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Christians, Liberty and Justice Today

By David Hamstra

The “Jesus and Politics: Christians, Liberty and Justice Today” conference convened the evening of Thursday, October 17, 2019, on the campus of Andrews University.

The keynote address was by Christian scholar and activist, Jim Wallis, of Sojourners. Conference-organizer, Nicholas Miller, introduced Wallis as a “cousin” to Adventists via his Plymouth Brethren roots. Miller, Lake Union counsel and director of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty, and professor of Church History at Andrews University, introduced the theme of the conference by pointing out that politics simply means those “matters of public concern” to members of the *polis*, the “community of citizens.” He noted that “our [Adventist] pioneers were actively involved in matters that today we would call ‘politics,’ but they viewed as moral issues,” pointing to the abolition and temperance movements.

In the spirit of recovering that Adventist tradition of moral political involvement, Wallis was invited to present the topic of his latest book, *Christ in Crisis: Why We Need to Reclaim Jesus*. He began his remarks by observing that our common ground in the ideas of the Radical Reformers means that he, like Adventists, believes in the separation of church and state. But he hastened to add that separation of

church and state does not imply “the segregation of moral values from public life.” And he believes that American politics is in a moral crisis because we have leaders appealing to our worst motives and a citizenry whose voting can be predicted based on what demographic categories into which they happen to fall.

For Wallis, that socio-political trap was laid around him during his early upbringing in post-war Detroit. He grew up in a White neighborhood, went to a White church, and lived in a White bubble where interactions with Blacks happened only for specific purposes. As a teenager, he started to ask questions about segregation at church but was told that questions like that would get him “in trouble.” “*They were right*” about that, he wryly observed.

So the young Wallis pursued the answers to those questions outside of that church. He went to Black churches, got jobs with Black men, and soon “realized that we were born in the same city but lived in different countries.” For example, he learned that Black mothers would tell their children that, if they were lost and saw a policeman, they were to

« Illustration by Sarah Duvivier »



hide until he went away and then find their way home. Because the police at that time, while they would help White children find their way home, were arresting Black children (in the same condition) for loitering.

Wallis raised these issues at his childhood church and was told that racism was a political issue, that Christianity only dealt with personal problems. So, he left the church behind for a life of a campus radical. Seeking to ground his views, he read Marx, Guevarra and Ho Chi Minh, but was unsatisfied. Then he picked up the New Testament to “give Jesus one more try,” and realized that he had never heard a sermon like the Sermon on the Mount in the church in which he grew up. When he got to Matthew 25 (the “it was me” chapter), “it brought me to Christ as an activist,” he confessed, because “I’d never read anything so radical” in the other social thinkers he studied.

In Wallis’ subsequent studies at an evangelical seminary in Chicago, he further developed the biblical basis for what he had already seen in the gospels: that while our relationship with God is irreducibly “personal,” it is never a purely “private” matter. It has public implications. For Wallis, “the privatizing of Christianity is the White American heresy.”

This raised the question of how to be Christian in public as it relates to politics. Wallis’ answer for Americans was, “Don’t go left; don’t go right. Go deeper.” And the example of Jesus can show us how that is done.

Wallis’ latest book is structured around questions Jesus was asked in the gospels which, upon careful study, turn out to have political connections. For example, when Jesus was asked whether He was going to pay the tax to Caesar, that raised the issue of separation of church and state. By asking whose image was on the coin, Jesus highlighted the distinction between our obligations to the government, and to God in Whose image we all are made.

Romans 13 teaches that the government has a limited function to “protect the good and punish the evil.” But it is to fulfill this function morally, not cruelly. “Kids in cages isn’t Romans 13,” protested Wallis. Sometimes, like Jesus overturning tables in the temple, we need to disrupt the symbols of power in order to stand up against wrongs.

Wallis concluded with the need for Christians to be salt and light in politics. He compared the preservative

properties of salt to the conservative impulse to preserve “values” that are good for society. He spoke of liberal calls to reform as a shining of light on dark deeds. For Wallis, Jesus’s twin challenge to His followers is to “preserve the things that need preserving” and at the same time to no longer tolerate that which is “no longer tolerable.”

The next morning, David Trim, director of General Conference Archives, Statistics and Research, presented on how certain Adventist missionaries, of which the Stahls in Peru are the best studied, empowered indigenous peoples to overcome intolerable political conditions. Trim showed that for Adventist missionaries in the early 20th century, the ministry of healing and education had a political dimension that equipped and even encouraged oppressed peoples to resist their post-colonial overlords. In the following address, Timothy Golden, professor of Philosophy at Walla Walla University, called our attention to the fact that Seventh-day Adventists did not follow through on this inspired agenda at home when the opportunity presented itself during the civil rights movement. He called on his church to renew the prophetic critique of America that, when presented from Revelation 13, first attracted him to Adventism as a young, African-American law student.

In the breakout sessions that followed, participants who attended a panel organized by conference-organizer Melissa Reid, North American Division associate director of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty, heard from a policy advisor with a gay rights organization and a board member of an advocacy group for private, non-profit, post-secondary institutions about how they are working together to advance “Fairness for All” legislation at the federal level. Many Christians do not realize that sexual minorities have no protection from discrimination under American federal law. Todd McFarland, General Conference Associate general counsel, explained how the Seventh-day Adventist view of the separation of church and state has led the General Conference to partner with those and other organizations to develop the proposed Fairness Act. Such legislation has the goal of protecting the religious liberty of those who uphold traditional sexual ethics while also protecting sexual minorities from discrimination in areas such as housing and employment. Other breakout sessions dealt with topics ranging from constitutional law to sexual abuse.

On Friday night, Ronald Sider, professor of Theology at Palmer Theological Seminary, provided a keynote address from the perspective of another of our Adventist cousins, the Mennonites. In a lecture that afternoon, he had argued for a thoroughgoing pacifism based on the example of Jesus and the failure of “just war” theory to prevent unjust wars among Christians. We learned that this was one implication of his consistent pro-life ethic, which also involved rejecting harmful substances, abortion and euthanasia. He sketched a method developed in his book, *Just Politics*, for arriving at such conclusions that account for philosophy, history, science, politics and the normative role of Scripture.

On Sabbath morning, Claudia Allen, PhD student and content manager of *Message Magazine*, preached a sermon that drew lessons for our political involvement from Jesus’ encounter with the collectors of the temple tax. She found that Jesus never offended for provocation’s sake, but also that the freedom we have in Jesus is a freedom to serve those who are offended when the church fails to minister to their practical needs as Jesus did.

The conference concluded on Sabbath afternoon with two addresses on politics and the prophetic identity of the Adventist movement by conference-organizers Michael Nixon, vice president for Diversity at Andrews University, and Miller. Miller applied the interpretation of the latter-day kings of the North and South in Daniel 11 as symbols of a contest between secularism (spiritual Egypt) vs. Catholicism (spiritual Rome) to the divide in contemporary American politics between secular progressivism and Christian-nationalist conservatism. Pointing out that neither is a satisfactory option for Adventists, he called for us to apply Revelation 13, not only to the past (nineteenth-century Sunday laws) and the future crises over the Sabbath, but to the present state of affairs in America. By developing, like our pioneers, a clear-eyed view of America’s perennial lamb-like and dragon-like qualities, we can fulfill the mission God has for His end-time people without compromising our identity to political false-alternatives. ■

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