

SBC pastor backs Huckabee, takes on Americans United: Wiley Drake's imprecatory prayer

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An early candidate for the presidency of the Southern Baptist Convention has called on Baptists to pray for misfortune to befall employees of a church-state watchdog group.

Wiley Drake, a pastor, radio crusader and Baptist gadfly, issued a statement August 14 calling for “imprecatory prayer” from supporters against two staffers of Washington-based Americans United for Separation of Church and State. The term *imprecatory* generally refers to prayers used by biblical figures to summon God’s wrath against their enemies.

The unusual appeal came after Drake endorsed Mike Huckabee, a fellow Southern Baptist minister, in the Republican presidential primary race, prompting Americans United officials to ask the Internal Revenue Service to investigate the tax-exempt status of Drake’s church, First Southern Baptist Church of Buena Park, California.

Drake, who served as the SBC’s second vice president in 2006-2007, had used his congregation’s letterhead and a church-supported radio show to “personally endorse” Huckabee. On August 13, Drake became the first person to declare himself a candidate for the SBC presidency next June in Indianapolis.

Huckabee surprised many observers on August 12 by finishing as runner-up to Mitt Romney in the Republican field in the Iowa Straw Poll.

The federal revenue code prohibits churches and other nonprofits from endorsing political candidates or parties. However, they are allowed to speak out on ballot issues.

“Federal tax law is clear,” Barry Lynn, Americans United executive director, said in a statement on the investigation request. “Churches and other nonprofits may not

endorse candidates, if they want to keep their tax exemption. I am confident that the vast majority of Americans do not want to see their houses of worship politicized.”

In Drake’s written endorsement, he said that of all the candidates running for president, “Mike Huckabee will listen to God.” Before serving as governor, Huckabee was pastor of several prominent Arkansas Baptist churches.

“After very serious prayer and consideration I announce today that I am going to personally endorse Mike Huckabee,” Drake wrote. “I ask all of my Southern Baptist brothers and sisters to consider getting behind Mike and helping him all you can.”

Lynn said that Drake or any minister may express personal views on political candidates but not while acting as officials of nonprofit religious groups. “Use of church letterhead to endorse a candidate for public office appears to violate the provisions of federal tax law that prohibit nonprofit intervention in political campaigns,” Lynn said.

In the past, churches that faced similar charges have lost their tax-exempt status, although often the IRS simply warns tax-exempt organizations against further violations.

The letterhead Drake used for the Huckabee endorsement also lists his SBC vice-presidential office. The fact that he formerly served as an SBC officer is also noted on the press release calling for God’s wrath on Americans United.

In the statement, Drake asks supporters to “specifically target” the group’s communications director, Joe Conn, and his associate, Jeremy Leaming. Their names often appear as the contacts on Americans United press releases. Drake’s call to arms said Conn and Leaming “are those who lead the attack” on him.

Conn told the *Los Angeles Times* that he was “startled” that Drake did not simply defend his actions. “Instead he goes on a spiritual blitzkrieg against us, praying for our destruction.” –*Associated Baptist Press*