

# ERRANT Evangelical?

## A Presidential Counselor in the Line of Fire

By Tony Campolo

**I**f anyone still had doubts that religion and politics, God and Caesar, were at the center of the national debate, President Clinton's very public decision to seek pastoral counseling in the wake of the recent scandal must have stilled them. In seeking redemption in public, the president broadened a national argument that had been about sexual behavior and allegations of perjury and obstruction of justice to the vexing question of how a political leader uses—or in the eyes of critics, misuses—religion.

Alan Wolfe's essay here reflects on this debate in a review of *Judgment Day at the White House*, a volume that grew out of the "Declaration concerning Religion, Ethics, and the Crisis in the Clinton Presidency." The declaration, signed by theologians and religious leaders, argued that "serious misunderstandings of repentance and forgiveness are being exploited for political advantage."

At the heart of this controversy is the Rev. Tony Campolo, a well-known evangelical leader selected by the president as one of his spiritual counselors. To shed light on this unusual intersection of the public and the private, we asked the Rev. Campolo to reflect on his experience.





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## DOES GOD TAKE SIDES?



**I**n Christendom some of the most angry criticism of President Clinton comes from the Evangelical community. Because I am part of that community, I have had some intense negative responses to my becoming one of his spiritual advisers.

Almost immediately after the news broke about my involvement with the president, David Black, the president of Eastern College, where I teach, began getting phone calls from irate alumni and financial supporters of the college. Even some of my faculty colleagues joined the angry chorus, claiming that my association with President Clinton would corrupt the good name of the college. In the face of these reactions, I offered Dr. Black my resignation, which he rejected.

In the days and weeks that followed, Dr. Black stood behind my decision to counsel President Clinton. It remains to be seen whether the college will suffer further damage. My fear is that my continued presence on the faculty will lead some pastors to discourage their young congregants from considering Eastern as a place to study.

Several regular contributors to EAPE/Kingdomworks, an evangelical missionary organization with which I am also associated (in an unpaid position), wrote to let me know that they would be discontinuing their giving to our ministries to “at risk” children and teenagers in urban America, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. I worry that a host of other contributors may stop giving without taking the time to write to me about their decision. Yet another concern is that my involvement with the president will cut off my opportunities to speak at evangelical college chapel services, a primary source of new recruits for our EAPE/Kingdomworks ministries. These days, it is a rare night that I do not wake and pace the floor, praying that our ministries will not suffer because of what I have decided to do.

**Dealing with the Press.** Each year in Washington representatives of America’s various religious traditions meet with the president for a prayer breakfast to discuss ways in which the government and religious institutions can work together for the public good. Joan

Brown Campbell, the executive director of the National Council of Churches, and several others suggested that the gathering last year, on September 11, would be a good forum for the president to confess his sins in the Monica Lewinsky affair and to ask for forgiveness. President Clinton did just that, calling what he had done “sin.” As a basis for his remarks, the president used Psalm 51, written by King David after his adultery, pleading that God “cleanse” him and help purify his heart. President Clinton told the American people that he also would be asking God to “cleanse” him and make him into a “new” person. What he had to say, in words reflecting the religiosity of his Southern Baptist background, moved him well beyond referring to what he had done as “inappropriate behavior.” The president also said that he had chosen a small group of clergymen to meet with him regularly and help him on his path of repentance. He deliberately did not announce who they were.

The prayer breakfast proved a major media event. Following the Friday morning breakfast there was widespread speculation as to whom the president had chosen for this pastoral responsibility. From the beginning, Gordon MacDonald, pastor of Grace Chapel in Lexington, Massachusetts, and one of the other clergymen chosen to be part of the president’s accountability group, and I decided to say nothing to the press and keep as low a public profile as possible. The third member of the group, J. Philip Wogaman, pastor of the Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C., where the president usually attends Sunday worship, made a similar decision.

On Saturday evening Gordon MacDonald phoned and told me that the *Boston Globe* was planning to send a reporter to his Sunday morning worship service and that the local TV stations would also be sending camera crews. We both realized that there would be no escape from public notoriety. We decided to issue brief press releases acknowledging that we were the clergy whom the president had chosen and stating that, given our pastoral obligations, we would be giving no interviews.

As I soon discovered, if you do not tell the press who you are, they come up with definitions of their own. On the following Tuesday morning, the *New York Times* ran a front-page story headlined “Clinton Selects Clerics to Give Him Guidance,” in which journalist Laurie Goodstein defined me as “a liberal Baptist, who advocates that

Christians accept homosexuality.” Her story was quickly picked up by the Associated Press and sent around the world. By the next day, most newspapers were repeating her description of me verbatim.

The label “liberal” is anathema in evangelical Christian circles, as I was soon to be reminded. By Wednesday afternoon, my office was flooded with e-mail, faxes, and phone calls from “concerned evangelicals” alarmed over my new designation. Because many who contacted my office were part of the vital financial base of our various ministries, my first concern was to keep the EAPE/Kingdomworks ministries out of serious trouble.

I called Ms. Goodstein at the *New York Times* to learn the source of her description of me. She recalled that she had met me once and remembered my opposition to efforts by the Religious Right to deny homosexuals some basic civil rights. She recalled my opposition to the welfare reform bill. She knew that I was part of the Call to Renewal, a broad-based Christian alternative to the politics of the Christian Coalition.

I explained that my refusal to embrace the political stance of the Christian Coalition on every issue did not mean that I was a *liberal* Baptist. I pointed out that many theologically conservative Baptists define themselves—as I do—as politically moderate. And I made clear that despite my concern for the civil rights of homosexuals, homosexual marriage is contrary to my understanding of Scripture.

Two days later the *Times* printed a correction. But a brief comment on page two could not undo what had been spread around the world on page one. Even people whom I know and consider brothers in Christ began repeating the *Times* report.

One such was Cal Thomas, a columnist for the *Los Angeles Times* and a spokesperson for the Religious Right, who is viewed by evangelists as the voice of truth in the distorting secular media. When he too called me “a liberal Baptist” who recently “has been urging conservative Christians to accept homosexuality,” I phoned to contest the labels. He refused to explain why he had called me a liberal Baptist and said that he believed me to be “too close to the line” that separates those who oppose gay and lesbian marriages and those who affirm them. Some evangelical pastors used Thomas’s article as all the evidence they needed to lambaste me from their pulpits. Christian talk shows on religious radio stations also used his column to condemn me.

**My involvement in what one newscaster called “the most difficult pastoral responsibility in the world” has changed my life forever.**

Another was Pat Robertson, who had interviewed me on the 700 Club a few years earlier and at whose university I had been a chapel speaker. On the evening of September 15, a news report on his 700 Club repeated the comments made about me in the *New York Times*, further damaging my standing among evangelicals.

Wherever I went as a speaker on the evangelical circuit during the weeks that followed, even in Northern Ireland and Brazil, I had to explain myself to pastors and congregations. Indeed, I have come to expect that I will have to justify to evangelical audiences my claim that I am still one of them. Three large evangelical gatherings have canceled my speaking engagements. I was allowed to speak at the 1998 convention of the Southern Baptists of Tennessee and at an American Baptist gathering in West Virginia, though angry pastors protested my place on both programs.

Although more moderate groups, such as mainline denominations, are now inviting me to address their gatherings, it remains to be seen how my involuntary “repositioning” as a speaker will affect the ministries that my evangelical speaking tours helped support.

**A Mistake.** When I learned that *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines would be featuring major stories on the president’s clerical advisers, I contacted reporters there to try to curtail further damage from misinformation. Kenneth Woodward’s *Newsweek* article dealt with our theology, trying to understand how our beliefs about grace and forgiveness might influence the way in which we related to the president. The *Time* article was less kind, describing me—ironically, it seemed to me—as being “media savvy” and suggesting that I was trying to further my career as a “motivational speaker.”

Still trying to find a way to reassure the people across the country who know me that I was not what *Time* and the *New York Times* had made me out to be, I agreed to do an interview with Peggy Wehmeyer to be shown on Peter Jennings’s news show and on *20/20*. I had known Ms. Wehmeyer, an evangelical Christian who had done several television stories on our missionary work, for more than five years. When Gordon MacDonald indicated that he too was favorably disposed to an interview with her, I readily consented. We had turned down invitations from dozens of talk shows and news shows, but I thought that doing just this one spot would enable me to correct misconceptions and then end my dealings with the media.

In the interview we did our best not to say anything to suggest what happens during our sessions with the president, but I now think that the interview chipped away at our efforts to maintain perfect pastoral confidentiality. Certainly, the airing of the interview brought some

accusatory letters. In the weeks that followed, everywhere I went to preach or lecture, reporters in the audience would seize on what I said from the pulpit to try to apply it to my conversations with the president. I have finally learned, I think, how to tailor my speaking accordingly.

**Using Religion.** Meanwhile, the Internet too had become my enemy. At least 3,000 articles, most derogatory and many declaring me to be an enemy of true Christianity, were readily available to anyone with a computer. Friends also informed me that the Internet had been used by a large group of academic theologians to issue a declaration condemning the president for the way he had repented of his sins and contending that his calling on pastors as an accountability group was cheapening the nature of true repentance. Suggesting that the president was merely trying to provide some religious buttressing to a weakened presidency, they proposed that the only evidence of true repentance would be his resignation from office.

Though all the signers of the declaration appeared not to trust the president’s three clerical advisers to follow through with their understanding of the biblical requirement in Matthew 18 that if Christians are concerned that brothers or sisters are in error, they should go to them directly and confront them personally. Still, I am open to the possibility that the signers’ declaration may well contain some important warnings. Religion *can* be used for political purposes. There *is* a tendency in our society to cheapen the repentance process to nothing more than a contrite declaration of “I’m sorry.”

**Prayers for the President.** More than four months have passed since the president asked me to serve him as a spiritual adviser. Still the letters come, many condemning, others affirming, encouraging, and grateful that I am available to the president during this time of national crisis. Jerry Falwell, in a phone conversation, let me know that he was praying for us daily in the hope that God’s will for the president would be done through us. As I go across the country, people regularly let me know their opinions on what I am doing, and, again, many assure me that they are praying for my ministry to the president.

One thing is certain. My involvement in what one newscaster called “the most difficult pastoral responsibility in the world” has changed my life forever. Once referred to by some, flatteringly, as “prophetic,” now I am known as a spiritual adviser to the president. To many my new mission appears to compromise my strong evangelical stance. The criticism pushes me harder to do what has been given me to do with all zeal and faithfulness. ■