a video, and guided discussion. Participants get a few pages of materials to read before each session. Presenters in the videos include John Shelby Spong, Marcus Borg, John Cobb, Tex Sample, Nancy Ammerman, Lloyd Geering, John Dominic Crossan, Minerva Carcaño, and others.



I enlisted participants from *Connections* recipients within 30 miles of me. About 40 of these said they were interested, and 24 are doing the study this summer at my home, in 2 groups. They include United Methodists, Episcopalians, Baptists, Presbyterians, and nonchurchgoers. They're lay and ordained, and a wide range of ages. Others have said they want to do the course this fall if it's available. We're loving it, so I think you might too. I urge you to check it out.

Because of their tax-exempt status, churches may need to avoid officially supporting a specific candidate or party. But we as the church need to help citizens learn about political issues and see how Christian principles apply to them, in order to decide which candidates and policies to support.



Religion's prophetic calling

In his recent book *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (Harper-SanFrancisco, 2005), Jim Wallis compellingly addresses the need for Christians to be more consistent and more vocal in applying Christian principles to politics. Wallis, an evangelical Christian who lives in inner-city Washington, D.C., is the editor of *Sojourners* magazine and founder of a nationwide network of progressive Christians working for justice and peace.



Wallis is concerned about what he sees as religion's failure to follow its God-given prophetic calling in today's world. In his view, "prophetic religion always presses the question of the common good." Thus "the loss of religion's prophetic vocation is terribly dangerous for any society."

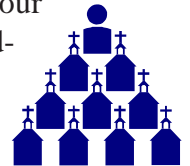
If religion fails to speak, Wallis asks, "who will uphold the dignity of economic and political outcasts? Who will question the self-righteousness of nations and their leaders? Who will question the recourse to violence and the rush to wars?" And who, Wallis wonders, will refuse to let God's name be used to justify ourselves instead of calling us to accountability? In his view, if religion doesn't do these things, they go undone and society suffers.

Called to reshape lives and society

"Our religious congregations," Jim Wallis reminds us, "are not meant to be social organizations that reflect the wider culture's values, but dynamic countercultural communities whose purpose is to reshape both lives and societies." Our avenue for helping to reshape society, in Wallis's view, is "a dialogue on those questions among people of faith who will then address them to policy makers."



I think Jim Wallis is right about this, and I'm dismayed when church members criticize church officials and agencies for addressing government policy makers on behalf of the church. Many United Methodists, for example, keep attacking and financially depriving the UMC General Board of Church and Society, the agency that is authorized to promote the UMC's official positions on social-justice issues. These UMs say the church shouldn't get involved in politics, question our nation's policies, or criticize its leaders. Yet the Bible calls us to do these very things.



Our side or God's side?

Wallis reminds his readers that, as Abraham Lincoln once said, "our task should not be to invoke religion and the name of God by claiming God's blessing and endorsement for all our national policies and practices—saying, in effect, that God is on our side." Instead, Lincoln said, we need to be praying and earnestly worrying whether we are on God's side.



Claiming God's stamp of approval for our side, Wallis observes, leads to triumphalism, self-righteousness, bad theology, and often dangerous foreign policy. Looking for God's side leads instead to repentance, humility, reflection, and accountability.

Recognizing God's politics

How can we get on God's side? Not by avoiding politics, but by trying to see what God's politics are like. The place to start to understand the politics of God, Wallis believes, is with the prophets. "What were their subjects?" he urges us to ask. "Quite secular topics really—land, labor, capital, wages, debt, taxes, equity, fairness, courts, prisons, immigrants, other races and peoples, economic divisions, social justice, war, and peace—the stuff of politics."



Poverty is an especially big issue in God's politics, so it's not just a secular issue. The Scriptures, Jim Wallis reminds us, "make it clear that poverty is indeed a religious issue, and the failure of political leaders to help uplift the poor will be judged a moral failing."

The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.
—Psalm 24:1

Preserving the environment is also a religious issue, yet in our churches we hear little about it. Neither do we hear much about how consum-

erism, globalization, and the growing power of multinational corporations can damage the environment, destroy natural resources, and harm the poor.



When we do hear about social issues, what we hear is often far from what the prophets and Jesus said. Jesus commanded us to be peacemakers, yet we glorify war in our churches by honoring military service without lamenting the wars that have made it necessary. And the prophets called their nations to accountability for their shortcomings, but our churches rarely do that. Instead, we



often put our nation's flag on our altars and sometimes even pledge allegiance to it as part of our worship.

Christian conservatives claim to be pro-life, but for them, being pro-life seems mainly to mean opposing abortion. Although lessening the number of abortions is important, what about the life that's destroyed in so many other ways? I rarely hear the Religious Right opposing war or capital punishment, or addressing the underlying causes of epidemic diseases, genocide, poverty, or child abuse.

A very public God

Instead of seeking political solutions to the kinds of issues to which Jesus and the prophets gave the most attention, many Christians focus

... I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life ...
—Deuteronomy 30:19

instead on passing laws to control sexual behavior. Yet the Bible focuses much more on defending against the oppressive use of wealth and power.

So why do we hear mainly about private religion in our churches, when the Bible reveals a very public God whose messengers speak publicly about public issues? "Affluent countries and churches breed private disciples," Wallis says, "perhaps because the applications of faith to public life could become quickly challenging and troubling." Today, "religion usually serves more to silence the politics of God than to announce it to the nations."

The wrong impression of Christianity

Religion can also distort God's politics. When the left wing fails to apply a religious perspective to public policy, and the right wing addresses mainly private, lower-priority topics, the public image of Christianity becomes inaccurate. Then vital issues are neglected, and people here and abroad get a false picture of Christianity as out of touch with reality.

"Clearly the politics of God is different from ours," Wallis assures us, "from the Republicans and Democrats, the liberals and the conservatives, the Left and the Right. The politics of God makes them all look pretty bad and points the ways to some very different directions—but some very hopeful ones."

Staying hopeful, however, can be hard. Becoming cynical is easier. "Cynicism," finds Wallis, "is the place of retreat for the smart, critical, dissenting, and for-



Woe to those who make unjust laws, who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people. ...
—Isaiah 10:1-2

This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I've written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 12 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

merly idealistic people. ... They know what is going on, and at one point, they might even have tried for a time to change it. But they didn't succeed, things got worse, and they got weary, ... so they retreated to cynicism as the refuge from commitment."

We're the ones we've been waiting for

It's hard to keep trying when we've already tried and tried to help change things and we see few results. The obstacles are real, and artificial optimism won't remove them. However, "the antidote to cynicism is not optimism but action," Wallis finds. "And action is finally born out of hope."

Our calling, Jim Wallis reminds us, is the one the prophets knew and Jesus followed. It's a calling answered by every religious person who promotes spiritual and social change inspired by God. It's a commission that can only be fulfilled by people whose faith and hope says the world can be changed. "It is that very belief that changes the world," Wallis assures us. "And if not us, who will believe?" We can't wait for someone else to do what needs doing. We, believes Wallis, are the ones we've been waiting for.



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In the Christian worship service I attended on Memorial Day, I was dismayed to hear only prayers and appreciation for people currently in our nation's armed services, and for those who had been killed in our current and past wars. I heard no prayers for our enemies or the civilians killed by war, and no mention of Christians' obligation to try to eliminate war or to reject it as a way of solving conflicts.

... Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.
—Luke 6:27-28

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
—Matthew 5:9

It seems as if we acknowledge Jesus's teachings only when they don't make us uncomfortable or conflict with our nation's policies. Isn't there something wrong with that, if we claim to be Christians?

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you ..."
—Matthew 5:44

