

## Book Review: Jesus and the Powers: Christian Political Witness in an Age of Totalitarian Terror and Dysfunctional Democracies.<sup>1</sup>

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Stanley Hauerwas once suggested that “there are few things that Christians can do in and for America than play and watch baseball.” I couldn’t agree more. But surely a Christian should do more than that as a responsible citizen in a democratic society, right? Hauerwas, on a more serious note, suggested that the church best serves the world in which it finds itself through faithful worship - in other words, by letting the church be the church and the world be the world. Others, like James Davison Hunter, have described the primary calling of the church as being a “faithful presence” in the world. The best theologians of our day all agree that the Christian church is not called to change the world (certainly not by force) but to be a living witness to the reality of Christ and his kingdom through love, prayer, worship, example, and persuasion. Most would agree that those representing Jesus Christ are to never pursue raw public power or control.

The relationship between the church and the world, however, becomes quite messy in actual practice. After all, to quote another great theologian named Bob Dylan, “We live in a political world” where political engagement is simply unavoidable. The problem is that it’s nearly impossible for Christians to reach any kind of consensus on exactly how to engage in politics – particularly in democratic societies. After completing one quarter lap of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, a bitter culture war has erupted throughout most of North America and Europe, including within the Christian church itself, which threatens the very survival of democracy in those societies. As Tom Wright and Michael Bird describe our situation,

*The globe is awash with terror, tyranny and trauma, divisions and despair, not just in the West, but also in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Our world seems dangerously combustible, due to financial crises, pandemics, increasing injustices and inequalities, democratic chaos, geopolitical upheaval, wars and rumors of more wars to come.*

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird. JESUS AND THE POWERS: Christian Political Witness in an Age of Totalitarian Terror and Dysfunctional Democracies. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Reflective, 2014).

Into this chaotic environment comes an excellent and helpful guide in the form of a book written by those two New Testament scholars just mentioned: the Englishman N.T. Wright and his friend, English/Australian Michael Bird. Their book is called Jesus and the Powers: Christian Political Witness in an Age of Totalitarian Terror and Dysfunctional Democracies. Wright and Bird provide the reader with an outstanding introduction and a concise summary of the relationship/distinction between the church and the Kingdom of Christ and the relationship of both to their surrounding society.

As seen in the book's whirlwind tour of Western Civilization, Christians have struggled for two thousand years with the question of how the church is to relate to the world. For the first few hundred years, the relationship was pretty clearly defined: the church was a beleaguered marginalized minority within the Roman Empire. Things changed, however, when Christianity was finally tolerated, then legalized, and then finally made the official religion of the Empire. Even after Rome's collapse, Christianity became the definitive faith of Western Civilization. Most of the time, the church and the world - Christianity and the State - actually joined forces and became a kind of Christian empire. This relationship, for better and for worse, was the dominant model for over a thousand years. At its best, Christendom established and cultivated Christian virtues and values, it made huge advances in human liberties from the Magna Carta to the Bill of Rights, and it established countless hospitals, schools, and benevolence ministries. At its worst, the church exchanged the cross of Christ for the sword of Rome. In many sad respects, much of Christian civilization was often neither Christian nor civil. Finally, in the last few hundred years, in the age of independent nation/states (whether secular democracies or autocracies of various flavors), the question of the relationship between church and state has become increasingly tense and confusing.

Throughout their book, Wright and Bird continue to warn their fellow Christians to fear the seduction of political power and to rest in the goodness and faithfulness of the one who is King of kings and Lord of lords. Having said that, however, the authors do not promote a withdrawal from the public square or an avoidance of the political issues of the day. They spend a large portion of the book, for example, defending the need for human government. They point out that anarchy is hopeless, because in the absence of a world governed by humans, the bullies will always prey on the weak. In that sense, they argue that any government is better than no government. A much better alternative, according to Wright and Bird, is liberal democracy. In fact, they spend a fair amount of time suggesting that this is the "least worst option for human governance," and their argument is persuasive. They do not pretend that

that the Scriptures nor good theology will inevitably conclude that this is God's preferred system. They explain that liberal democracy is "liberal" in the sense that it "regards civic freedoms as an inherent good" and that it's "democratic" in the sense that "voting rights apply equally to all citizens and each citizen's vote should have the same weight." They conclude that "liberal democracy is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for a just society, but it can be an enabling condition for a just society."

As a local church pastor living in the midst of the current divisive culture war raging throughout North America, I found chapter six to be the most helpful. It was here that the authors offered some very pointed critiques of the Christian Nationalism common on the right, and what they called the "Civic Totalism" that is prevalent on the left. Their observations and critiques resonated with my own experience. They warned that Christian Nationalism is bad on every level imaginable and that it leads to superficial Christianity rather than to sincere faith. Political leaders end up pretending to be religious merely to win the favor of their constituents. It also inevitably diminishes the rights of the people of other religions or no religion. On the left, they argue, is an equally insidious problem. They argue that Civic Totalism seeks to establish a hierarchy of "identities" and to divide the world up into the binary slots of "oppressor" and "oppressed." In this subculture, there quickly arises an intolerance of any dissent or any ideological diversity. These folks, under the guise of being "progressive," often find "oppression everywhere except in itself and its system," and can often become fiercely intolerant and non-affirming of anyone and everyone who disagrees with them.

In the end, Wright and Bird urge their fellow Christians to pursue the narrow way of Jesus. They provide a helpful introduction to the discussion of the church's role in a political world. This book is a well-written "primer" to help Christians understand the basic history, terms, and concepts revolving around church, kingdom, and politics. They encourage the reader to live out their faith and to seek justice and human flourishing for all. They remind the reader that their first calling is to be a faithful presence in the world and that that means forgiving their enemies and loving their neighbors. They provide two severe warnings: Christian nationalism pursues victory without mercy and acclaims God's love of power rather than the power of God's love, and that post-liberal progressives on the left need to learn that one does not burn down the village in order to save the village. In other words, any crusade to restrict freedoms of speech, association, conscience, and religion is not going to end well.

In the meantime, Hauerwas is not wrong: no matter how bad things get, at least we have baseball. By the way, as an Anabaptist, Hauerwas refuses to sing, but he does stand for the “Star-Spangled Banner.” Hauerwas is often accused of being a poor American, of being ungrateful for the many privileges and blessings that he enjoys in this society, of biting the hand that feeds him. He agrees somewhat. He says, “I do not want to bite the hand that feeds me, but I do not think that means I have to lick the same hand.” Others may do it differently – something Wright and Bird made clear in their book. But all of us can agree that our allegiance to Christ and his Kingdom is far far above all our secondary allegiances to nation, party, movement, family, club, or anything else.