

Bootleg preacher: An interview with Will Campbell

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [November 27, 2007](#) issue

A self-described “bootleg preacher,” Will Campbell got into lots of trouble as a minister and advocate for economic justice and racial equality in the South. The iconoclastic Baptist minister was director of religious life at the University of Mississippi in the late 1950s and was later a field officer for the National Council of Churches. He is also known for his books, including the celebrated memoir Brother to a Dragonfly. Campbell received the Presidential Humanities Medal in 2000. Now 84 and living on his farm in Tennessee, Campbell was honored this fall by Yale University with the William Sloane Coffin Award for Peace and Justice. Asked if he would consent to an interview, he said, “Why not? I don’t have anything to lose. Not much to gain either.”

So what are you up to these days?

I’m working on a book called *I Never Knew Elvis*. That’s the outside cover. What’s inside is that I did know Waylon Jennings and Johnny Cash and many others in the country music world. I’m not trying to say that I was the Billy Graham of country music, but I happen to love it, and I was there for many of the big events of people’s lives. I married them and buried them, baptized their children and so forth. The book is about people I came to love.

As you look back on your career as a minister, author and activist, what gives you the greatest sense of satisfaction?

Just trying, you know—just showing up. I was no hero in the civil rights movement, but I was there, and that was something. If anything in our faith were taken literally, it would be so revolutionary that we wouldn’t recognize it. And I don’t mean just the Christian faith either, but the Jewish faith and the Muslim faith as well. We don’t live by our own preachments. If we did, everything would change.

When you were growing up, what shaped your views on race?

I learned when I was five or six years old from my grandfather that racism is wrong. Both my father and my grandfather saw that racism was wrong. I don't know why my father and grandfather were free of it. There was kind of a cluster of Campbells on the land in Mississippi, and after church all of us yearling boys—that's what they called us—would go over to Grandpa's house to play. One day a black man came down the road, and we started taunting him and calling out the n-word. Grandpa called us over. He called everybody "Hon"—didn't matter who they were—and we didn't have those Freudian hang-ups in those days. He said, "Hon, that man is a colored man. Not a nigger. There aren't any niggers, and I don't want to hear you calling anybody that." That made an impression on me that has lasted until this day. Why it didn't make an impression on the others, I can't say.

Another experience like that was when I was in the war overseas. Once a sergeant came in the middle of the night and woke me up. I was in a medical unit and assisted in surgeries and the like. This sergeant was a friend, and that night we were helping with an operation on an island boy. The colonel who was performing the operation was a crusty man from Atlanta. The operation failed and the boy died. After it was over and the colonel told us to wrap the boy up so that he could be carried back to his family, he asked, "What happened to this boy?" The sergeant told him that he had been a houseboy for a wealthy French planter. The boy had dropped an ashtray and the planter had kicked the boy. "He didn't just kick him," the colonel said. And then he said, "That's a hell of a price to pay for a goddamn ashtray."

Afterward, the sergeant, who was a devout Christian, asked me if I would go to the chapel to pray with him. He prayed and prayed, but he never mentioned the child or his family. Instead he was praying for the colonel who had taken the Lord's name in vain. Now, granted, in my household that word was never used. If you had uttered it, you would have had the wrath of mama and daddy to deal with. But to give your attention to that and not to the child—that changed me.

There's a rumor that you don't go to church.

Well, I'm in church right now: We're talking about the faith. We're remembering what God in Christ has done. We're having church. Now if you are asking me whether or not I am active in the steeples at 11 on a Sunday morning, I can't say that I am.

What do Christians most need to be doing?

One thing is just to say no. We can just shake our heads and say, “No, we are not going to go there. We are not going along with that.”

Now if you take that to an extreme, then you are not voting and are not paying taxes. And I tried that for about 12 years—not voting, that is. But I’ve decided that’s not really the answer either. If the man who is currently in the White House had not been elected, I think it is pretty clear that we would have a different world and a better one. Not that I have ever been a big fan of Mr. Gore. And I’ve known all along that politics is inherently evil. At the end of the day, there may not be a huge difference between voting and not voting, between who gets elected and who doesn’t, but there is *some* difference.

You’ve lived through a lot of social change. Has any social progress been made? Is our society any better?

With what’s going on in Iraq, I don’t see how you could say progress has been made. What is being done at our behest is indefensible. In some ways, it seems like we’ve moved forward, and in other ways it seems like we are more in denial than ever. This war is inexcusable. I say this as a person who served in the military three years myself.