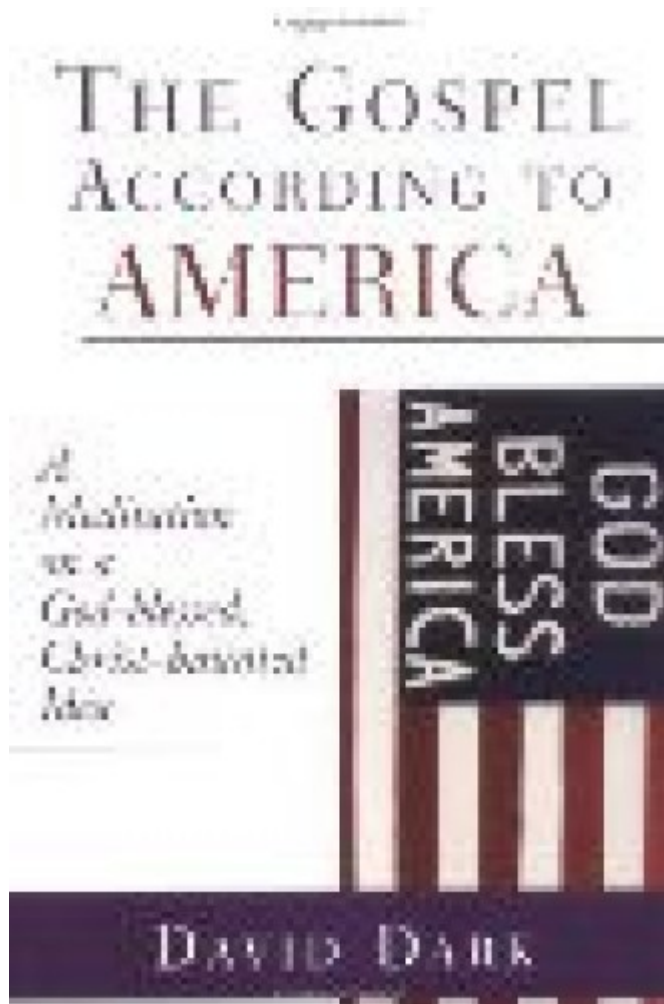


American heresies

By [Lauren F. Winner](#) in the [August 23, 2005](#) issue

In Review



The Gospel According to America: A Meditation on a God-Blessed, Christ-Haunted Idea

David Dark

Westminster John Knox

It is not a new question, but it is one that presses in on us with ever greater urgency: what does it mean to be Christian and American? How best can Christians bear the cross and proclaim the kingdom in a country that's on constant alert for terrorist attacks? For that matter, how does a Christian bear the cross in a country where many people describe the last presidential election as the triumph of Christian values? David Dark, a teacher at Nashville's Christ Presbyterian Academy, has engagingly and invaluable offered some answers to these questions.

It's not just 9/11 or the war in Iraq that invites this inquiry, says Dark. "In an age of totalitarian consumerism—with news networks vying for higher ratings with whatever viewers can be taught to settle for in the way of incantations and imagery and personalities presenting themselves as independent thinkers to an audience increasingly incapable of associating cause with effect—knowing how to feel, how to think historically, and how to exist within a community becomes an urgent and powerfully demanding task for the church." Dark does not labor under the illusion that church folks have never addressed any of the questions about Caesar, God, the church and America before. But he is convinced that, with a few exceptions (among them Daniel Berrigan and Will Campbell), we're botching the answers.

The Gospel According to America is the book philosopher Jeffrey Stout might write if he were a Christian. Dark offers a "celebration of uniquely American manifestations of . . . Christian moral insight *and* an examination of American culture in light of the tradition." To that end, he investigates a wonderful pastiche of American cultural artifacts, from the highbrow to the popular, from the thrummings of Bob Dylan and REM to the novels of Kurt Vonnegut and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

From these diverse sources Dark discerns the heresies to which America is prone. Let the facts be candidly submitted to the world: We have drained important words of their heft. We drug ourselves with media that teach us to think and feel in sound bites. We form communities only with people who think like us. We embrace a wholly privatized faith. We have indulged in the "paganistic, them-and-us formulations of most wars on terror."

Our besetting sin, says Dark, is our tendency to overidentify the U.S. with Jesus—an overidentification that began when John Winthrop mistook the Massachusetts Bay Colony for the city on a hill described in Matthew's Gospel. "One would think that the enormous, mostly agreed-on historical missteps in American history and church

history would have us speaking with a bit more modesty or with some measure of apprehension concerning our karmic account,” suggests Dark. Well, one would think so, but one would be wrong.

Dark allows that at this moment—when America is both Babylon and anti-Babylon, when we are terrorized and feel besieged yet are on the march around the globe and are perceived by many other countries as a latter-day Rome—it can seem downright dangerous to point out that God’s will is not identical with U.S. prerogative. And yet testing the spirits is far from unpatriotic or irreligious.

Indeed, we can test the spirits for the most patriotic of reasons—because we suspect, for example, that Lincoln was on to something when he identified America’s democratic experiment and commitment to freedom as the last, best hope and because we see that last-best-hope-ness being thwarted and undermined. To put it in sci-fi terms, the society that says, “It don’t get no better than this,” is the society in which the pods have won.

We can disentangle George W. Bush’s will from God’s will because we know that America is not, in fact, that city on a hill; because we know that democracy is not the last, best hope in an eschatological sense, but only in an earthly political sense. Put differently, the gospel demythologizes any story that presumes to contain it. I am frequently critical of the ways that certain Republicans in Washington confuse their imperialistic jingoism with the gospel, and I am gleeful that Dark gives me the tools to critique this confusion. I am less gleeful that Dark’s account also calls me to criticize my own tendency to identify nationalized health care with the gospel. The gospel doesn’t demythologize only the right-wingers’ stories.

Dark does more than simply identify our peculiarly American heresies. He also teases out some “correctives to these heresies.”

Scripture, of course, is the seedbed of the correctives. Dark notes that reading the Bible can help us to go “beyond the rhetoric that fills our minds concerning necessity, duty, goodness, and glory.” Unfortunately, Americans are so immersed in “the language of biblical imagery that distinguishing between the sayings of Benjamin Franklin and the wisdom of the book of Proverbs is sometimes a difficult task.”

That’s a generous interpretation of the problem. There are other possible interpretations: that we are not too steeped in scripture, but in fact wholly biblically

illiterate; that we are so culturally illiterate that most of us recognize neither Franklin nor Solomon. (Quick, who said it? “Little strokes fell great oaks.”) Too often we read the Bible and assume that it “affirm[s] all we hold as good, true, and glorious instead of letting the Word exorcise our elaborately conceived delusions.” We have heard the words of scripture turned into cant, topos and advertising copy so often that we no longer notice them. Or, less innocently, we have begun to think that we, not the Bible, are the judge of the judges.

Another corrective is neighborliness. True neighborliness, says Dark, forbids the glib political jibes to which so many of us are inclined in this politically tense, hysterically divisive time.

He illustrates neighborliness by way of a scene at his local Waffle House. There, a motley crew makes conversation, “sitting and talking over food and drink in a boisterous public place. What could be more exciting or egalitarian? No appeal to the court of fact has more resonance than another, everybody has to let everybody else finish speaking, and nobody’s allowed to talk too terribly loud, because people are trying to eat in peace. You’re welcome to bring the Bible or the president into it, but if you don’t keep your ego at a reasonable volume, you can take your conversation elsewhere. . . . Those who make an appeal to religion had better be ready to explain themselves humbly and carefully. Good fellowship requires good-natured self-deprecation in all our testimonials.”

What are the fruits of this “Waffle House Conversationalism”? Insofar as “they’ll see each other again the next day, the regulars might find it hard to assert that the token liberal among them doesn’t believe in family values or that the resident conservative hates poor people.”

It is not more civility that we need, though civility is a fine thing, but more particular knowledge of one another. More—dare we say it?—love.