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Jim Wallis is a theologian, activist and editor-in-chief of *Sojourners*. His responses have been edited for conciseness and clarity.

DH: *The example of Jesus is the subject of your book, Christ in Crisis, but we also have the Old Testament, the Bible of Jesus. Going to the Old Testament raises interpretive issues that different Christian communities handle differently, but it seems highly relevant for the question of how Christians should conduct themselves in public life. Can you give an example of how you've drawn on the Old Testament to shape your life's work?*

« Illustration by Sarah Duvivier »

JW: The Hebrew prophets are very clear on holding rulers, princes, government leaders if you will, accountable for how they treat the most vulnerable. The Hebrew word *ger* for refugee or immigrant occurs about ninety times in the Old Testament. And how we treat the refugee/immigrant is a test of our love for God all the way through the Old Testament. The prophets hold political rulers — not just rulers of Israel but other rulers, too — accountable for how they treat the poor. That's the Biblical test of politics, systems and rulers: how they treat the most vulnerable.

DH: *What is the place of the Second Coming of Christ in a Christian vision for public life? As Adventists we are all about the Second Coming. My church's founders took this as a reason to get involved in select political issues, but more recently Adventists have taken Jesus' soon return as an excuse to separate themselves from worldly affairs. How do you avoid the extremes of quietism, on the one hand, and over-realized eschatology, on the other, relative to the Second Coming?*

JW: Excuse is the right word — an excuse for not being responsible. The first verse I learned was John 3:16: *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.* So, in eschatology, the belief that the Kingdom is now and not-yet is critical. We live in the Kingdom now. We act, we live in light of the Kingdom right now in the *world*. But it is also not-yet. It has not come to fulfillment, but we know that the Kingdom will be fulfilled on earth as it is in Heaven. We don't withdraw from the world into quiet piety because of the future. We live in the world now in light of the values of Christ and His Kingdom.

DH: *Would you add a comment on over-realized eschatology in terms of our political expectations?*

JW: How is that interpreted in your tradition?

DH: *We would want to be careful to leave some level of perfection for after Jesus comes and have provisional expectations for the here and now. For example, Adventists might be uncomfortable with language about ending poverty, but doing something for the poor would certainly be within our tradition.*

“Doing something for the poor” — that sounds like charity. Overcoming poverty is central to what the biblical prophets are calling for. There is no perfection, to be sure. But we can accomplish much of this. Social Security really did wipe out a lot of poverty for

a lot of senior citizens. The Civil Rights law ended discrimination at hotels and restaurants for African Americans. We never reach perfection. But it's not a matter of letting systems of the world go on the way they are while we do a little charity on the side. “Charity” is not a biblical word. The biblical word is “establish justice.” We didn't end sin in South Africa, but it wouldn't have been acceptable to tolerate Apartheid and do charity on the side.

DH: *In your book, you try to stake out a position that is deeper than the left/right American political divide based on the normative example of the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet it seems that the majority of your critique is focused on one side rather than the other. We always face a temptation to read the politics with which we identify into the Scriptures. Yet there also is a fallacy of both-side-ism, because one side may truly be worse than the other side from God's perspective. What would you say to those who worry your theology has been captured by a certain political position?*

JW: Those who say that are normally Republicans. If anything has captured Christian faith in America, it is political operatives from the Republican party trying to co-opt the evangelicals. That's not hyperbole; that's what the people who did it tell me: Richard Viguerie and the others. The Republicans claim to own religion in America at election time, and the Democrats often don't talk about it. So, I always say, “The right gets it wrong, and the left doesn't get it” [from the subtitle of his book, *God's Politics*].

I don't want a religious left to replace a religious right. I don't want to wrap ideology and politics around my faith. I want my faith to critique politics, parties and candidates. Wrapping politics around faith is what the religious right has done, but Democrats should be more open to listening to the faith community. I disagree with the Democrats focusing on the middle class instead of the poor. And I've been critical of abortion on both sides of the aisle. But the Democratic party has been more sympathetic to lower class people than the Republicans have. The Republicans are the ones who consistently take away programs for the poor while making the wealthy even wealthier. That's a clear distinction between the two parties, and one is more like Jesus than the other in that regard. ■