

Red Letter Revival gives voice to evangelicals on the margins

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LYNCHBURG, Va. (RNS)—When Tony Campolo began his altar call in Lynchburg, he embellished his spiritual charge in a way not often heard in evangelical services.

“Are you ready to say, ‘I’m going to commit myself to Jesus?’” Campolo asked as many rose to their feet, some closing their eyes and raising their hands in prayer, “I’m going to be committed to the poor? I’m going to stand up for the refugee? I’m going to speak for those who feel oppressed by our society?”

Campolo, a leader of the Red Letter Christians advocacy group, knew his audience would appreciate that call, made April 7 at the Red Letter Revival, a two-day gathering organized by progressive evangelical leaders near the campus of evangelical Liberty University.

In Lynchburg, they aimed not only to fellowship and to reaffirm their values, but also to serve as a thorn in the side of those who promote a conservative brand of their faith that has given unquestioning support to President Trump. More than 80 percent of white evangelicals voted for the president.

Pray against ‘toxic evangelicalism’

They organized to pray against “toxic evangelicalism” and to offer a spiritual challenge to Liberty President Jerry Falwell Jr., whose steadfast support of Trump has drawn fierce criticism from some other people of faith.

Compared to other evangelical conferences that often boast larger numbers, the revival was small. Roughly 300 to 350 people crowded into the E.C. Glass High School auditorium.

But those who sang and prayed said they appreciated how the gathering was framed as an alternative to the theology of Falwell.

One of the speakers, evangelical author Jonathan Martin, was escorted off Liberty's campus by police in October while attending a concert days after calling for a peaceful protest of the school. In the months leading up to the revival, Martin referred to Falwell's leadership style as "authoritarianism."

Speaker William Barber said Falwell is "justifying the GOP's immorality" in the "same way" slaveholders used the Bible to justify slavery.

"I came to announce tonight that I am a theological conservative," Barber said. He chided right-wing religious leaders and their support for policies he says hurt the poor, saying, "they call themselves conservative, but they liberally resist so much of God's character."

Sermons at the revival included lengthy discussions of political topics, such as sexuality, white supremacy and mass incarceration.

Others railed against conservative pro-gun arguments.

"Some evangelicals are more committed to the amendments than the commandments," said David Anderson, a Maryland pastor, triggering a chorus of amens.

Platform for underrepresented voices in evangelical circles

For many in attendance, the speaker and workshop lineup itself functioned

as a de facto critique of white evangelical Protestantism, featuring voices often underrepresented in evangelical circles—women, Native Americans, African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans.

Lisa Sharon Harper, who was among the faith leaders who protested white supremacists during the violent demonstrations last year in Charlottesville, said the focus on race and marginalized voices wasn't a coincidence.

“Evangelicals continue to champion (President Trump), and the clearest manifestation of that is Jerry Falwell Jr.’s support for the president,” she said in an interview. “There is no way that we can look at his presidency and not see the manipulation of the political construct of race in order to secure the supremacy of whiteness, and that itself is an assault on the image of God.”



Shane Claiborne addresses the Red Letter Revival in Lynchburg, Va. (RNS photo by Jack Jenkins)

Despite the rhetoric against Falwell, author and revival organizer Shane Claiborne insisted the Red Letter Revival was not designed to “vilify” him,

saying, “We’re not here to protest, we’re here to pro-testify!”

Campolo also drew a distinction between religious disagreement and personal attacks, noting Jesus’ disciples often had heated disputes. He pointed to his own televised debates with Jerry Falwell Jr.’s father as proof that theological sparring partners can disagree respectfully.

Falwell Jr. has taken a hard line with the group’s leaders but remained mostly quiet about the weekend’s events. He has not replied to the group’s request for a formal debate, they say, and personally stifled efforts by the Liberty student newspaper to cover the revival, according to a student editor.

According to Claiborne, Liberty police also sent him a letter last week threatening fines and jail time if he visited the Liberty campus to pray with students or Falwell, which Claiborne says he requested in advance.

Claiborne said these reactions were disappointing, but they strengthened Red Letter Christians’ argument.

“What Dr. Martin Luther King talked about is that sometimes we’ve got to expose injustice so that it becomes uncomfortable,” Claiborne said, noting they ultimately hand-delivered prayers for Falwell to his brother’s nearby church. “I think discomfort can be a good thing. Our goal is certainly not to antagonize, not to manipulate, not to be inauthentic. But our goal is to expose some of this stuff.”

Feeling frustrated and alienated

Highlighting tensions may prove to be an overarching strategy of the group, which holds little sway in more mainstream evangelical circles. Organizers say they may hold a similar gathering later this year in Dallas.

Many at the revival expressed frustration with modern evangelicalism,

sometimes detailing a feeling of alienation.

“They’re placing the priority on the wrong things,” said Chris Miller, who drove 12 hours from Bluffs, Ill., with a friend to attend the event and used to work in an evangelical church.

The revival, by contrast, was widely seen as refreshing among the progressive crowd.

“I think we’re celebrating a new movement, and I’m very happy about it,” said Marianne, a Lynchburg resident who did not share her last name.

Participants said it’s still too soon to say whether the revival was a success, or what success even looks like.

“Ask me in a year,” Claiborne said. “It’s not about a moment. It’s about a movement.”