

cbf_Campolo urges: 'Fight the good fight' for justice_71403

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Campolo urges: 'Fight the good fight' for justice

By Marv Knox

Editor

CHARLOTTE, N.C.—Christians must “fight the good fight” for justice, speaker and author Tony Campolo told participants at the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's general assembly.

“The Bible speaks to every social issue,” Campolo insisted, and he touched on many of them in an hour-long sermon.

The centerpiece of his message included a challenge to champion the causes of minorities and the oppressed. Campolo is founder and president of the Evangelical Association for the Promotion of Education and a retired sociology professor at Eastern University, an American Baptist school in suburban Philadelphia.

Tony Campolo left no stone unturned in a wide-ranging and challenging message that highlighted the opening night session of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's 2003 General Assembly in Charlotte. (Mark Sandlin photo)

"We shouldn't be fighting against each other," he told supporters of the Fellowship, who split from the Southern Baptist Convention over fundamentalism 12 years ago. Baptists should do what every basketball player is coached to do when elbowed in a game, he said: "Walk away."

However, some fights are worth fighting, he added, focusing on a range of justice issues, including:

✘ Racism. "I'm bothered that this group is so white," he said, scanning the Fellowship audience, imploring the organization to involve more African-Americans and Hispanics.

A byproduct of racial inclusion will be joy, he promised.

"You gotta get more joy," he urged. "Allow the Holy Spirit to come in and fill you. ... I want a Fellowship where there's laughter, joy and we're filled with God's spirit."

✘ Sexism. "We don't want women preachers. ... That's sinful," he said, apparently aiming a broadside at the SBC, whose doctrinal statement says a church should not call a woman to be its pastor.

The Apostle Paul says, "Neglect not the gift of God's Spirit," Campolo noted, claiming that to deny a gifted woman the opportunity to preach or lead a church as pastor runs counter to the will of the Holy Spirit.

"There's something crazy" about allowing women to go as missionaries and preach overseas but refusing to allow their sisters to serve as pastors in the United States, he said.

The aversion against women pastors even caused the conservative translators of the New International Version of the Bible to change Scripture to suit their purposes, he alleged. The NIV translation of Romans 16:7 say a man named Junius was "outstanding among the apostles," an office higher than pastor, when the other major translations note the person's name was Junia, a woman.

"When you start changing the Bible to suit your theology, you better look at yourself," Campolo warned.

✘ Homosexuality. "I'm not asking you to be conservative or liberal. I'm asking you to be loving," he said of Christians' response to gays and

lesbians.

Christians are divided on their response to homosexuality, he conceded, noting he and his wife do not agree. He doesn't believe homosexuals should be married, while she does.

"But I believe in justice for all people," he said. "I am asking you to show love and compassion for people who have had their teeth kicked in for far too many years."

Even Christians who are conservative about the morality of homosexual practice, as he said he is, will get attacked if they advocate basic human rights for homosexuals, he predicted. "But if we're going to be unique, ... we've got to stand up and say things nobody is saying."

✘ Anti-Semitism. "We've got to be a voice for the weak, and that means the Jews," Campolo said.

"There's no place for anti-Semitism" in the world today, he insisted, stressing Jews should have a right to a land of their own protected by secure borders.

"But as we say that, we better stand up and speak on behalf of the Palestinians," he said, noting they were "driven off their land in 1948."

"I do not legitimize Hamas and (Palestinian) terrorism any more than I legitimize the terrorism of the Israeli army," he insisted.

He also spoke of the influence of the "evangelical lobby" in the United States, pointing out that half of all U.S. foreign aid is allocated to Israel.

Given the amount of money the United States contributes to Israel, the U.S. ought to influence Israel to treat the Palestinians well, Campolo said, also calling also for fair treatment of the Israelis by the Palestinians.

“We've got to say to the Palestinians and the Jews: 'In the name of Jesus, you've got to stop,'” he urged.

In an earlier aside, Campolo also railed against the “Left Behind” novels, which are based on a premillennial dispensationalist interpretation of the Book of Revelation that places a premium on Jews occupying the Holy Land before Jesus can return.

“Nobody wants to say it. You are scared to attack the 'Left Behind' books which are false theology and unbiblical to the core. And it is about time you stand up and say so,” he urged preachers. “I mean all of this stuff comes out of not only fundamentalism. It comes out of dispensationalism, which is a weird little form of fundamentalism that started like 150 years ago.”

☒ Poverty. “Most importantly, we've got to be a voice for the poor,” he declared.

The United States ranks last among the 22 industrialized nations in social support for the poor, he reported. In addition, 500,000 poor children in America will lose after-school care in order to provide the latest round of tax relief for the rich, he added, including himself among the financial beneficiaries.

Although the United States is the wealthiest nation on Earth, millions of Americans cannot afford basic medical care, he said, observing, “That's obscene.”

And while government plans enable the wealthy to increase their financial status, the government is cutting back its spending on education and environmental controls, he acknowledged, noting, “That's sad.”

Lest some Christians claim social issues are an individual responsibility and should not be approached by government, Campolo pointed to the 25th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus said the “nations” will be

judged according to how they treat the sick, hungry, poor and homeless.

Turning to risers filled with scores of teenaged choir members, he called for Baptist young people to spend a year of their lives affiliated with his organization, working with poor people in several of America's inner cities.

Of course, they should get a good education, he said. But contrary to popular opinion, the purpose of a good education is not to get a good job and buy "stuff," but to "do good for God's kingdom."

If young people will spend a year working with impoverished people, they will return equipped to spend the rest of their lives advocating for justice and seeking to do God's work among people.

"If Mormon kids are willing to give two years of their lives for their church, I don't know why we can't give one year for the church," he lamented.

The gospel demands more than just response to social needs, he said, stressing the need for evangelism.

"The truth we hold above all else is Jesus," he insisted. "We must preach Jesus. ... Keep Jesus central. Make Jesus known."

Even though times and culture change, the most successful means of proclaiming the gospel has not changed in 2,000 years, he said, calling for Christians to "reach out" to non-Christians around them.

One method of reaching out is faithfully telling people about the Bible and teaching the Bible to them, he said.

Unfortunately, most mainline churches do not emphasize the Bible enough, Campolo said. To illustrate, he told about how he was asked to evaluate a set of resolutions that were to be considered by the National Council of Churches. While they dealt with important topics, they did not support their claims with Scripture, he said.

“Don't you ever listen to Billy Graham?” he asked. “Every fifth sentence that Billy Graham utters is what? 'The Bible says,' 'The Bible says.' People, they won't believe anything we tell them unless we can convince them that the Bible says it.”

He continued: “When we say we're Baptists, we accept no creed but the Bible, but then after we say that we never talk about the Bible. We never announce what it is the Bible says on each and every social issue and theme. ... The Bible speaks to every social issue.”

After Campolo's message, CBF participants were invited to give a special offering for CBF's Rural Poverty Initiative, an effort to minister among residents of the nation's poorest counties, including several along the Texas-Mexico border.

That night and the next night, an offering totaling \$175,210 was collected, surpassing an offering goal of \$100,000.

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