

WHO SPEAKS FOR GOD ?

An Alternative to the Religious Right--
A New Politics of Compassion, Community, and Civility
by Jim Wallis

At first I saw only the title, "Who Speaks for God", and I passed over the book because all too many people have claimed to know exactly what God says to us. The next time I saw the book I was in less of a hurry and I read the subtitle, then I looked to see who would write such a book: Jim Wallis. That did it. I had read an earlier book by Wallis and I knew he was a powerful writer with a message I simply should not miss. Now I have to review it, not as a substitute for your reading it, but hopefully to encourage you to read it.

Some chapters start with quotations from Pat Robertson. I thought I knew enough about the religious right, but I could not have imagined the quotations from him that are in this book. I needed to know exactly some of the things he has said to know why it is vital that others in religion need to repudiate such views rather than ignore them. Wallis shows that Robertson turns Biblical religion upside down. And we all need to know the tactics of Ralph Reed, Robertson's former political strategist.

While that is enough to justify reading the book, that is not its constructive message. That is too briefly stated in the subtitle. Each chapter makes it clear that this country is in deep trouble now in several respects, then details what all is needed under each of those three "Cs" to deal with them. All too briefly summarized here, neither liberal nor conservative have adequate answers to our increasing poverty, our increasing breakdown of the family, our continuing racism and discriminations, our increasing violence, our need to protect the environment better, or our deteriorating political process.

Everyone should know some of the figures Wallis cites: from 1983 to 1989, 62% of the newly created wealth went to the top 1 % of income recipients, and from 1979 to 1993 the economy grew by 35% while real income fell for 80% of Americans. Complaints about increasing inequality while the stock market and the economy are booming are said to be fomenting class war, but they indicate to others that a few are winning the class war and don't want that mentioned. In the light of that it is odd that the budget is being balanced by expanding the military and cutting programs for the poor, while who is to benefit most by cutting the capital gains tax? The so-called Contract for America pretended to be conservative, but was radical, and it isn't dead.

Wallis argues that it takes all elements of the national community to work together with compassion and civility, not just churches or the market or just government, but certainly with adequate government financing, to deal with our nation's problems. It is a well balanced and very thoughtful book. The real key is to bring us all together in communities to discuss together what is the best way to deal with each problem.