

HIGH PROFILES

Tony Campolo

The veteran US sociologist,
pastor and social activist
interviewed by ***Steve Chalke***
over the internet

22 March 2016

Radical Enough?

Tony Campolo

is a US pastor and social activist who for over 50 years has been lifting up the downtrodden and putting down the self-righteous. **Steve Chalke** called him up at Eastern University.



PHOTOGRAPHY: NINA SUBIN

Can you talk a little about your background?

I'm 100-per-cent Italian in lineage. My father came to America from Sicily; my mother actually was born here – her mother was pregnant when she crossed the Atlantic.

There's a funny story. My grandmother was in steerage, at the bottom of the ship, and between the morning sickness and sea sickness she was having a horrible time – she was throwing up and praying for deliverance. I remember her telling me: 'And, Tony, I'm looking out of this little round window and I'm praying to the Virgin Mary and suddenly there she was, holding up a light, and she was gigantic and I thanked her because she was bringing me to land. And within 10 minutes we were on shore!' I tried to tell her it was the Statue of Liberty, but she just wouldn't buy it.

My father couldn't find a job and they were totally impoverished, and a Baptist mission in South Philadelphia reached out to them, got my father a job, got them a place to stay, put their feet on solid ground and really saved them from despair and destitution. People often ask me: 'Where did you get your social consciousness? Where did you get your

commitment to the poor, before it was ever fashionable?’ My mother and father saw in the way they were treated by a group of Baptists that this is what Christianity is about. It’s not about getting a ticket to heaven, it’s about becoming an instrument of God to transform this world.

So, you’ve taken your stand on the values you were taught in childhood rather than an intellectual rejection of an over-spiritualised Christianity?

Yes. Add to that the fact that my father was deeply involved in the labour movement and that made me different from most evangelicals in the United States, because evangelicals here seem to be married to capitalism rather than to justice for the poor. My father drilled it in my head: ‘If you’re a Christian, you must be committed to doing good for the people at the bottom of the ladder.’ So, that’s where it comes from.

If your parents were alive today, what would they say to you now?

They would say: ‘You’re looked upon as something of a radical. We don’t think you’re radical enough.’

You have long been an associate pastor in a black Pentecostal church...

Well, it’s not Pentecostal, it’s Baptist, so let’s get that right. But, as a matter of fact, the Pentecostal churches I’ve gone to in the United Kingdom aren’t anywhere as lively as my Baptist church! One time I was preaching and I was coming to the end and I thought I’d done OK, and the pastor was behind me and he was yelling at me: ‘Is that all you got to say? Where’s the gospel in all of that? Is that all you got to say?’ So, I went on for another 20 minutes.

Why did you decide to join a black church?

Well, it wasn’t a conscious decision. The white church I had belonged to from my earliest days closed down [in 1954] and so I looked for the nearest Baptist church and I joined that. I didn’t see what being black had to do with it. In fact, I’m the only white guy in this church, which has about 1,500–2,000 on Sunday morning, and I am now its longest-standing member.

When people on your side of the pond talk about ‘the evangelical church’ [in the US], what they’re talking about is the *white* evangelical church. There’s a *huge* difference between white evangelicals and black evangelicals. The latter are committed to social justice, they’re committed to reaching out to those who are downtrodden. During the Sixties, when most African-American churches were standing behind Martin Luther King, white evangelicals were opposed to him. [The magazine] *Christianity Today* called him a Communist, a rabble rouser, a disturber of the Christian faith. Now, decades later, everybody pretends that they marched with him in the difficult days; but it was mainline churches and the African-American churches that were with Martin Luther King.

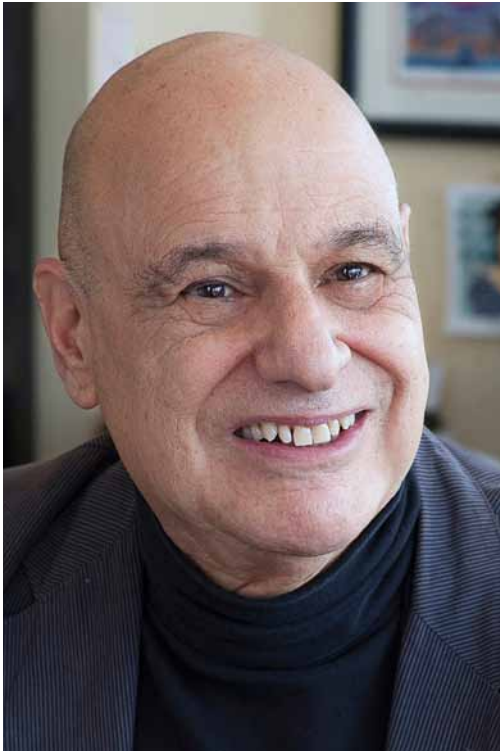
We’ve still got a long way to go. As a matter of fact, we’ve lost ground in the last decade.

Why is that?

The truth is that the right wing of the Republican Party has used two issues – gay

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marriage and abortion – to lure the evangelical community into its camp. I think in the last election white evangelicals voted 80 per cent for the Republican candidate, Mitt Romney. Compare that with [1976], when Jimmy Carter got 58 per cent of the evangelical vote! That day is gone: evangelicals no longer identify with people like him. Today, if you mention Jimmy Carter, evangelicals will say: ‘Oh, he was a terrible man!’



A photograph was recently posted online of a woman holding a placard that said: ‘Thank you, Lord Jesus, for President Trump.’ What do you make of that?

Most of [white US] evangelicalism really does not have much to do with what Jesus said any more. They work so hard to prove that the Bible’s inerrant but they’re not going to do what it tells them anyway. The truth is, we say to them, you’re called to give all your money to the poor. Have you done that? You’re called to lift up the oppressed. Are you doing that? No. You’re standing behind Donald Trump, this billionaire who – I mean, there’s nothing wrong with earning a lot of money; there is something wrong with keeping it. Trump recently said: ‘We’re going to make our country rich again, we’re going to make our country great again – and we need the “rich” in order to make the “great”.’

He has one answer to Isis: Let’s bomb them and kill every one of them! Here’s Jesus

who says, ‘Love your enemies,’¹ which I *think* means you shouldn’t kill them. But most evangelicals on this side of the pond support capital punishment, in spite of the fact that Jesus said, ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.’

So, about 10 years ago a group of us got together in Washington and said: We can’t call ourselves ‘evangelicals’ any more, because the press and the public in general identify evangelicals with being male chauvinist, anti-gay, pro-war, pro-gun, anti-environmentalism – they think that it is going to hurt capitalism. And maybe it will, but are we more committed to God’s love for creation or to American *laissez-faire* capitalism? And we went down that list and said: That’s not who we are.

So, we changed our name. We call ourselves ‘red-letter Christians’ now, referring to the fact that many of the old Bibles have the words of Jesus highlighted in red, and those words describe a new way of life.² Jesus said: ‘You are my friends if you do whatever I command you.’³ His only description of Judgement Day, in the 25th chapter of Matthew,⁴ says this: On the day of judgement, it will not be: Campolo, do you believe in the Virgin Birth? Strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree – check one. No. He’s going to ask me: Did you feed the hungry? Did you clothe the naked? Did you visit the sick? Did you help those who were in prison? Did you reach out to the alien? (Man, that’s a hot one these days!)

I mean, we love to have long arguments about what Paul means when he talks about predestination in Romans; but with Jesus there is very little to argue about. When it comes to the lifestyle he is prescribing, he’s very clear as to what he expects of his disciples.

Question: how seriously do we take the teachings of Jesus? [White US] evangelicals will say: 'Well, we know what Jesus taught, but' – here's the line, you'll love this! – 'it's not for this dispensation.' They say: 'When Jesus returns and the kingdom is established upon earth, then we will be able to live according to his teachings. We've got to be more realistic today.' I say: I'm not a realist, I'm a biblical follower of Jesus.

Do you ever worry that your gospel is too earthbound? Your critics say: Didn't Jesus emphasise the world to come –

No, he didn't!

– but you've ended up with a social gospel?

At every funeral I go to, they quote exactly the same verses – John 14.2–3: 'In my Father's house are many mansions...' – because there are so few that talk about the afterlife. Yes, there is a life beyond the grave, but what Jesus primarily talked about was: What are we going to do in *this* life? What are we going to do for the poor and the oppressed? As one prophet once said: One world at a time. Before we talk about heaven, let's get down to earth! In fact, let's deal with the reality that many Christians are so heavenly bound that they're no earthly good. We've got to get down to where Jesus was.

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I don't preach a social gospel, I preach a holistic gospel. Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God. That's transformed people in a transformed world. We need to emphasise both.

Do you ever doubt your own certainty? For many years you stood firmly on one side of the argument about homosexuality and then in 2015 you changed your position.

Well, let me ask you a very simple question: What does Jesus say about gays?

Nothing.

Nothing, yeah. That's the first thing I want to communicate. The [white US] evangelical community has made gay marriage the greatest sin that you can commit, but when Jesus went after the greatest sin, you know what it was? It was the sin of the Pharisees and the priests and the Sadducees, who kept people out of the kingdom with their rules and regulations.

Sure, but my point is that for years you sincerely believed and taught one thing and now you say the opposite with equal conviction.

Well, they can say that. Only closed-minded people never change their minds. In fact, if you read my statement you will see the words 'I could be wrong'¹⁵

I did have a conservative opinion on gay marriage, [but] it was always moderate, it was never harsh. As a sociologist, I knew that people did not choose to be gay [and so I would say:] 'That's your identity sexually and it's not going to change. You've got to figure out how you're going to live as a Christian given that reality.'

And here's what changed me. I said: 'You're going to have to remain celibate.' And I began to reflect on marriage and what it means to be married. And here's where the

Christian community has failed greatly: we never clearly defined what marriage is and should be. We always defined it in sexual terms. I think the Bible is far deeper than that.

For me, marriage is entering into a relationship with a partner who nurtured me as a Christian, who corrected and encouraged me, who prayed for me and with me. And when I realised what an enriching relationship I had in marriage, I had to ask myself: How can I deny that kind of relationship to my gay and lesbian brothers and sisters?



There's a verse in the Book of Proverbs that says: 'There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.'⁶ As a progressive Christian, when you depart from the historic teaching of the church, how are you so sure you're right?

Martin Luther said this: If you can persuade me from scripture that I am wrong, I will recant. I'm always open to correction if scripture is the basis. If you can show me in those red letters of the Bible where Jesus supports capital punishment, I'll have to give it very serious consideration; and that goes for other issues as well.

Donald Trump has said that he wants to 'make America great again'. Do you think the US ever has been great?

I think that America has always had a chequered record. Alexis de Tocqueville, the great sociologist and journalist who surveyed this country during the early 1800s, wrote at

the end of his book *Democracy in America*: 'America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.'⁷ That's a beautiful line and I've heard it repeated many, many times. I'm not sure when we were [good].

Were we great when we enslaved millions of black people who we stole out of Africa and treated them as less than human? Is that when we were great? Were we great during the Vietnam War, when we killed over three million Vietnamese people because they wanted to determine their own political destiny and it wasn't the destiny that we wanted? We believe in democracy as long as you vote for the candidates we like. As long as you vote for the *American* way of life. And we act as though the American way of life is good for everybody in the world – and it's not.

Hillary Clinton has said: 'I want to make America whole again.' What would it take to make the US whole?

Let me say, I would go along with Donald Trump. I would say, 'I want to make America great' – I just wouldn't add the word 'again'. I want to see America become great. I want to see America more and more approximate what the Bible says the kingdom of God is all about. Read the description of the kingdom in Isaiah [65:17–25]. It says this: No more will children die in infancy. Whoa! I look for a great America which, with all its resources, will be working to abolish infant mortality.

It says: Old people – and at my age I appreciate this – shall live out their lives in health

and wellbeing, so that the man that dies at 100 will be considered accursed. It goes on to say: Everyone will have a decent house to live in, everyone will have a job, nobody will die of malnutrition, 'the wolf and the lamb shall feed together.' 'Neither shall they learn war any more.'⁸

That's what I want America to be: great in biblical terms. Paul writes in the Book of Romans: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he's thirsty, give him a drink. ... Overcome evil with good.'⁹ Suppose we had a President that went to the United Nations and said: 'We've made life hell for the people of the Middle East. We meant to do good, but we created suffering and death instead. On behalf of the American people, I want to repent. And as evidence of our repentance, we are going to commit a trillion dollars to rebuild the infrastructure that we destroyed, to allow these people to live with dignity.'

That's what Jesus would require us to do if we were to take him seriously.

You were a spiritual adviser to Bill Clinton. Does it make any difference what spiritual advice a President gets?

Yes, it does. Yes, it does, for this reason: he'll never be able to say on Judgement Day, 'I never knew. Nobody ever told me.' Because the Lord will say: 'Hey, you were the guy that chose Tony Campolo!'

In fact, I was calling him to live out the Sermon on the Mount – and I have to say that, insofar as it was possible for him to with a Republican Congress shooting down every progressive idea he came up with, I think he did pretty well. He did pretty well. He could have done a lot better – if he hadn't messed up his life with that [Monica] Lewinsky thing, who knows, he might have been one of the greatest presidents we ever had, if not *the* greatest.

The British theologian Os Guinness spoke of a 'third way' that is neither left nor right.¹⁰ Is that what you are looking for?

If I'm angry with evangelicals for making Jesus into a right-wing Republican, I am also angry with those progressive evangelicals who want to make Jesus into a left-wing Democrat. On your side of the pond, he is neither a member of the Conservative Party nor a member of the Labour Party. He transcends all political ideologies and he comes with judgement on all political parties and he finds something lacking in each of them. When we go to the voting booth to vote, we should always be troubled because we can never find the ideal party, the ideal candidate. We have to, in the words of [Philippians 2:12], 'work out our salvation with fear and trembling'.

But I think we can agree, whether you're right, left or in-between, that Jesus had a priority for the poor. When he was born, Mary said: 'He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.'¹¹ That's how he entered the world – and he died on the cross not only to save us from sin but to create a new people who in *this* world would work to humanise humanity, by the love and the joy and the patience and the long-suffering that can be found in our personhood.

So, why didn't Jesus condemn the dehumanisation of slavery? Why didn't he

Suppose we had a President that went to the United Nations and said: 'On behalf of the American people, I want to repent'



condemn militarism? Why did he say, ‘Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s’?

Well, if you really render unto God what is God’s, there’s not much left over for Caesar. Agreed? If God is Lord of all, what belongs to Caesar? Serious question – it’s not being cute. Jesus was [asking] the Pharisees whether or not they believed in the Lordship of God. ‘What do you have that you think belongs to Caesar and what do you have that you think belongs to God?’ I mean, if you’re a Christian, the answer to that should be – and oh! we say this all the time, have you heard this line? ‘He is Lord of all.’ [You] sing it in Anglican churches from one end of your country to the other: ‘Crown him Lord of all!’

You know, why don’t we change the hymnbook to say ‘Crown him Lord of some...’? Why don’t we sing in the Baptist church: ‘One-tenth to Jesus I surrender, one-tenth to him I freely give’? Why not? Because Dietrich Bonhoeffer was right when he said that when Jesus calls a man or a woman, he calls that person to come and die.

OK, but what about slavery? Why didn’t he address that issue?

I think he did. He wrapped it all up in one line, in Matthew 25:40: Whatever you do to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you do to me. Isn’t that the answer? Isn’t the slave, in any society, the least of all people? Does he have to spell it out for you? Do you whip Jesus when you whip a slave? Of course you do. When you humiliate a slave, are you humiliating Jesus? Yes, you are. However you look upon a slave, that’s how you’re looking on *him*. He is in that person waiting to be loved. If you don’t give the slave love, you’re not giving *him* love. If you don’t give the slave justice, you’re not giving *him* justice. So, don’t tell me he never spoke to the issue! He spoke to the issue in a way that is unarguable-with.

‘Whatever you do to the least of these.’ That has become the mantra of our movement.

Your most famous message is the one with the punchline: ‘It’s Friday – but Sunday’s coming.’¹² Does it ever bother you that Sunday is taking an awful long time?

And Paul addresses that. It's not in the red letters but he calls upon us to wait with patience. But I have this to say. I hear my evangelical brothers and sisters say *Maranatha*, 'Come quickly, Lord!' I really don't want him to come back soon. I'm like a guy who has the President of the United States coming for a visit, or the Queen of England. Before Jesus returns, I want to straighten out the house, I want to clean up all the mess. And so I'm saying: Lord, don't hurry back! There's too much that your church has left undone that you called it to do.

So, you're telling people, 'Don't worry, it may be Friday but Sunday's on its way' -

And look at the evidence! Twenty-five years ago, 40,000 children a day died of either starvation or diseases related to malnutrition. Today, it's down to 17,000. And guess who has been largely responsible for feeding programmes, for child sponsorships, for clinics! The church of Jesus Christ. Twenty-five years ago, 80 per cent of the population of the planet was illiterate. Today, it's down to 20 per cent. Guess who has done most of the literacy training! It's been the church.

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Twenty-five years ago, one out of every six persons on earth had no access to clean drinking water. Today, it's one out of 12 – the situation has improved 100-per-cent. And who's drilled most of the wells in poor countries? It has been church groups going over. I could go on. Jimmy Carter has been a driving force behind Habitat for Humanity, which – get this! – this year completed its one-millionth house. A million houses, built by Christian people for poor people!

I see it all around me, the kingdom of God breaking loose. Sunday is coming. It's breaking loose in our midst, and those who have eyes to see ought to see!

But an unemployed, illiterate person living in a slum in Detroit hears the message that Sunday's coming but a year goes past and a decade goes past and they're *still* unemployed and they're *still* in a slum and it's *still* Friday. Don't you ever feel the message should be: 'Sunday is coming for some of us, just not all of us'?

It's coming for *all* of us. And here is the good news: we are the people through whom it is coming. Jesus has given us not the obligation, the *privilege* of participating with him in changing the world. And Philippians [1.6] says – it's not in the red letters, it's in the black letters – 'He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.' The kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our God, and he shall reign forever.¹³

And you can go to a country such as Haiti, which has been suffering for generations now, and tell everyone, 'Sunday's coming'?

It's exactly what they need to hear. They need hope. The Bible says that without God-given dreams and visions, the people perish.¹⁴

We've got to wind this up -

I enjoy preaching!

You do, and you're a great speaker - not least because you make people laugh. There

aren't many funny prophets in the Bible, are there? Amos, Jeremiah – they weren't well known for their jokes.

There's a lot of funny preachers in today's church! The only problem is, they don't realise they're funny. Søren Kierkegaard said it well: 'I went to church, the pastor opened the Bible, marked it with a satin marker and read to the congregation: "If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."¹⁵ And Kierkegaard looked around and said: 'And nobody was laughing!'

Is it not humorous to sing 'All to Jesus I surrender' in a church where you can't get people to give as much to the work of missions and feeding the poor and the needy as they would spend on a ticket to a football game? Kierkegaard said this – I love this! – when they told him the church had been used for a dance on a Saturday night: 'Using the sanctuary for a dance on Saturday night is not half as bad as using it to make a fool out of God on Sunday morning.' Whoa! Whoa! Think about the truth of that!

At the end of your life, you hope you will stand in front of Jesus and he will say, 'Well done, good and faithful servant!' What do you think he might be referring to?

I think he would say – and this is going to sound strange after all I've just said – that I led people to know him as Lord and Saviour of their life. You say: Wait a minute! Where's the social dimension? Because when people are really filled with Christ, they become agents of love and justice in this world.

© *High Profiles 2016 This interview was posted on highprofiles.info on 6 May 2016.*

1 Matthew 5:43–45

2 See www.redletterchristians.org.

3 John 15:14

4 Matthew 25:31–46

5 See bit.ly/1Wdy0lB: 'Obviously, people of good will can and do read the scriptures very differently when it comes to controversial issues, and I am painfully aware that there are ways I could be wrong about this one.'

6 Proverbs 14:12

7 However, see tws.io/1riMKc5.

8 Micah 4:3

9 Romans 12:20f

10 In his 1973 book *The Dust of Death*, Guinness wrote: 'How often in the contemporary discussion a sensitive modern man knows that he cannot accept either of the polarised alternatives offered to him. In Christianity, however, there can be a Third Way, a true middle ground which has a basis, is never compromise and is far from silent.'

11 Luke 1:52f

12 See, for example, bit.ly/1OgXqOV.

13 See Revelation 11.15.

14 Proverbs 29:18

15 Matthew 16:24

Biography

Tony Campolo was born in 1935 and educated at West Philadelphia High School. He studied history at Eastern Baptist College (now Eastern University) in St Davids, Pennsylvania.

In 1955, he became assistant to the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Mount Holly, New Jersey. The following year, he enrolled at Eastern Baptist (now Palmer) Theological Seminary, where he ultimately gained a master's degree in theology in 1961.

He served as pastor of Chesterfield Baptist and Jacobstown Baptist Church in New Jersey from 1957 to '61 and then of Upper Merion Baptist Church in Pennsylvania until 1965. For many years, he has been an associate pastor of Mount Carmel Baptist Church in West Philadelphia.

In 1964, he began teaching sociology at Eastern. The following year, he completed a PhD in sociology at Temple University and took up a post as professor of sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, a position he was to hold for 10 years. He was also professor of sociology and director of the urban studies programme at Eastern College.

In 1971, he founded the Evangelical Association for the Promotion of Education, which was active in countries such as Haiti and Zimbabwe. He finally wound it up in 2014.

Eastern University established the Campolo College of Graduate and Professional Studies in 1988. In 2000, it named him Professor Emeritus of Sociology.

In 1995, he started meeting President Bill Clinton every month to discuss the state of the country's inner cities. Three years later, he became one of his spiritual advisers.

He co-founded the Red-Letter Christians movement in 2006 with Jim Wallis, Brian McLaren, Shane Claiborne and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove. He has co-hosted the talk show *Red Letter Christians* with Claiborne on JC-TV since 2011.

He is the author of more than 35 books, including *The Success Fantasy* (1980), *A Reasonable Faith* (1983), *You Can Make a Difference* and *It's Friday, But Sunday's Comin'* (both 1984), *Partly Right: Christianity responds to its critics* (1985), *Who Switched the Price Tags?* (1987), *Twenty Hot Potatoes Christians are Afraid to Touch* (1988), *Growing Up in America* (1989), *Wake Up America!* (1991), *Sociology through the Eyes of Faith*, *How to Rescue the Earth without Worshipping Nature*, *Everything You've Heard is Wrong* and *The Kingdom of God is a Party* (all 1992), *Stand Up and Be Counted* (1993), *Carpe Diem* (1994), *Following Jesus without Embarrassing God* (1997), *Revolution and Renewal* (2000), *Adventures in Missing the Point*, written with Brian McLaren (2003), *Letters to a Young Evangelical* (2006), *The God of Intimacy and Action*, written with Mary Albert Darling (2007, 2013), *Red Letter Christians: A citizen's guide to faith and politics* (2008) and *Red Letter Revolution*, written with Shane Claiborne (2012).

He has been a frequent speaker at Christian conferences and has appeared on TV shows such as *The Colbert Report*, *The Charlie Rose Show*, *Larry King Live* and *Crossfire*.

He has been married since 1958 and has two children and four grandchildren.

Up-to-date as at 1 May 2016