

Is It Time to Replace the Term 'Evangelicals' with 'Red-Letter Christians'?

In a recent New York Times op-ed titled "The Evangelicalism of Old White Men Is Dead," white Christian leaders Tony Campolo and Shane Claiborne argue that "the reputation of evangelicalism" is a "casualty" of the Trump election.

Consequently, they suggest this could be a "moment in our history for evangelicals to repent and be 'born again' again as Red Letter Christians," meaning Christians who follow the words of Jesus, which are often printed in red in our Bibles.

Their logic is clear and straightforward.

First, they argue that evangelicalism was widely associated with Donald Trump, with more than 80 percent of white evangelicals voting for Trump despite "large numbers of African-American, Latino, Asian, young and female evangelicals who were fiercely opposed to the racism, sexism and xenophobia of Mr. Trump's campaign and the hypocrisy of a candidate who built a casino empire while flouting morality."

Second, they claim that, "As a result, much of the good that went by the name 'evangelicalism' has been clouded over; now a new movement is needed to replace it."

Third, they note that the fastest-growing religious identity in America is the "nones," meaning people who claim no religious affiliation, with millennials leading the way. And, the authors claim, "They left the church because they gave up on evangelical leadership. Nothing sums up their objections more clearly than evangelicals' embrace of Mr. Trump. Didn't Jesus say, 'Blessed are the meek' and 'Love your enemies'?" In the words of Andy Crouch, the executive editor of *Christianity*

Today, who criticized both candidates, evangelical enthusiasm for Mr. Trump “gives our neighbors ample reason to doubt that we believe Jesus is Lord.”

Fourth, since the future of evangelicalism does not lie with older, more conservative white evangelicals but rather with younger, non-white, more progressive evangelicals, it’s time for a new identity. Why not red-letter Christians?

How should we respond?

First, for several years now we have heard that (white) evangelical influence in America is waning, yet the power of white evangelicals to help elect Donald Trump (and, perhaps, help influence his decision-making) reminds us that our obituary is being written prematurely. In fact, the Vice-President elect is himself a white evangelical.

Second, I welcome with joy the growing number of non-white evangelical leaders in America, and if they outnumber whites in the future (I write this as a white evangelical), to the extent that reflects national demographics, that would be absolutely wonderful. I would point out, however, that many of today’s rising, non-white evangelical leaders are strong conservatives, in contrast with some of the leaders pointed to by Campolo and Claiborne.

Third, and most important, Prof. Campolo, as the best-known leader in the “Red Letter Christian” movement, has put himself outside the pale of evangelicalism by embracing same-sex “marriage.” In fact, I do not believe he can call himself a red-letter Christian, since it is impossible to follow the words of Jesus and to embrace gay “marriage” at the same time, as was easily demonstrated a few years back on the Piers Morgan show.

And so, despite Tony Campolo putting forth many excellent challenges to the evangelical church in years past, and despite the many good works done by Shane Claiborne, I would

strongly question whether they are the ones to set the next agenda for the evangelical movement, whatever that movement's name might be.

That being said, I totally agree with them that: 1. Evangelicals need to be associated with the name of Jesus more than with the name of Trump (while at the same time doing whatever they can to be a blessing to President Trump and his administration); 2. Some evangelicals have hurt their own reputations by almost beatifying Trump and supporting him in a way that overlooked his failings; and 3. The words of Jesus are often grossly neglected by Christians today and paying attention to His words and seeking to follow His words would be transformational for the church.

To offer just a few examples, paying careful attention to the words of Jesus would:

Radically redefine our standards of sexual purity (see Matt. 5:27-30).

Challenge our loose views of divorce and remarriage (see Matt. 5:31-32).

Turn our worldview upside down (see Matt. 5:3-12).

Remind of us the high cost of being disciples (see Luke 9:57-62; 14:25-35).

Call us to walk in sacrificial love to others, including our enemies (see Luke 6:27-38).

Expose our religious hypocrisy (see Matt. 23:1-39).

Renew our zeal to reach a lost and dying world (see Matt. 28:18-20).

Invite us to fresh intimacy with the Lord (see John 15:1-8)

Call us to repentance and revival, both personal and corporate

(see Rev. 2:1-3:22).

Let us, then, make special note of the words of Jesus as we read our Bibles, thereby proving ourselves to be His disciples.

This what our country needs more than anything: for the followers of Jesus to truly follow Jesus and for the church to truly be the church.

In this, I concur with Tony Campolo and Shane Claiborne. {eo}