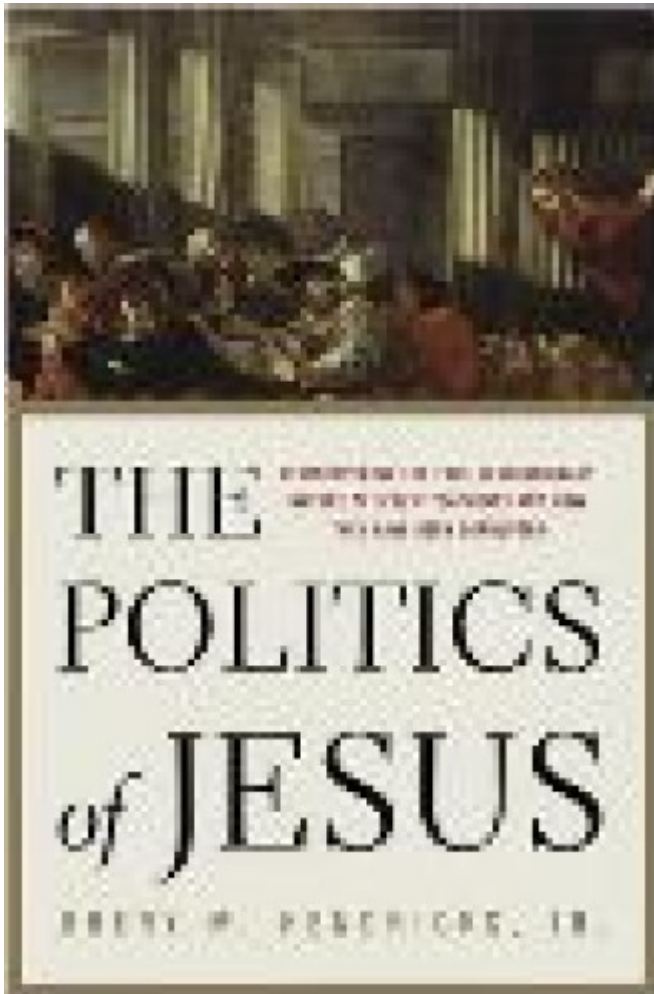


The Politics of Jesus

reviewed by [Eugene H. Winkler](#) in the [January 23, 2007](#) issue

In Review



The Politics of Jesus: Rediscovering the True Revolutionary Nature of Jesus' Teachings and How They Have Been Corrupted

Obery M. Hendricks Jr.
Doubleday

Like many of us, Obery Hendricks Jr. can confess that he “was raised on the bland Jesus of Sunday School and of my mother’s gentle retellings, the meek, mild Jesus who told us, in a nice, passive, sentimental way, to love our enemies, and who assured us that we need not worry about our troubles, just bring them to him.” But Hendricks writes from the same poetic and prophetic stance as Isaiah, Amos, Micah, Jeremiah and the other Hebrew prophets.

This “gentle, serene, nonthreatening Jesus” whose primary concern is getting believers into heaven has infected mainline Protestant pulpits for generations. Black Christians accept such a portrayal too. Hendricks declares that they “can be some of the most conservative people in America. My parents certainly were. . . . They knew only a long-suffering Jesus” who “had little thought of matters like social injustice, racial and gender inequities, or the systematic oppression of the poor.”

Hendricks has turned 180 degrees away from that kind of Jesus. He speaks with authority as he traces the courageous proclamations of the God of the Exodus. The primary purpose of biblical prophecy is to effect social and political changes in a society. Prophets never uncritically support the status quo. The “forth-teller” (a prophet’s job is not to foretell but to speak forthrightly) is commissioned to function as God’s spokesperson, to oppose injustice and to articulate the events, including punishments, that are destined to occur in an unrighteous society.

In our time, when not only the language but the reference points of the Christian faith have been appropriated by and have come to connote right-wing visions of the world, Hendricks reminds us that “*there has never been a conservative prophet*. Prophets have never been called to conserve social orders that have stratified inequities of power and privilege and wealth: prophets have always been called to change them so all can have access to the fullest fruits of life.”

Jesus of Nazareth was born into and spoke from that political tradition. A revolutionary, strategist and tactician as well as the Messiah, in his preaching, teaching and serving our Lord was not just a “religious” person. In turning over the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple, for example, Jesus was not committing a purely religious act, for the simple reason that the Temple was not a purely religious institution. It was the center of Israel’s political power, and more than that, it was its central bank and treasury. It was fundamentally an economic institution. Thus, when Jesus attacked those who changed money and sold goods, he was

committing an overt political act.

But when was the last time you heard a sermon that dealt with the political aspect of one of the central acts of Jesus' ministry? The nonpolitical Jesus presented by mainstream Christianity ultimately serves the very forces he opposed by foisting upon oppressed people a model of Jesus that is tragically devoid of the power of his social witness. Preaching a nonpolitical Jesus "constitutes an un-Christian abdication of responsibility to wage struggle against the demonic structures of oppression that militate against the justice of God."

Hendricks examines the faith and works of two recent "Christian" U.S. presidents, Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, in marvelous detail, and it is worth the price of the book to read his history and examination of conservatism and liberalism. He makes a clear distinction between the moral and political aspects of each, then concludes by recommending "neither liberalism nor conservatism but something more."

You are not likely to be comfortable while reading this challenging book, which questions easy faith as well as nimble political slogans. It destroys any image of a Jesus meek and mild, and if taken seriously it will help to move mainline Protestantism in not only a new political direction but a new liturgical one as well.