

CAMPAIGN FOR AMERICA'S FUTURE

"TAKE BACK AMERICA"

SPEAKER:

JIM WALLIS, AUTHOR, "GOD'S POLITICS"

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ROGER HICKEY: Well, if you came of age in the South in the 1960s like I did, you had to be inspired by the brave commitment and prophetic vision of the African-American church leaders whose Biblical faith moved souls and moved a social movement. It really informed the values of all of us here. More unusual but just as inspiring were the white church leaders, people like my friend, Reverend Will Campbell, who risked loss of churches and pulpits to say what had to be said against the official segregation of the day.

Reverend Jim Wallis is a minister in both of those noble traditions. He lives his faith in an incredibly consistent way. He reaches out to evangelical Christians, preaching respect for life and for social justice as intertwined and inseparable. Jim founded Sojourners: Christians for Justice and Peace more than 30 years ago, and he is also the convener of Call to Renewal, a national federation of churches and faith-based organizations – you have heard that phrase before – faith-based organizations – working together to overcome poverty by changing public policy.

He has been traveling the country – a kind of modern-day circuit rider – because he is got this fantastic new book out, which is a challenge not only to the evangelical right but to all of us here in this room to really live our values. It is called, “God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It.” Please welcome Jim Wallis.

(Applause, cheers.)

JIM WALLIS: Thank you, Roger? Oops. Is it on? No? One, two, three.

AUDIENCE: Yes.

MR. WALLIS: I just hate to stand behind the pulpit, you know. Are we on yet here? No.

MR. HICKEY: Let me work on that.

MR. WALLIS: Working on that, okay.

MR. HICKEY: And you can start at the pulpit.

MR. WALLIS: Okay.

I am really glad to be here and wish I could have been here for more of this. I took the red eye home last night from California just to be with you and I’m very excited to be here. You look great out there, by the way. (Applause, chuckles.)

You know there is lots of talk these days about religion: how it’s used and some would say abused, and what faith stands for and surprising things this day. You know, I checked my Bible; I didn’t find filibuster anywhere in the Bible, you know. (Laughter,

applause.) But I want to start with what I think faith should be not just what it shouldn't be by telling you a story.

I got invited to a different kind of speaking event, different than a great conference like this or a university or church; it was the inmates at Sing Sing Prison. They wrote and said come speak to us. It sounded interesting so I said – I wrote back, I said sure. When do you want me to come? So this young prisoner, young brother wrote me back and said, well, we're free most nights. (Laughter.) He said – he was a real comedian – we're kind of a captive audience here.

So I went and the authorities were very generous – gave us this room in the bowels of the Sing Sing. I had just me and 80 guys left alone for five hours. One of those young prisoners said something that night I'll never forget. He said, you know, Jim, all of us here at Sing Sing – all of us – almost the whole prison are from just about four or five neighborhoods in New York City, four or five neighborhoods. It's like a train, he said. You get on that train in my neighborhood when you're nine or 10 years old and that train ends up here at Sing Sing.

He had had a spiritual conversion inside of the walls, part of a New York theological seminary program training preachers inside the joint, you know – masters of divinity inside the walls. You graduate when your sentence is up I suppose. (Chuckles.) And he said to me, when I get out, I want to get out and stop that train. (Applause.) You see, that is what I mean, that is what I mean by a faith-based initiative. (Chuckles, applause.)

Two years later I am New York City, two years later, and guess who is up front – back home, leading the meeting trying to stop that train. Faith is supposed to be for the big things, the things nobody feels can be changed, like stopping a fast-moving urban train on the way to inevitable destinations like Sing Sing. Or he is a big thing: 3 billion people, half of God's children living on less than \$2 a day; that is a big thing. (Applause.)

Or a silent tsunami that takes the lives of 30,000 children every day because of things like hunger, lack of clean drinking water, things we could change if we ever decided to and even quickly. Faith is for the big things. When things feel hopeless, the odds are against us, how could that ever change; that is why they call it faith, that is what it's supposed to be for; not Ten Commandment monuments in Alabama courthouses. (Applause, cheers.)

So, so what has been happening now is a lot of people around the country look at the way faith has been used and abused in the election, or the way it's often portrayed in the media, or invoked in White House or the Congress. And they say to themselves, wait a minute – (chuckles) – that is not my faith. I am a person of faith too or I have moral values too and those aren't my moral values.

I think the right – they may have taken over in some ways but they are now seriously over stepping, and they are causing this response. There is this – in the churches in the faith community, there is new – to coin an old term by one of our opponents, there is a new silent majority in the land; this time, they are on our side. (Applause, cheers.)

So I am traveling all over the country, a book tour has become a movement tour; we are having town meetings disguised as book signings – (laughter) – we are having revivals in bookstores, and I want to make an announcement: we have been to the East, the Midwest, the South, to Texas – (chuckles) – the Rocky Mountains, California, Pacific Northwest, and I want to give you some good news: after hearing what people are saying, seeing these huge crowds, we’re meeting lots of fire marshals because they are shutting down all of the venues.

Here is what I want to announce: the monologue of the religious right is finally over and a new dialogue has just begun. (Cheers, applause.) It is sort of the rise of the non-religious right; it’s not much of a name for a movement – (laughter) – but movement is on everybody’s lips; they want to join something, they want to get involved. Let me tell you who is coming: a lot of evangelical Christians of which I am one – you’ll say what does he mean evangelical – evangelical Christians who don’t feel represented by Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson and James Dobson. (Cheers, applause.)

And, you know, there are millions of them – millions – Catholics who don’t want a handful of right-wing bishops telling them there is only one issue on which they can vote – (applause, cheers) – a lot of mainline Protestants, who feel – to use my neighborhood’s language – disrespected – (chuckles) – by the whole conversation as they are disrespected, not even people of faith – they are coming out.

A whole lot of black churches coming because this has been a white conversation – when the media says evangelicals, they just mean white evangelicals; they don’t mean black churches – they are coming out. Asian, Latino believers changing so many churches, they are coming. A lot of rabbis are coming, a lot of the synagogues – young Muslims who want a more tolerant, democratic, open, and, yes, peace-loving Islam, they are coming too. (Applause, cheers.)

And a lot of young people who say I am not religious but I am spiritual – (chuckles) – I want to be part of this. (Applause.) Every time somebody says I’m an agnostic but I care about moral values; thanks for making me feel so welcome to night – and in Boston, this kid comes up to you to book sign – he says, you know, I’m gay; thanks for making me feel welcome. But, you know, it’s easier to come out as gay in Boston than as religious in the Democratic Party. (Laughter, cheers.) That is what has to change. Here is how.

The subtitle of the book says it the way that I want to see it: “Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get it.” The right is very comfortable of the language of faith and values, and religion, and God; so comfortable sometimes it sounds to me like

they think they own the territory: faith, values, maybe own God. But then they restrict everything to one or two moral-values issues.

Did you know there is only two moral values issues: abortion, gay marriage – easy, end of conversation. Only two. Those are important issues. We need to – I think we can find common ground on a number of those questions, but my goodness, I am an evangelical Christian; I find 3,000 verses in the Bible on poor people and I insist fighting poverty is a moral values issue too. (Applause, cheers.) And protecting the environment, otherwise known as God’s creation, is a moral-values issues too, you know? (Applause, cheers.) And we must say, as clearly as we can, that the ethics of war, whether you go to war, when you go to war, and whether you tell the truth about going to war is a religious matter too, you know? (Applause, cheers.)

So when you’re on a book tour, they put you on TV. And some nights, you’re on “The O’Reilly Factor;” other nights you have fun. (Chuckles.) So the next night was Jon Stewart – you know, Jon Stewart, “Daily Show.” (Cheers.) So, Jon says, so you want to apply religion and the words of Jesus like to politics? And I could feel his young audience around the country saying, oh, no, they’ve got some wacko evangelical on my favorite TV show. They’re going to ruin my show! And I said, well, Jon, yeah, but I don’t think Jesus’ two top priorities would have been a capital gains tax cut and the occupation of Iraq, you know? (Laughter.) So how did Jesus become pro-rich, pro-war, and only pro-American? Some of us feel like our faith has been stolen. When your faith is stolen, it’s time to take it back. (Cheers.)

So, the emails begin to come. All these thousands of young people and they said – amazing – I didn’t know you could be a Christian or a person of faith and care about poverty – (chuckles) – really, or the environment or be against the war in Iraq. And now they know, and you know what? They like it, they like it. A whole generation of young people are saying we want to define our faith in a different way. We want our faith to make a difference in the world. Whether we’re religious or not, we want our moral convictions to shape our – we don’t want just a polar – religion should not be used as a partisan wedge, an ideological weapon to divide us and destroy us. It should be a bridge to bring us together on the big things. (Applause.)

Now, you said both sides, right? Well, where the left I think gets it wrong sometimes is we somehow forget our own history – our own progressive history where all of the major social reform movements in our progressive history - -the abolition of slavery, women’s suffrage in those first rounds, child labor law reform – they all were driven and fueled in part by religion and by faith. Never just religion – I say, every time I speak, religion does not have a monopoly on morality. (Applause.) We need all of us, lots of people. But religion must be a socially dynamic conscious force making our world a different place. I believe – in case you asked – in the separation of church and state, I really do. (Cheers.) But that does not mean the segregation of moral values from public life or the banishing of religious language from our public discourse. Where would be if the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had just kept his faith too himself? (Applause.)

Religion must be disciplined by democracy. We don't want competing religiosity in the public square, but we do want a moral discourse on our public life to which all of us are invited – that we all need and that we're all needed for. I think the biggest mistake progressives have made in the last several decades is conceding the entire territory of religion and values to a religious and political right. They have turned that into a wedge. We must never make that mistake again. (Applause.)

Finally, I'm a 19th-century evangelical born in the wrong century because back then evangelical Christians fought against slavery, for women's suffrage, for child labor law reform. Charles Finney was the evangelist – the Billy Graham of his day – he's the one who invented the altar call. You know where they all come down in the front and sign up? But do you know why the altar call was first invented? Invented to sign up the converts for the campaign to abolish slavery. That's why we first – we need today – we need a new altar call. We need revivals for justice across this land.

And you know, the big choice, the right always says, is between religion and secularism. You know, we got belief over here and secular humanism here. It's this creepy, crawling thing that eats your children, you know? That's not the big issue. The big issue though is a spiritual one and one that we all face. It's the choice between hope on the one hand and cynicism on the other. And even we who are progressives and activists can fall into cynicism. We're out there, we're fighting, we're working hard. We're against all the bad stuff. Cynics are always against the bad stuff. They don't have rose-colored glasses on. They see it's wrong, but they're out there and they're fighting and things don't change and they start to feel disillusioned, disappointed and, you know, vulnerable. So we retreat to a place called cynicism, which says, it's all bad, but it really won't change. It's too much for us. And we then try to make sure we protect our own security.

Hope, on the other hand, is not a feeling, a state of mind, or a personality trait. Hope is a decision, a choice you make because of your faith – a choice you make that the world doesn't have to be this way, as Martin said, that it bends toward justice. We've got to be those who make hope into a decision. My Bible says, faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things are not seen are my best paraphrases still. Hope means believing in spite of the evidence and then watching the evidence change. (Applause.)

The world needs something from us. And I'll close with this. It's a commission – we're going home today – it's a commission. The world needs not just to know what we're against. There's so much to be against in this town. The world needs to know what we're for. What's our vision? What are our values? What's our faith, defined however you want? Go home and tell them about your faith, about your values, about your vision, about what you're for. And I'll leave you with a commission from a dear friend of mine.

A young African-American kid from our streets – my streets – D.C. – she was smart, Lisa Sullivan was, so smart she went to Yale and got a Ph.D. Could have written her ticket to anywhere. When you're a young Black female with a Ph.D., you can go anywhere you want. She came home with the children on the streets that won her heart and became the best street organizer I ever knew. She's rap, hip-hop. She hugs, she scolded, she loved, she confronted, she organized, she fundraised, she – as they say – built capacity. She did it all. She was the future; she was the hope. And one day I got a call, Lisa Sullivan's big heart had a heart ailment and within two weeks before she was 40, Lisa Sullivan was gone. But she leaves us a legacy, a commission that has won my heart and I want to share with you and it might encourage your hearts as well.

When people would say, Lisa, the problem is too big – the drugs, the violence, the streets, the apathy, the corruption – it's too big and we our too small. Our budget, our staff, our resources, our faith – it's too big and we're too small. And Lisa, we don't have any Martin Luther King Jr.'s anymore. We don't have any leaders anymore, Lisa. She'd get angry, really angry. Don't say that, she'd say. Don't say it's too big and we're too small. And don't ever say we don't have any leaders anymore. Don't you understand, and these are her words to us, don't you understand, we are the ones we have been waiting for. (Applause, cheers.)

As you go home, as you go back home, don't be intimidated. Don't be intimidated by the Bush administration, by our religious right, by the polls and the focus groups. As you go home, tell them what you believe. Tell them what you're for. Tell them what your vision is. The country is waiting to hear from you because, my friends, we, in a progressive movement, a social movement with spiritual foundations. We have done it before, we've changed history before, and we can do it again because we are the ones that we have been waiting for. Thank you very much. (Applause.)