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CHARLOTTE, N.C. (ABP)—Human governments are the Babylons referred to in the Book of Revelation, and America's Babylon is the temptation for religious charities to accept government money, Baptist sociologist Tony Campolo said in a May 27 speech.

Campolo, a former professor at the American Baptist-related Eastern University in suburban Philadelphia, spoke at the annual luncheon of the Religious Liberty Council of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs. The luncheon took place during the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's general assembly in Charlotte, N.C.

“Whenever the church finds itself in a particular political-economic system, then of course that system must be referred to as Babylon,” Campolo said

in reference to the allegory of the “whore of Babylon” in Revelation 17.

“The system is out to seduce the church, and that is exactly what is going on right now with 'faith-based initiatives,'" Campolo continued. “It has become the most dangerous seduction that I've ever seen come down the pike.”

Campolo referred to President Bush's bid to place thoroughly religious groups—such as churches and mosques—on an equal footing with secular groups in receiving government grants for performing social services. Many religious leaders have endorsed the idea as a more effective way of providing social services that work, while many others have viewed it as a violation of the Constitution's ban on government support for religious groups.

Churches and religious charities that think it's a good idea to take government money are looking to the wrong place for their funding, Campolo said. “The people of God have the resources to do what needs to be done, and we don't need to be looking to the government.”

The risk is greater to the church's freedom than it was to the state's integrity, he added. “We will lose our prophetic edge” if churches take government money. “Separation of church and state is crucial if the church is going to influence the government.”

But churches can't offer a meaningful critique of government if they are in debt to it, he continued. “Whoever pays the fiddler calls the tune.”

Campolo, a sociologist by training and a popular Christian speaker on social-justice issues, also used the opportunity to opine on several areas of public policy.

Discussing new restrictions on Americans' freedom, Campolo questioned why more Christians in the United States aren't speaking up for Muslims.

“Following Sept. 11, the religious freedom of Muslims is being seriously threatened” in the United States, he said.

Campolo condemned new laws and Justice Department policies that make it possible for government police—such as FBI agents—to spy on religious services and groups without probable cause.

“They're sending spies into mosques, and we're not saying a word,” he said. Campolo pointed out that, during the Soviet era, American evangelicals often expressed outrage over reports of KGB agents spying on churches and keeping intelligence files on Christian leaders, sometimes imprisoning them.

“If it was outrageous to send spies into churches, then it is also outrageous to send spies into mosques,” he declared.

At the same time, he called on the U.S. government to pay particular concern to the peril a Shiite Muslim theocracy in newly liberated Iraq would create for that country's religious minorities—including hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Christians.

Campolo particularly took to task American Christian leaders who have made incendiary public statements about Islam in recent years.

“I can tolerate difference of opinion, except when they're stupid,” Campolo said. “Do these people understand how this plays out for our Christian missionaries in Muslim countries?”

A better approach, he suggested, would be for American Christians to persuade leaders in Islamic countries of the value of religious freedom.

“We've got to resist that seduction of Babylon,” he said, “but we've also got to ensure that the New Jerusalem has the right to exist in every Babylon around the world.

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