

Buzz for a Baptist: Huckabee's healthy contribution

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Most of the excitement lately in the Republican race for president has been generated by Baptist minister Mike Huckabee. Huckabee's surge in the polls seems to stem largely from the fact that he exudes one quality the other Republican candidates seem to lack—authenticity. Unlike Mitt Romney, for example, the folksy former governor of Arkansas hasn't had to revise his views on abortion or other key moral issues in order to run. In fact, it was concern over abortion that originally induced Huckabee, former pastor and former president of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention, to leave ministerial life and enter politics.

Whatever Huckabee's success in the primaries, the man with the country-sounding name is at least getting a close look by voters and the media. Of special interest is the way he applies his concern for the "dignity of life." On the campaign trail he often states, "We care about individuals because of the intrinsic worth and value in every single human life"—and this concern appears to extend beyond the issue of abortion.

As Arkansas governor he launched a government-funded health care program for children. Recalling the importance of music to him as a teenager, he speaks up for arts education in public schools. He occasionally attacks corporate greed and says he thinks something's wrong when CEOs make 500 times what their employees make. His willingness as governor to raise taxes to support social programs has earned him the wrath of the Club for Growth. (Huckabee has termed that group, devotees of tax cuts, the "club for greed.") He favors giving educational opportunities to the children of immigrants (which his opponents charge is endorsing "amnesty"). When he thunders that Americans should not accept homelessness or talks about the needs of people who have lost jobs, he almost sounds like populist Democrat John Edwards.

While small-government conservatives have attacked Huckabee as a “pro-life liberal,” some liberals worry about his hard-core Southern Baptist faith. In a *Rolling Stone* article titled “The GOP’s Weirdest Nut Job,” writer Matt Taibbi opines that unlike President Bush, Huckabee is nuts enough to actually believe this Jesus stuff. Taibbi goes on to mock Huckabee for earnestly citing the book of Revelation in a speech to Texas Baptists.

Yes, he believes. But contrary to stock portrayals like Taibbi’s, Huckabee’s faith is not, or should not be, a conversation-stopper. The primary question for voters should not be his theology but his political commitments, passions and policies. Huckabee is at least showing that a very conservative Christian faith can generate a mix of conservative and liberal political stances. That in itself is a healthy contribution to American politics.