

BOOK REVIEW**JESUS AND THE POWERS: Christian Political Witness in an Age of Totalitarian Terror and Dysfunctional Democracies.**

By N.T. Wright & Michael F. Bird. Zondervan, 2024. Pp. 208. Softcover, \$12.64 US.

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Wright (Anglican bishop and theologian) and Bird (Anglican vice principal of Ridley College in Australia) have written a book based on the vision of “Jesus is King.” This kingship, being both now and in the future, inevitably impacts the rival kingdoms of this world--sometimes in resistance to and sometimes as an ally of. The book’s aim is to help Christians think and act biblically as they interact between these two kingdoms; it is a sort of “primer” of political theology, using as its prism the New Testament concept of “principalities and powers,” a term which the authors understand to apply both to political powers and the spiritual powers in heavenly places.

In equipping Christians to think biblically, they stress:

- An otherworldly “waiting to go to heaven” avoiding the messiness of political involvement is no option.
- The church must step into its role as prophet “speaking truth to power,” holding rulers to account. At the same time, remaining on the margins as angry prophets simply won’t do, for “what happens when the power listens? ... [and] ask you to sit on a committee [to] contribute....? ... if you want to change the game you have to have skin in the game.”
- A theocratic Christendom model is to be avoided; but while acknowledging Christendom’s sins and faults, they equally recognize its now forgotten biblical contributions to the positives in our Western civilization today.
- Romans 13 is primary: It clarifies that political government is part of God’s creation plan that must be honored, even when imperfect. At the same time, they allow for Christian resistance to evil governments, discussing the limits and triggers to this resistance.

These are some of the book’s strong points. It has weak points too.

- Its discussion of “Christian nationalism” (mainly of the America variety) is irresponsible. Wright and Bird become uncharacteristically shrill and reckless. First, they ascribe characteristics to the movement without a single footnote or reference; naked assertions need no backup, apparently. Then, they carelessly lump all “Christian nationalists” together, never distinguishing between the different streams. Sloppily, they mischaracterize Lance Wallnau’s reference to Trump as the “new Cyrus” as the “christianisation of kingship,” when the entire point is actually the opposite!—that God uses ungodly/non-Christian figures in his providence. Lastly, Wright and Bird actually resort to a usual alarmist bogeyman of the Christian Right, hauling in the End Times’ Antichrist as a worrisome possibility in this pro-Trump movement.
- It seems that Wright’s conviction that voting against Trump is a “no brainer” (2016) has led him to abandon his usual academic rigor when it comes to Christian nationalism. Brain work not necessary.
- There is something humorous in Wright’s heavily denouncing Christian nationalists’ “violation” of America’s First Amendment prohibiting the establishment of religion, while breezily dismissing as theologically un-worrisome his own church’s status as the officially established Church of England of which the secular monarch is actually the head (“Supreme Governor”). Perhaps a wee bit of culture capture is at work here.
- Wright and Bird are weak on the conceptual foundations for religious freedom when they look mainly to expedience and pragmatism, ignoring the rich literature rooting religious freedom in biblical values developed by the medieval church and onwards (see Lord Acton, Peter Garnsey, Larry Siedentop, Quentin Skinner, Brian Tierney, Nicholas Wolterstorff et al.). Arguments from mere expedience buckle under stress.

Wright and Bird are two heavy hitters, but if you will permit me this baseball analogy, on some of their at-bats they have hit triples, while on others have struck out.
