

Wounds of a Friend

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It's hard not to like Tony Campolo. For starters, the 72-year-old professor, Baptist preacher and former spiritual adviser to President Clinton is hilarious. "You don't need to be Baptist to go to heaven," Campolo once said, "but why take a chance?"

He's also passionate. My first memory of Campolo is still vivid. I was 16 years old, just one soul in a sea of thousands, crammed into an arena for a youth conference. He erupted onto the stage that night. As he paced back and forth, dabbing perspiration from his brow, he delivered a no-compromise message that sent a holy hush over the crowd.

Campolo has continued to inspire my spiritual journey. Through his more than 30 books he's become something of a spiritual hero.

Maybe that's why it felt strange to question him. But after reading some recent comments he made, that's exactly what I did. I wrote an open letter on New Man's Web site challenging the stances he'd taken on two important issues.

My letter was prompted by an interview Campolo did with The Charlotte Observer. The interview covered a variety of topics, but it was Campolo's take on Muslims and on homosexuality that caught my eye.

On Muslims: "Jesus said some very interesting things. 'Other sheep I have who are not of this fold.' I know I'll get in

trouble for this because I'm an evangelical, but (in deciding who gets into heaven), the questions (Jesus) asks on Judgment Day are not theological."

Campolo continued, implying that the eternal plight of Muslims would hinge solely on whether or not they fed the poor, clothed the naked and took in the alien—all scriptural requisites to be sure, but hardly the complete picture of salvation in my view. The suggestion that Muslims (who deny Jesus' divinity, death and resurrection) could be the "other sheep" Jesus speaks of, struck me as absurd.

I was also confused by Campolo's words on homosexuality.

"We shouldn't be saying to gay and lesbian people, 'You have to become what you're not to be welcome by Jesus.'"

Although I completely agree that we should accept homosexuals, Campolo seemed to be saying that we should not expect them to change. In the letter I asked him to clarify his position. Shouldn't we offer homosexuals acceptance and the promise of freedom from their sin?

Campolo wrote back. I had anticipated a spirited rebuttal. Instead he seemed hurt. He wrote of the "serious consequences" my letter would have for his ministry and the "damage that could have been prevented" had I opted for a private dialogue.

Some of our readers agreed. "This letter should have been sent to Campolo in private," wrote one reader. Another was more direct. "This type of criticism is useful only to the enemy, Satan."

I believed Campolo needed to be questioned, but the backlash took me by surprise. Had I violated Matthew 18 (as Campolo claimed) by not approaching my brother in private?

I did not think so. The instructions of that passage are clearly defined. They are to be followed “when a brother sins against you.” Campolo’s statements were not a personal offense against me. And because they appeared in a newspaper I thought it was appropriate to address them publicly.

Ultimately I feel the good done by the exchange far outweighed the bad. I disagree with Campolo on some important points, but have high esteem for his faith and continue to regard him warmly as a brother in Christ. And though some of the reader comments on our exchange were unnecessarily harsh, most were intelligent and constructive and many men were grateful for the opportunity to engage in the discussion.

As men of God we build one another up when we force one another to examine and defend our beliefs. Of course we should do so in love—never resorting to character assassinations and name-calling. But we must engage in rigorous dialogue. Yes, as we hash out our differences there will be hurt. But what wounds we suffer will be the wounds of a friend. I’ll take those scars any day.

Drew Dyck is a graduate of Fuller Theological Seminary and editor of . To read Dyck’s open letter and Tony Campolo’s reply, visit