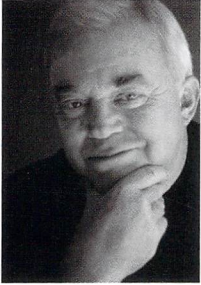


BY JIM WALLIS

What Does It Mean to Be on God's Side?



I RECENTLY FINISHED a new book, which we launch on April 1, the day after Easter. The beginning of the Easter season is a liturgically appropriate moment for the introduction of a hopeful book in what many feel is a hopeless time.

I wanted to tell you, our faithful magazine readers, why I wrote this book, and why I called it *On God's Side: What Religion Forgets and Politics Hasn't Learned About Serving the Common Good*.

This is not just another book for me. I wrote it during a three-month sabbatical that started in a monastery overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Every day started before sunrise with prayers, walks, yoga, and exer-

cise, followed by writing the rest of the day. My other discipline was not to write or comment publicly on the news. I watched the nation's political discourse each night after a day of writing and found it more depressing than ever. It was an election year.

The resulting book is not about politics in the narrow sense, but about how to engage our personal and public lives with an ancient but timely idea and practice—the common good—that has long and deep historical roots across many religious faiths and secular notions of democracy. I sought to explore the biblical and theological roots of the idea, and then apply it to the most basic questions of economic trust, the role of government, civility, renewing democracy, globalization, conflict resolution in a violent world, and, of course, what our faith can contribute to the common good with the world as our parish. Most compelling, I found Jesus' call to love our neighbors to be the gospel foundation for serving the common good, and the

excerpt in this issue, "A Gospel for the Common Good" (page 16), makes the case for that.

For Christians, the book explores a fundamental question: Why did Jesus come, and what do the gospel and the mission of the church really entail? The book's message is that when people of faith actually say and do the things their faith stands for, two things happen: at first other people are surprised, and then they are attracted. It examines both inspirations and practices for how we can respond to the growing hunger for a better life together and find common ground for the common good, especially in relation to those who are the most vulnerable.

Abraham Lincoln famously said, "My concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side." That was probably the most important thing about religion ever said by an American president. Presidents and other politicians usually want to claim that God is on their side, their country's side, and even their political policy's side.

But Lincoln had it right. One of the biggest problems with religion is that people, institutions, and nations—all of our human "sides"—tend to try to claim God's favor. When people are sure they're right, they confidently say that God agrees with them. Claims of divine blessing for human behavior—often brutal behavior—have always undermined the integrity and credibility of religion. The much harder task, and the more important one, is to ask how to be on God's side. That often means changing our minds and hearts and taking on a new perspective. The Bible calls this "conversion"—and this is the most biblical and theological book I have written in some time.

Shallowness characterizes our politics, our media coverage, and our popular cultural values. If we

are truly committed to discovering what it means to be on God's side, it is time to go much deeper in seeking a redemptive path forward. It's time to move beyond our superficial, often hateful politics and media. It's time to dig deeper in the places that supply our better values and instincts and to revive the practices that renew our faith traditions and ethical priorities. And it's time to do the spiritual reflection that could provide the moral compass that our politics and economics have lost and that even our religions can forget.

I am also convinced that what happens in our households is as central to the common good as what happens outside of them. The quality of personal, everyday life in our families, neighborhoods, and local communities is vital to shaping the quality of our public life. Being a husband, father, and Little League baseball coach has convinced me that the common good is about far more than what happens in the halls of power. Restoring healthy households means making the transformation from appetites to values. Our homes must become the places where our children learn the difference between the two.

As I wrote this book, the reason for writing it became more clear: to help spark a national conversation about the meaning of the common good. Although the call to the common good goes back centuries, the need for a new dialogue about what it means and what its practice would require of us has never seemed so timely. That's why I wrote this book. I hope you find it helpful to your families, vocations, churches, and your own public witness in the world and that together we can help spark a new and needed conversation on the common good. ■

Jim Wallis is editor-in-chief of Sojourners magazine.

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