

Evangelical Christianity Has Been Hijacked: An Interview with Tony Campolo

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It's a common perception that evangelical Christians are conservative on issues like gay marriage, Islam, and women's roles. Is this the case?

Well, there's a difference between evangelical and being a part of the Religious Right. A significant proportion of the evangelical community is part of the Religious Right. My purpose in writing the book was to communicate loud and clear that I felt that evangelical Christianity had been hijacked.

When did it become anti-feminist? When did evangelical Christianity become anti-gay? When did it become supportive of capital punishment? Pro-war? When did it become so negative towards other religious groups?

There are a group of evangelicals who would say, "Wait a minute. We're evangelicals but we want to respect Islam. We don't want to call its prophet evil. We don't want to call the religion evil. We believe that we have got to learn to live in the same world with our Islamic brothers and sisters and we want to be friends. We do not want to be in some kind of a holy war."

We also raise some very serious questions about the support of policies that have been detrimental to the poor. When I read the voter guide of a group like the Christian Coalition, I find that they are allied with the National Rifle Association and are very anxious to protect the rights of people to buy even assault weapons. But they don't seem to be very supportive of concerns for the poor, concerns for trade relations, for canceling Third World debts.

In short, there's a whole group of issues that are being ignored by the Religious Right and that warrant the attention of Bible-believing Christians. Another one would be the environment.

I don't think that John Kerry is the Messiah or the Democratic Party is the answer, but I don't like the evangelical community blessing the Republican Party as some kind of God-ordained instrument for solving the world's problems. The Republican Party needs to be called into accountability even as the Democratic Party needs to be called into accountability. So it's that double-edged sword that I'm trying to wield.

Are the majority of evangelicals in America leaning conservative because they see their leaders on TV that way? Or is there a contingent out there that we don't hear about in the press that is more progressive on the issues you just talked about?

The latest statistics that I have seen on evangelicals indicate that something like 83 percent of them are going to vote for George Bush and are Republicans. And there's nothing wrong with that. It's just that Christians need to be considering other issues beside abortion and homosexuality.

These are important issues, but isn't poverty an issue? When you pass a bill of tax reform that not only gives the upper five percent most of the benefits, leaving very little behind for the rest of us, you have to ask some very serious questions. When that results in 300,000 slots for children's afterschool tutoring in poor neighborhoods being cut from the budget. When one and a half billion dollars is cut from the "No Child Left Behind" program.

In short, I think that evangelicals are so concerned with the unborn — as we should be — that we have failed to pay enough attention to the born — to those children who do live and who are being left behind by a system that has gone in favor of corporate interests and big money.

So as an evangelical, I find myself very torn, because I am a pro-life person. I understand evangelicals who say there comes a time when one issue is so overpowering that we have to vote for the candidate that espouses a pro-

life position, even if we disagree with him on a lot of other issues.

My response to that is OK, the Republican party and George Bush know that they have the evangelical community in its pocket — [but] they can't win the election without us. Given this position, shouldn't we be using our incredible position of influence to get the president and his party to address a whole host of other issues which we think are being neglected?

Like what you just said — poverty, or our foreign policy?

Exactly. And we would also point out that the evangelical community has become so pro-Israel that it is forgotten that God loves Palestinians every bit as much. And that a significant proportion of the Palestinian community is Christian. We're turning our back on our own Christian brothers and sisters in an effort to maintain a pro-Zionist mind-set that I don't think most Jewish people support. For instance, most Jewish people really support a two-state solution to the Palestinian crisis. Interestingly enough, George Bush supports a two-state solution.

He's the first president to actually say that the Palestinians should have a state of their own with their own government. However, he's received tremendous opposition from evangelicals on that very point.

Evangelicals need to take a good look at what their issues are. Are they really being faithful to Jesus? Are they being faithful to the Bible? Are they adhering to the kinds of teachings that Christ made clear?

In the book, I take issue, for instance, with the increasing tendency in the evangelical community to bar women from key leadership roles in the church. Over the last few years, the Southern Baptist Convention has taken away the right of women to be ordained to ministry. There were women that were ordained to ministry — their ordinations have been negated and women are told that this is not a place for them. They are not to be pastors.

They point to certain passages in the Book of Timothy to make their case, but tend to ignore that there are other passages in the Bible that would raise very serious questions about that position and which, in fact, would legitimate women being in leadership positions in the church. In Galatians, it says that in Christ there's neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female, all are one in Christ Jesus. In the Book of Acts, the Bible is very clear that when the Holy Spirit comes upon the Church that both men and women begin to prophesy, that preaching now belongs to both men and women. Phillip had four daughters, all of whom prophesied, which we know means preaching in biblical language. I'd like to point out that in the 16th chapter of Romans, the seventh verse, we have reference to Junia. Junia was a woman and she held the high office of apostle in the early Church. What is frightening to me is that in the New International Translation of the Scriptures, the word Junia was deliberately changed to Junius to make it male.

I'm saying, let's be faithful to the Bible. You can make your point, but there are those of us equally committed to Scripture who make a very strong case that women should be in key leadership [positions] in the Church. We don't want to communicate the idea that to believe the Bible is to necessarily be opposed to women in key roles of leadership in the life of early Christendom.

What position do you wish American evangelicals would take on homosexuality?

As an evangelical who takes the Bible very seriously, I come to the first chapter of Romans and feel there is sufficient evidence there to say that same-gender eroticism is not a Christian lifestyle. That's my position.

So you mean homosexual activity?

That's right. What I think the evangelical community has to face up to, however, is what almost every social scientist knows, and I'm one of them, and that is that people do not choose to be gay. I don't know what causes homosexuality, I have no idea. Neither does anybody else. There isn't enough evidence to support those who would say it's an inborn theory. There isn't enough evidence to support those who say it's because of socialization.

I'm upset because the general theme in the evangelical community, propagated from one end of this country to the other — especially on religious radio — is that people become gay because the male does not have a strong father image with which to identify. That puts the burden of people becoming homosexual on parents.

Most parents who have homosexual children are upset because of the suffering their children have to go through living in a homophobic world. What they don't need is for the Church to come along and to lay a guilt trip on top of them and say "And your children are homosexual because of you. If you would have been the right kind of parent, this would have never happened." That kind of thinking is common in the evangelical Church and the book attacks on solid sociological, psychological, biological grounds.

But even if evangelicals came to believe that it was not a choice, how should they approach the topic?

Well, beyond that, they seem to offer an absolute solution to the problem. They are saying, "We can change every gay. We can change every lesbian." I have heard enough of the brothers and sisters give testimonies of having changed their sexual orientation to doubt them, and I believe them. But that's rare: people who stand up and say, "I was gay but Jesus came into my life and now I'm not homosexual anymore."

But the overwhelming proportion of the gay community that love Jesus, that go to church, that are deeply committed in spiritual things, try to change and can't change. And the Church acts as though they are just stubborn and unwilling, when in reality they can't change. To propose that every gay with proper counseling and proper prayer can change their orientation is to create a mentality where parents are angry with their children, saying, "You are a gay person because you don't want to change and you're hurting your mother and your father and your family and you're embarrassing us all."

These young people cannot change. What they are begging for, and what we as Church people have a responsibility to give them, is loving affirmation as they are. That does not mean that we support same-gender eroticism.

What do you wish evangelicals might accept in terms of salvation for non-Christians?

We ought to get out of the judging business. We should leave it up to God to determine who belongs in one arena or another when it comes to eternity. What we are obligated to do is to tell people about Jesus and that's what I do. I try to do it every day of my life.

I don't know of any other way of salvation, excerpt through Jesus Christ. Now, if you were going to ask me, "Are only Christians going to get to heaven?" I can't answer that question, because I can only speak from the Christian perspective, from my own convictions and from my own experience. I do not claim to be able to read the mind of God and when evangelicals make these statements, I have some very serious concerns.

For instance, they say unless a person accepts Jesus as his personal savior or her personal savior, that person is doomed forever to live apart from God. Well, what about the many, many children every year who die in infancy or the many children who die almost in childbirth and what about people who are suffering from intellectual disabilities? Is there not some grace from God towards such people? Are evangelical brothers and sisters of mine really suggesting that these people will burn in hell forever?

And I would have to say what about all the people in the Old Testament days? They didn't have a chance to accept Jesus.

I don't know how far the grace of God does expand and I'm sure that what the 25th chapter of Matthew says is correct — that there will be a lot of surprises on Judgment Day as to who receives eternal life and who doesn't. But in the book I try to make the case that we have to stop our exclusivistic, judgmental mentality. Let us preach Christ, let us be faithful to proclaiming the Gospel, but let's leave judgment in the hands of God.

But in the book you also mention the decline of mainline churches. Some people would say that this lack of

taking a firm stand is wishy-washy, and that if evangelicalism is infected by relativism, that could be its downfall as well.

I didn't say anything that was relativistic. I am just saying that when we don't know what we're talking about, we shouldn't make absolute statements. And we don't know how God will judge in the end. We do not know the mind of God.

As for mainline churches declining, my own particular analysis is that they're declining because they have been so concerned about social justice issues that they forgot to put a major emphasis on bringing people into a close, personal, transforming relationship with God. The Pentecostal churches, the evangelical churches, attract people who are hungry to know God, not just as a theology, not just as a moral teacher, not just as a social justice advocate, but as someone who can invade them, possess them, transform them from within, strengthen them for their everyday struggles, enable them to overcome the guilt they feel for things in the past.

Mainline churches have not sufficiently nurtured that kind of Christianity. They believe in it, they articulate it, it's not where they put enough emphasis. They are not putting enough emphasis on getting people into a personal, I use the word mystical, transforming relationship with Christ.

I think that Christianity has two emphases. One is a social emphasis to impart the values of the kingdom of God in society — to relieve the sufferings of the poor, to stand up for the oppressed, to be a voice for those who have no voice. The other emphasis is to bring people into a personal, transforming relationship with Christ, where they feel the joy and the love of God in their lives. That they manifest what the fifth chapter of Galatians calls "the fruit of the Spirit." Fundamentalism has emphasized the latter, mainline churches have emphasized the former. We cannot neglect the one for the other.

In your book, you put forward a sort of ideal creed for 21st-century evangelicals. What's most crucial to understand about the additions you made to this creed?

The Apostles' Creed I think is the ultimate measure for Christians. Some say it goes back as far as 1800 years. It has been the standard statement of faith that the Church has maintained, and I wanted to say, "An evangelical is someone who believes in the doctrines of the Apostle's Creed." However, the thing that evangelicals would add to the Apostles' Creed is their view of holy scripture. They contend, and I contend, that the Bible is an infallible message from God, inspired. The writers were inspired by the Holy Spirit and [the Bible] is a message that provides an infallible guide for faith and practice.

And not only that. It's necessary to know Jesus in an intimate and personal way. That's what it means to be an evangelical. I don't think it means evangelicals are necessarily in favor of capital punishment. I'm one evangelical that is opposed to capital punishment. I do not believe being an evangelical means women should be debarred from pastoral ministry. I believe women do have a right to be in ministry. It doesn't mean evangelicals are supportive of the Republican party in all respects, because here's one evangelical who says "I think the Republican party has been the party of the rich, and has forgotten many ethnic groups and many poor people."

I am an evangelical who holds to those three positions [Creed, Bible, personal relationship with Jesus] and is a strong environmentalist. I am an evangelical who raises very specific questions about war in general, but specifically the war in Iraq. The evangelical community has been far too supportive of militarism.

You were criticized when you counseled Bill Clinton during the Lewinsky scandal. Are you still in touch with Clinton?

Yes, and very much in the way I was before: trying to be a faithful follower of Jesus. I think it's the task of Christians to speak truth to power.

The president of the United States called upon me to help him and nurture him into some kind of relationship with God. He obviously had strayed away from what he knew was right, and he called me one day and said Can you

help me?

I don't know what you're supposed to say to that: "I'm sorry, but evangelicals only pray with Republicans?"

I was appalled that evangelical leaders wrote me nasty letters and said you should have no time for this man after what he's done to this country, to Monica Lewinsky, to his family. I can't understand that mentality. We're talking about being the follower of a Jesus who would never turn his back on any person seeking help.

If you're an evangelical, you should believe that every person, no matter how low or high, is capable of being converted, of repentance.

If John Kerry or George W. Bush were to call you up and ask for your guidance on issues facing America today, what would you tell each of them in turn?

To Kerry, I think my major issue would be "Do you understand us? Do you understand evangelicals and why we're so upset about the pro-life issue? Do you understand why we believe all life is sacred?" I'd encourage him to do justice and to do righteousness.

To George Bush, I'd say "The God of scripture is a God who calls us to protect the environment. I don't think your administration has done that very well. The God of scripture calls us to be peacemakers. We follow a Jesus who said those who live by the sword will die by the sword, who called us to be agents of reconciliation."

I would point out to George Bush that the Christ that he follows says "blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" — which doesn't go along with capital punishment.

I would say different things to each candidate, but I would respond instantaneously to the invitation to speak to each of them. All the way to the White House, I would be praying, "God, keep me from chickening out. Help me to not be so overawed by the high office of these people that I fail to recognize I answer to a higher authority."