

FIVE QUESTIONS WITH DR. RANDY BRINSON

In our December 2006 FIVE QUESTIONS interview, Alabama doctor and Christian leader Randy Brinson takes a look at how evangelical Christians are transforming their relationship to politics by expanding their concerns to global warming, health care, poverty and more. Media organizations are encouraged to reprint the interview in full or part.

BETTER SOUTH: Across the nation, many Christian evangelicals are looking at Biblical passages in a new way in relation to various issues -- taxation, environment, health care and education. What's going on out there, particularly in light of the recent changes in politics at the state and federal levels?

DR. RANDY BRINSON: The major difference is that the evangelical community is not only interested in the sanctity of life and traditional marriage but a host of other issues that define Christianity. For several years, the Republican Party portrayed itself as the party of values and moral clarity and the Democratic Party was portrayed as a party of liberal values that sought to embrace a secular view of government. We have found that Christians support limited government when government seeks to impose its will on people regarding deeply held moral beliefs, but they also understand that the private sector cannot solve all problems and that government can be an instrument of good. Particularly, we see Christians as wanting improvement in public schools and adequate tax revenue to support local school systems provided there is support

from the school system for protection and nurturing of religious liberties and expression.

We have found that Christians are very concerned about the environment and want governmental regulations to protect them from environmental damage that may occur from the relaxation of business regulations regarding environmental protection, whether it be protection for clean water, air or industrial ground pollutants. This placed many Christian activists at odds with some social

conservatives who have close ties with the business lobbyists. Communities want their waterfronts and their neighborhoods protected from business sprawl that frequently disregards existing

zoning laws. CreationCare, an alliance of a number of evangelical ministries, is actively lobbying for Congress to act to protect our wetlands and forests. Christian sportsmen organizations are also working with state and local governments to ensure that national forests and waterways are protected for future generations.

In the area of health care, evangelicals in general heed to the call for us to care for the sick and needy who are most the sick

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and needy who are most vulnerable. In fact, most states have incorporated into their state constitution the obligation of the state to provide means of health care for their citizens. Unfortunately, the cost of health care has begun to imperil the ability of state government and the private sector to meet this health care need. Christians are willing to provide tax support for the health care needs of their neighbors but want to build incentives for them to care for themselves as well, such as nutrition programs, obesity reduction and pharmaceutical assistance. They also, in general, support increasing tax subsidies from cigarettes and alcohol sales in order to combat their health-related complications, and act as an incentive to reduce their consumption. States could also direct funds that are earmarked for Homeland Security to devise a state wide trauma and disaster network that would direct and triage care to those medical centers and health care providers that have the expertise to respond to mass disasters and casualties in the event of a terrorist attack or natural disaster.

BETTER SOUTH: Let's look a little more closely at the environment. There seems to be an ongoing shift in attitudes among Christian evangelicals about confronting environmental issues. What's happening that is getting this group of Americans more involved in protecting the environment and what is driving this shift?

DR. BRINSON: The Bible is full of references to the environment. In Genesis, God told Adam to take care of the creation that he created for them and eat of the garden. In Numbers, Chapter 13, Joshua and Caleb report that the land of Canaan promised to them was a land of milk and honey and they brought back clusters of grapes, pomegranates and figs, and saw that the land that was unspoiled.

ABOUT RANDY BRINSON

Dr. Randy Brinson, a gastroenterologist from Montgomery, Alabama, is the founder and chairman of Redeem the Vote (www.redeemthevote.com), a nationally-known nonprofit organization founded in 2003 to improve voter registration and participation among young people of faith. During the 2000 election, evangelical participation was estimated to be limited by 4 million voters who had been disenfranchised. During the 2004 election, Redeem the Vote registered more than 78,000 people, outpacing all other faith-based voter outreach efforts combined. Subsequent data compiled by the Pew Foundation and *USA Today* confirmed that the value voters and increased participation among people of faith significantly influenced the election, with Redeem the Vote being one of the most influential. *USA Today* cited Redeem the Vote as one of the top 10 events involving election year entertainment. A total of 2,500 radio stations broadcast public service announcements for Redeem the Vote.

Brinson has been widely sought for his counsel and strategy on lobbying and voter motivation among Republican and Democratic strategists. Redeem the Vote has been widely featured on television and in print media. In 2006, Brinson formed Redeem the Vote Alabama to enhance and educate young people of faith on issues dealing with education and promoting education including public, private and parochial education.

Brinson, who is married with three sons, is a licensed lay minister and board-certified gastroenterologist. Brinson holds a bachelor's degree from Valdosta State College and a medical degree from the Medical College of Georgia. He completed his internship and residency at the University of Florida College of Medicine and a gastroenterology fellowship at the Medical College of Georgia. He served as staff gastroenterologist at Maxwell AFB in Alabama from 1987 to 1989 and has been in private practice in Montgomery since then.

This is what God envisioned for us today in America. The areas of our natural resources are vital to our survival and serve as a land that only God could create with his hand. We are entrusted to protect it. This in no way implies that we worship the Earth and see it as some kind of pagan deity, as some conservatives would attempt to stereotype those interested in the environment. It is truly our sacred duty to protect the Earth as we utilize the resources that God has provided to us. These ideas are not mutually exclusive. Most sportsmen today are professing Christians, yet they support initiatives that protect our natural forests, lakes, streams and waterways so that future generations can enjoy them. We must mitigate the man-made emissions that threaten our environment. Just as we are commanded to treat our bodies as the temple of the Holy Spirit, we must care for the environment and the world around us.

BETTER SOUTH: There are other areas, other than the environment, in which more evangelical Christians are finding themselves involved. For example, the news recently highlighted how the Rev. Joel Hunter of a large church in Longwood, Fla., recently decided against heading up the Christian Coalition because of his work to expand his agenda to include work on fighting poverty and HIV/AIDS. Another example: Rick Warren ("A Purpose-Driven Life") recently invited Sen. Barack Obama, among others, to talk at his megachurch in California. The subject -- the AIDS crisis. So to the point, is there something going on in the evangelical movement across the country that is causing it to reshape what it is doing into what many would consider more progressive ideals?

DR. BRINSON: Throughout the New Testament, Jesus speaks of being "in the world but not of the world." This message was further emphasized in the letters of Paul to the First century church. I believe this message is even more pertinent today as Christians attempt to influence the culture we live in and share the message of Christ to those around us. Some have sought to do this in the field of public service, extending help directly to the poor and those in need. Others have been called to the mission field to serve in lands far away, meeting both the spiritual and physical needs of the afflicted in other countries. Some have sought to be engaged in the political field, involved in public policy and speaking out on moral issues that confront our country.



Brinson

It is in these areas of public policy that we must be careful to truly be "salt and light" in the world and not be conformed to the world, so that we can be exemplify Christ in everything that we do.

Some have been criticized since some of their work in this area has been compromised by political expedience. Others, such as Rick Warren, have been criticized for working with individuals who openly disagree with many of the Biblical principles such as protecting life that many Christians uphold.

The most important thing that Christians should always ask themselves, "Does this activity bring more people to want to know Christ or is it a stumbling block to others?" If we are successful in sharing Christ with others without compromising the message of Christ, then we should look to ways that we can extend the love of Christ to others. However, we should never endorse or embrace the political views of a particular group or individuals

that do not exemplify Christian principles in action.

We should also understand that the love of Christ compels us to serve. We should not confuse this message to a political message that doesn't reflect God's call on our lives, and allow the ideological message to superimpose the calling of our faith.

BETTER SOUTH: Let's explore this last bit a little more. You say that Christian evangelicals shouldn't necessarily embrace one group's views. Given the past two decades of Christian evangelicals' close relationship with the Republican Party, this latest statement seems to be a maturing that one party doesn't have all of the right ideas. I know you've

faced a lot of criticism for how you are now working with Democrats and Republicans. What has taken place to open the eyes of mainstream

Christian evangelicals to this political realization - - that they need to concentrate on the ends (what Jesus would want) as well as the means (how to get there, regardless of party)? And second, what do you think has to be done to get more people to open their minds and hearts to what you've experienced about working on particular issues, regardless of party?

DR. BRINSON: First of all, I think both parties have realized the importance of faith as it applies to the voters in the last election and are doing a better job in building relationships within the faith community in order to understand what is important to them. I think it is also

important that both parties understand the basic tenets of mainstream Christian evangelicals are to protect life, support the family unit and traditional marriage, and to develop policies that provide tools to develop the spiritual and physical gifts each of us possess such as education, health care, environmental concerns and the workplace.

I believe there is some skepticism about the political process among most evangelicals in light of recent revelations among some politicians professing Christian values; however, at the same time, I think Christians are more willing to support those candidates that build relationships and show a true desire to help promote Christian values on a wide range of issues.

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Secondly, I think that evangelicals need to see more clearly how they can work in a bipartisan fashion to promote issues that deal with faith and this will take time as both parties develop relationships

within the evangelical community. In the last election, we saw tremendous support of candidates regardless of party affiliation when they engaged the evangelical community and actively sought their support. So, it can occur provided the parties engage those of us that regularly communicate with Christians via the Internet, radio, television and newsprint.

BETTER SOUTH: Now to a more general holiday question: From a policy perspective, what do you think Christian evangelicals would want for Christmas to make the South a better place to live and work?

DR. BRINSON: I think Christian evangelicals are proud of the spirit that exudes from the culture of the South. I think they want to see the spirit of the Christmas season continue throughout the year. The ability to celebrate family, traditions and selflessness that embodies what makes the South truly unique. I think most of us want to see the business community recognize the special place that we have for nature and making sure that we preserve our forest, lands and waterways as well as our pristine coastal areas. I think they want governmental policies to help our children reach their full potential so they can fulfill God's call

on their lives, such as an affordable college education and quality public education. I think they want to see us help our neighbors by selfless giving of our time and talents so that everyone can become self sufficient.

The spirit of Christmas is what Southerners want to see -- a sacrificial spirit of caring and devotion to our land and our citizens just as Christ came sacrificially for us.

ABOUT THE FIVE QUESTIONS SERIES

In the Center for a Better South's Five Questions project, staff members pose challenging questions to Southern leaders for their views on how to deal with public policy issues.

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