

Church-Goers Who Are

Disillusioned by Nixon

Washington

"They're not mad. They're not bitter, they're not violent. They don't want to blow up something.

"They're just hurt."

That's the effect the White House transcripts have had on millions of God-fearing Americans who, until a fortnight ago, had cherished Richard Nixon in their pantheon of moral mentors.

"He's been a symbol. A Quaker. You think of a people who are godly. Pious. The contrast is something that hurts the heart."

When the Rev. W. A. Criswell talks about it, his voice is hushed, like a man newly bereaved. The clergyman, pastor of the nation's largest Baptist church, First Baptist in Dallas, and a past president of the Southern Baptist Convention, had supported Mr. Nixon and worked for his re-election.

Now, he feels, the country is in a "time of grief and despair."

The Dallas pastor is one of the most respected figures among the 40 million or so conservative, "Bible-believing," Evangelical Protestants in this country who have been among Mr. Nixon's strongest supporters.

The Rev. Mr. Criswell is not alone in voicing disappointment now.

The leading voice of Evangelical Protestantism in America is the Washington-based fortnightly, Christianity Today.

The lead editorial scheduled for the magazine's next issue will say of Mr. Nixon, "... the transcripts show him to be a person who has failed gravely to live up to the moral demands of our Judeo-Christian heritage. We do not expect perfection, but we rightly expect our leaders, and especially our President, to practice a higher level of morality than the tapes reveal."

Among Evangelical Protestants, Eternity Magazine is almost as influential as Christianity Today.

Executive editor William J. Peterson of Philadelphia,

a Nixon backer in 1972, said Nixon support among Evangelicals has fallen drastically. He said the release of the transcripts "confirmed the fears we had on the whole thing. The Evangelical community is shocked to get into the back room and find out how hypocritical everything was."

It was the "hypocrisy of it that jolted people," Peterson said. "Nixon was put before the public as a religious man, so circumspect."

The profane language on the tapes "is just a surface thing," he said.

"There is much more concern for the deeper issues — the way he handles people, his lack of concern for the long term ..."

The most revered leader of the Evangelical Protestants is Billy Graham. The evangelist has been a frequent guest in the White House and, in 1970, President Nixon made a personal appearance at a Graham crusade in Knoxville, Tenn. in the heart of the Bible Belt.

Graham said on Tuesday that he could "not but deplore the moral tone implied" in the transcript of Mr. Nixon's conversations concerning Watergate. "What comes through in these tapes," he said, "is not the man I have known for many years." He called the transcripts "a profoundly disturbing and disappointing experience."

Graham broke sharply with tradition when he announced that he supported Mr. Nixon in 1972. Conservative Evangelical churchmen traditionally shy away from taking official stands on secular issues.

Another break with that tradition came when the Rev. Harold J. Ockeniga, pastor of Boston's historical Park Street Church and

president of Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, used his considerable influence to mobilize support for the President among Evangelical leaders.

The Rev. Mr. Ockeniga told a 1972 luncheon, whose guest list read like a Who's Who of theological conservatism in America, that he backed Mr. Nixon "because of the high moral integrity displayed in his public, personal and family life."

Last week, the Rev. Mr. Ockeniga said that while he had read only a few excerpts from the transcripts,

he was "disappointed in the moral tone."

A reporter's survey of nearly a score of Evangelical Protestant leaders disclosed only one who appeared unmoved by the transcripts — though a number of others declined to comment because they had not read them.

The Rev. E. V. Hill, pastor of Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles and one of the few black clergy invited to preach at the White House, professed no interest in the transcripts issue because the whole con-

trovery over Watergate "took up too much time ..."

"If this nation would devote one-tenth of the time they've given to Watergate to finding housing and jobs and equal opportunity for people, we would have overcome ten years ago," the Rev. Mr. Hill complained.

Another black pastor, the Rev. James L. Richard of Oakland, had a different view.

"I feel that no man is any higher than the laws of the state ... I feel that one who is the head of the govern-

ment should set the standard for this country and give the youth something to live up to."

Noting that he had worked for Mr. Nixon's election, the Rev. Mr. Richard said he now believed "If he (Nixon) doesn't resign, the people of the United States ought to put him out."

The Rev. Lester Harnish, pastor of the prestigious Third Baptist Church in St. Louis and a former president of the American Baptist Convention, is another Nixon supporter who was disillusioned by the tran-

scripts.

"There is no evidence that he is anything other than a political animal. There is no shock or indignation at what is being done to the affairs of the nation. It is political thinking at the lowest level," the Rev. Mr. Harnish said.

"I sincerely feel President Nixon should resign," he said.

The 12-million-member Baptist Convention is the nation's largest Protestant body and the bulwark of Evangelical Protestantism.

When the convention holds its annual meeting in Dallas next month, the messengers, as the delegates are called, will be asked to vote on a resolution on integrity in government that, among other things, urges church members to pray "that we may be delivered from the current malignancy of deceit and distrust and discord."

The Rev. Foy Valentine, chief of the church's Christian Life Commission, said he expects the resolution to pass.

Washington Post