

Why I Wrote *The Great Awakening*

My book *God's Politics* called on people to take back their faith, after it had been "hijacked" by the Religious Right. Millions of Christians have done just that, and now the question is what are we going to do with our faith, now that we have it back? My new book, *The Great Awakening: Reviving Faith and Politics in a Post-Religious Right America*, addresses that new question.

My good friend E.J. Dionne, a *Washington Post* syndicated columnist, has read the new book and describes how it is different than the last one. "*The Great Awakening* is the perfect successor to *God's Politics*," Dionne says. "If the earlier book helped open our eyes to what had gone wrong, *The Great Awakening* ... provides an historical and theological foundation for a transformative public religion."

When I am asked what has changed since *God's Politics*, I reply, "Everything." The subtitle of *God's Politics* was "Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It." Well, the hard Right continues to get it wrong, but evangelicals are leaving the Religious Right in droves. Meanwhile the Left is starting to get the idea that politics should be about values and that religion has much to contribute to progressive politics.

TWO THINGS IN particular have changed. First, we now see the "leveling of the praying field" as many Democrats are rediscovering their own religious roots, with many coming out of the closet as people of faith. And their candidates are actively reaching out to the faith community. In recent years perceived as the "secular party," hostile to religion and values, Democrats are becoming a much more faith-friendly party—that's a real sea change.

Second, and more important, the agenda of the faith community (especially the evangelical community) is changing dramatically, to include issues such as poverty and pandemic diseases, environmental care and climate change, trafficking and human rights, genocide, war and peace.

That change could significantly impact politics in the 2008 election. *The Great Awakening* explores the new broad-

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er and deeper faith agenda and shows how a new spiritual "revival" could spark real social and political change.

Bill Hybels, senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, says that many evangelicals are ready for just such a "justice revival." He says, "We are interested in the poor, in racial reconciliation, in global poverty and AIDS, in the plight of women in the developing world."

And Rich Nathan, senior pastor of the Vineyard Church of Columbus, Ohio, says that "there is a spiritual awakening across America ... on behalf of the poor and the most marginalized."

Adam Hamilton, pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, wants to "fan the flames of the 21st century revival within American Christianity. This revival is a reclaiming of the fullness of the gospel—a gospel that invites people into relationship with God through Jesus Christ, transforms them from the inside out, and then calls them to pursue justice, to practice radical compassion, and to both pray and work for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven."

The new book traces the history of "great awakenings" of the past, in U.S. and world history, and then points to what is occurring now. I wrote the book because I believe it's "movement time" again.

U2's Bono, in one of the book's endorsements, says, "I had always been a skeptic of the church of personal peace and prosperity ... of righteous people standing in a holy huddle while the world rages outside the stained glass. But I've learned that there are many people of the cloth who are also in the world—and from debt cancellation to the fight against AIDS and for human rights they are on the march."

THE GREAT AWAKENING speaks of two great hungers in our world today—the hunger for spirituality and the hunger for social justice. I believe that the connection between the two is one the world, and especially a new generation, is waiting

for. *The Great Awakening* makes that vital connection and shows how spiritual renewal will likely be a necessary part of social change, and how perhaps only genuine spiritual revival can spark social and political transformation.

As a longtime social activist, I am now convinced that we will not get to social justice without spiritual revival. The book lays out seven key commitments that—if made on the personal, communal, and public policy level—could provide the "tipping point" on many of the key moral issues that we confront today.

I am not just saying that another Great Awakening may be coming. I'm convinced that it has already begun, and the book begins to tell its stories. As I've often said, this could be a revival that calls us to find

common ground by moving to higher ground. It could transcend traditional divisions and bring people together across the theological and political spectrum on the major moral issues of our time. It asserts that religion should not be a wedge to divide us, but a bridge to bring us together.

As a teenager, I went to the black churches of Detroit after being kicked out of my white evangelical church. It was in the black churches that I first encountered the explosive combination of spiritual power and social change, and I have adopted that vision as my own.

In the months of working on this book my writing, praying, and vocational discernment got nicely tangled together. So I didn't just finish a book; I also got a clearer sense than ever before of what the next steps might be and what I am supposed to be doing. We decided to organize "Justice Revivals" in cities across the country, beginning later this year. I've been meeting with a wide variety of pastors and leaders to prepare for these three-day gatherings of preaching, praise, and the call to do justice.

It's the vision of the book, and a vision we are beginning to put into practice—a Justice Revival may be coming to a city near you. ■

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