

Decisions, Decisions

How (and How Not) to Make Them

By Dave Swavely
Reviewed by Tim Challies

Dave Swavely (M.Div., The Master's Seminary) is the pastor of Faith Presbyterian Church in Sonoma, California. He has edited a number of books, including *Introduction to Biblical Counseling* by John MacArthur and Wayne Mack. He is the author of *Why Are You to Judge?: The Dangers of Judging and Legalism* and the co-author of *Life in the Father's House: A Members's Guide to the Local Church*. He and his wife Jill have five children.

Life is made up of seemingly endless decisions. We face decisions every day of our lives – some are as minor as what to wear or what to eat, while others may be huge, impacting our lives or the lives of hundreds or even millions of others. As Christians it is crucial that we understand Biblical principles on how to make decisions that will honor and glorify God. It is to this subject that the book *Decisions, Decisions* is dedicated.

The book approaches the subject matter first from the perspective of how *not* to make decisions. To illustrate how not to make decisions the author, Dave Swavely, uses several phrases and ideas that are in common use in Christian circles and shows how they do not follow Biblical foundations for decision-making. Among the ones he discusses are: "I flipped a coin," "God gave me a sign," "God told me," and "God opened all the doors."

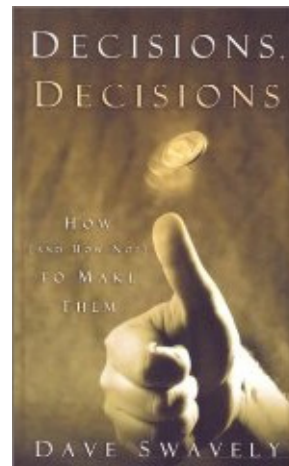
To begin the discussion he examines revelation and shows how God's revelation to us is sufficient and complete in the Scripture. To seek God's will through signs and

wonders, is futile, for God no longer operates in such ways. Similarly, to put our faith in random verses of the Bible or flips of a coin is to deny our responsibility to make decisions on our own. After

several chapters outlining how not to make decisions, all of them based on things you have heard from Christian friends or may have said yourself, Swavely turns to an examination of the Biblical principles of making godly decisions.

He first examines the prerequisites of making Biblical decisions. These are walking in the Spirit, recognizing God's sovereignty and praying for wisdom and providence. Without these prerequisites we cannot expect to be able to make godly decisions. When these prerequisites are in place he outlines four aspects of decision-making.

The first key to making Biblical decisions is Scripture. Scripture rules supreme over any of the other principles. The Bible bears on every decision we make, either directly or indirectly. For example, any decision relies on motive, and the Bible



has much to say about motives. Also, the other three principles of decision-making are drawn from the Bible. While the Bible does not describe exactly what to do in any given situation, it does tell us everything was absolutely need to know in order to make a proper decision. Scripture points us in the direction of the right decision, even if it does not tell us exactly what we must do.

At this point the author teaches that, provided an option is not absolutely forbidden by Scripture, we would not sin by taking that option. We are given freedom in Christ to decide whether or not to proceed. So we may now be faced with two decisions: first, should we or should we not do it and second which of the options should we take.

The second key to making Biblical decisions is wisdom. The author defines wisdom as “a knowledge of Scripture and the ability to apply that knowledge in your

life.” Wisdom is tied to Scripture since Scripture is the source of God’s wisdom to us. The words are often used interchangeably in the Bible.

The third key is desire. If we are living by the Spirit and immersing ourselves in the Word of God, we see that God will plant desires in our hearts. It is good and proper, then, to do what we desire.

The fourth key is counsel. The counsel of other believers who meet the prerequisites of Biblical decision-making should play a part in each of the other aspects. Other believers can share their knowledge of Scripture, can share their godly wisdom and can interpret our desire.

These four principles, each backed with ample Scriptural support, provide the author’s framework for making Biblical decisions. He presents his case well and his words are convicting. As one who has often struggled in this area, I highly recommend this book.

Swavelly, Dave. *Decisions, Decisions: How (and How Not) to Make Them*. Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2003.

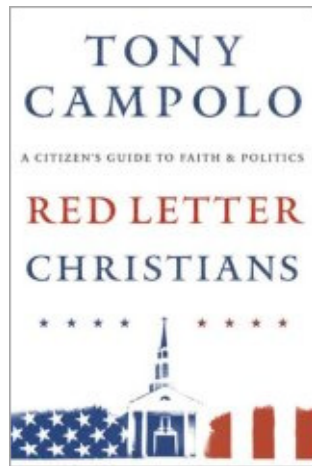
Red Letter Christians

A Citizen's Guide to Faith & Politics

By Tony Campolo

Reviewed by Tim Challies

There are some people who will undoubtedly read no further than *Red Letter Christians*, the title of the latest offering from Tony Campolo. The reference to red letters will no doubt convince people, even before they read the book, that it is a defense of ignoring the black letters of the Bible (which is to say, most of the Bible) in favor of the red words (the words actually spoken by Jesus). While I, too, am somewhat uncomfortable with the term, it is only fair to allow Campolo to define it before passing judgment!



“A group of us who are speakers and authors and who share an evangelical theology got together and confessed that we have a hard time applying the label [Evangelical] to ourselves anymore. Among those who gathered were Brian McLaren, Richard Rohr and Jim Wallis. They settled on the name “Red Letter Christians” as an alternative to evangelical. “In adopting the name, we are saying that we are committed to living out the things that Jesus taught.”

According to Campolo, Red Letter Christians...

1. ...hold to the same theological convictions as do evangelicals (beliefs summarized in the church's historic creeds).

2. ...have a very high view of Scripture, affirming that the Bible is an infallible guide for faith and practice. They emphasize red letters because they believe you can only properly understand the rest of the Bible when you read it from Christ's perspective.

3. ...are differentiated from other Christians in their commitment to social justice.

The focus on the red letters means that they will seek to look to the red letters as their guide to understanding the black. They will look first to Jesus before Paul or any other biblical author. This leads them to an overarching concern with social justice. Campolo says that poverty is a major concern to Red Letter Christians and he makes this clear throughout the book. From reading it, I'd actually conclude that it is the *predominant* concern.

I'm not so sure that Red Letter Christians are entirely fair to Evan-

Tony Campolo is professor emeritus of Sociology at Eastern University in St. Davids, Pennsylvania, founder of the Evangelical Association for the Promotion of Education (EAPE), and associate pastor of the Mount Carmel Baptist Church in West Philadelphia. He is a media commentator on religious, social and political matters, having been a guest on a number of national television programs. An author of 34 books, Campolo co-hosted his own television series and presently hosts a weekly program on the Premier Radio Network in England.

gelicals. At one point Campolo draws what is clearly a caricature of Evangelicals saying, "There are Evangelicals who argue against environmentalism, claiming that global warming is a myth (or at least grossly exaggerated), and that environmental concerns distract Christians from those matters that should fully occupy our moral and political attention: gay marriage and abortion."

Related to the concern with social justice is a concern with politics, for the two tend to go hand-in-hand. As Christians involve themselves in the political process, they can guide their nations to policies that will promote social justice. The stakes are high, says Campolo, for "On the day of judgment, the Lord will not ask theological questions so much as He will ask if we fulfilled our social obligations." Campolo anticipates, probably rightly, that some will hear this and immediately cry "liberalism" and he responds in advance, carefully stating that this movement cannot be easily and conveniently labeled as liberal or conservative. "Conservatives maintain many lines that should never be crossed, while liberals destroy many lines that should never have existed." Instead, this movement seeks to be guided by Scripture, he insists. "Challenging the popular image of Evangelicals is one of the purposes of this book. "I want it to be known that there are millions of us who espouse an evangelical theology, but who reject being classified as part of the Religious Right. We don't want to make Jesus into a Republican. On the other hand, we want to say loud and clear that we don't want to make Jesus into a Democrat, either." Red Letter Christians can and should take their place in all and any political parties that are democratic and egalitarian. This book seeks to help the reader understand how Red Letter Christians will think about and react to a variety of social and political issues.

And so Campolo seeks to lay out a biblical approach to politics and, in the book's second chapter, outlines what this means. Red Letter Christians believe that Jesus Christ has initiated His new kingdom and this kingdom is made up of transformed people living in a transformed society. When we preach this message, he says, we are preaching the gospel. The primary way God uses the church to usher in the fullness of His presence in history is "by commissioning its members to serve in each and every social institution ... and, like leaven and salt, to permeate these institutions with Kingdom values. Being in all the world, living out the love of God, working for justice whenever opportunities arise, and talking about how God is impacting their lives are the activities that make ordinary Christians into effective change agents, and together living the fullness of the presence of God." How this gospel can be held as being consistent with the gospel of the historic church and its creeds escapes this reviewer, for this seems to be a gospel that is far more about social justice than about the substitutionary atoning death of Jesus Christ.

The bulk of the book, seventeen chapters, looks at a variety of timely Global Issues (the environment, the war, Palestine and AIDS), Hot-Button issues (gay rights, gun control, education, abortion, immigration, crime), Economic Issues (the federal budget, the minimum wage, debt-or nation, wasteful government) and Government Issues (political lobbyists, campaign finance, the right kind of candidate). It really applies mostly to Americans as many of the issues are specific to the United States. Others are more widely applicable but are set in an American context. The book seeks to give a biblical, Red Letter perspective on each. "I hope that this book challenges the reader to develop his or her own perspectives, and encour-

ages him or her to use biblically based critiques to examine the pros and cons of contemporary political debates.” In some cases, Campolo succeeds as he looks to Scripture as a guide to our response to various issues. In other cases he seems to miss the mark entirely, stating his beliefs without reference to Scripture or drawing on Scripture only very narrowly. Yes, it is important to look to the words of Jesus as we seek to understand how we are to live in this world, but looking only and sometimes even primarily to the red letters may mean we are ignoring ones which would further explain or further interpret. It may mean we are ignoring the full testimony of Scripture.

Because of the variety and importance of the topics Campolo tackles in Red Let-

ter Christians, it is unlikely that many people will agree with him in every point he makes. But that is not meant to be the point of the book. Rather, the purpose is to help people think both critically and biblically about each of these issues. And in that regard I feel the book falls short. If you happen to care what Tony Campolo thinks about gun control, abortion, immigration, the environment and a long list of other issues, this book may have some appeal. If, on the other hand, you are hoping to find someone to model biblical thinking about these same issues, you will want to look elsewhere. Though Campolo’s perspectives are often interesting and often align with my own, I simply do not find that he consistently models biblical thinking or biblical discernment.

Campolo, Tony. *Red Letter Christians: A Citizen’s Guide to Faith & Politics*. Ventura: Regal, 2008.