

Rev! Mike Huckabee Interview

Perhaps the best-known pastor (or former pastor) during the recent GOP race for the presidential nomination was Mike Huckabee. Former Arkansas Governor Huckabee was a pastor for 12 years before entering politics. Rev! caught up with him in California for this exclusive interview on his transition from pastor to politician. He said, with a wink, that there's not a lot of difference between the two. Here's what else he had to say.

What prompted you to move from being a local pastor to a ministry of politics, and how similar or dissimilar are these callings in your life?

HUCKABEE: It was a process; it wasn't just something I woke up and one day said "Hmmm, I think I'm gonna do this." It got started as a result of my being president of the Baptist Convention in Arkansas, but even before that, the truth is, the pastorate was somewhat of a detour. Everyone thinks that politics was [the detour], but my original plan was communications—I'd been in radio and then in television and advertising. I had really seen myself getting into a long-term career in broadcasting with an emphasis on Christian broadcasting. And in fact that's what I was doing. I ran an ad agency in Fort Worth, worked for James Robison, was his director of communications. Went back to Arkansas with the thought that I would establish an independent communications company there, do Christian work—I was doing a lot of freelance; I was ghostwriting, and so on—and then I would run for office.

So I got back to Arkansas in 1980, and a church in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, asked me to speak and I did; they asked me to come back and speak again. They were without a pastor, and they asked me if I'd be interim, and I said, "Sure"; then they came back and said, "We just want you to stay." So I stayed for six years, and while we were there, I really felt like the Lord had just said, "This is where I need you to be for right now," so I was okay with that. We created a local community television channel through the church, and then another church in Texarkana came and asked me to be their pastor, and asked me to pray about it, and I said, "Well, I can tell you now that if you're not interested in some type of communications and doing something in broadcasting, I wouldn't be your guy because that's a part of who I am." They said, "That's exactly why we want you to come."

So I went there and we started the television channel, and then I became president of the Baptist Convention at a time when there was really a lot of controversy going on in Southern Baptist life, and I kind of shepherded the denomination through somewhat of a rocky period, and we came through it fine, so a lot of people started coming to me saying, "Have you ever thought about running for office?" Well, what they didn't know was

that I'd thought about that years and years ago but had put it out of my mind, thinking that once I went into a pastorate it would never be a possibility. So I had several people say, "Well, just pray about it. We would help you." So I sought counsel from close friends and pastors that I knew, many of them I went to specifically expecting them to tell me not to do it, and to my surprise every last one of them said, "You know, ordinarily I would never encourage this, but I really believe the Lord may be in this."

So over a period of a year or more, my wife and I sought counsel. We prayed. We just asked God to show us a direction, and finally came to the conclusion that we weren't on earth to be comfortable, but to be salt and light, and if that's really the case, then salt needs to go where things are decaying, and light needs to go where there's darkness, and we couldn't think of any place that was darker and more decaying than the world of public policy. Then we both looked at each other and said, "We don't want to grow up with our kids going to schools where they undermine everything we believe in and then one day ask why somebody didn't do something, and look at each other and ask why didn't we do something?" That's really the genesis of it.

Just a little side note—sometimes pastors, or sometimes in the Christian world, we edify the world of the pastor so much and emphasize the calling so much—but callings may or may not be for full-time pastoral ministry.

I think we've created a cultural version of following Jesus. And we've made it that when you really follow Jesus—you become a full-time pastor or a missionary overseas. Well, that sort of precludes the schoolteacher who may be called to be the schoolteacher or even the advertising person, or the policeman, called to do that. And I came increasingly to the conviction that God's call is the call to follow him. It's not a call so much about where we get our paycheck as much as it is a call to make sure that whatever we do for a paycheck, our livelihood is secondary to our life. And you know, when people often would come up to me and say, "I'm just so sorry that you left the ministry," my response was that I didn't know that I had. "When did that happen? And would you inform the Holy Spirit so he'll quit telling me every day that I'm walking in him 'cause I kind of thought I was." They look at you like, yeah, but you know you don't work for the church. And I'm thinking, and your point would be?

But we've created this cultural expectation that the closer you get to Jesus, the closer you get to a church paycheck. And it certainly was some of the most wonderful and formative periods of my life, but I see it as an important part of God's training and his preparation in an ongoing pilgrimage. I don't know what the future holds. I've done a lot of differ-

ent things. Everything I have done, I have felt his pleasure and his purpose. And I've never come to a point, even when I ran for office and lost, that I said, "I really missed God's will. I really blew it." Not ever. I see it as an ongoing call, and the Lord wants to take us on a path.

Now that you know both paths, what do you think the role of the local pastor should be in terms of politics?

HUCKABEE: Well, I think he should never use his pulpit to endorse a specific candidate—because candidates can fail, and I have a real strong conviction about the pulpit. I believe that the sacred desk ought to be reserved for the unabashed truth of the gospel. Jesus never fails. The rest of us will. So I don't think a pastor ought to get up and say, "I think you ought to vote for John McCain or Barack Obama." I think pastors should, however, specifically call out their members to be involved in the process of citizenship. And it's not so much to be involved in politics per se, but to follow Christ wherever he leads in their citizenship. He will lead some maybe no further than to the voting booth. I can't believe that he wouldn't lead them there. Because if we have a society in which we are given the privilege to participate and we fail to do so, then it's as if we have acted as if that special privilege doesn't matter. That's a huge mistake.

Pastors ought to be very specific in applying biblical principles to issues of the day. Not just get up and say, "Abortion is wrong." Talk about why the sanctity of life is right. There's a big, big difference. And you know somebody just getting up there and railing against something—but edifying and teaching the congregation that no life is worth more than another, that one human life can't be valued higher because to do so would say that God has put a premium on a person's life above another. For me the whole life issue is not about abortion; it's about the value and intrinsic worth of each person because of God's gift of life itself.

You've presented yourself really well as a Christian but also as a politician, unlike others before you. How in your mind have you avoided the potholes that so many Christian politicians have hit?

HUCKABEE: I don't mean to sound like I'm patting myself on that back; I think the honest answer is because I believe I'm doing what the Lord has wanted me to do, He's given me a capacity to say spiritual things in a way that didn't necessarily just scare the daylights out of people. I remember one of the signature moments during the course of the campaign was being on The Daily Show with Jon Stewart. He popped the abortion question

on me, and I knew exactly what was about to happen because the audience is extremely left wing, and he is, and it was like "Okay, gotcha now." And when I gave my answer and explained that this wasn't about being against abortion, this was about believing that every life—and I pointed out how every person here is valuable and precious and that life may begin at conception, but it doesn't end at the birth canal. And I said that for many of us who are pro-life, it's not enough to love the child in the gestation period. We also need to care about the kid when he's 8 years old, when he's 18, or when he's 80. And it really is focusing on the entire life, not just in the birth canal. And the audience broke out and applauded. So that was an unusual audience to get a pro-life round of applause. And I've tried in the course of my life to ask myself, "If I were the lost person, how would I respond to what I'm saying?" And you know, I've paid special attention to communicating words that really make sense to people—and not assume that they understand the language of Zion.

What future plans do you have?

HUCKABEE: The immediate plans are launching a new television show on the Fox network starting the 27th.

What's it called?

HUCKABEE: The name of the show is simply Huckabee. I kept saying, "Well, we need something—at least Huckabee Tonight—but anyway that's what they want to call it, and they're paying the bills. It'll run in primetime on Saturdays/Sundays. We're still developing the issues, and it'll be a live audience, really unlike anything else. It's not going to be the typical talk show of politics with four or five people yelling at each other because I just find that completely worthless. I want to have thoughtful conversations. I'm going to get a lot of people who are on the far left and bring them on, not to argue with them, but to have an honest discussion and to let them talk. And my experience is that if you let a liberal talk and don't interrupt him, his arguments will deconstruct in front of your face. You know that the biggest mistake conservatives make in dealing with liberals is they want to interrupt them in the middle of a presentation, and if you just stand back and let them follow their own argument to its logical conclusion, it usually falls apart. And I've always felt like, as believers, we don't have to apologize for our beliefs. Our beliefs make sense, they're rational, and they can be followed to a logical conclusion and defended. It's the position of the lost person that can't.

I've also got a book coming out in November, the book is *Do The Right Thing*. I'm doing

a lot of speaking. I've started a nonprofit C-4 organization to work on public policy, campaigning for people all over the country running for house, senate, governor races, whatever, to elect good people into office—and actually staying busier than I need to be.

What would you like to tell the pastors who are reading this interview?

HUCKABEE: I think the most important message to pastors is that they need to be bold and prophetic in applying the Word of God to the culture. And don't let the culture influence their message; let their message influence the culture. But be wise in how they do it. I'm not asking any of them to give up their pulpits and run for political office. What they need to do is realize that the real way to change America isn't through the next election. It really is through one person becoming a person with moral convictions and living life with a godly spirit. We don't need a lot of government if everybody governs themselves. 🌐