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Between Pulpit and Podium, Huckabee Straddles Fine Line

By [DAVID D. KIRKPATRICK](#) and [MICHAEL POWELL](#)

SPARTANBURG, S.C. — [Mike Huckabee](#) mentioned his faith only glancingly in his stump speech this week at North Greenville University in Tigerville, S.C. Discussing presidential decisions that will matter after he is long gone, he added: “By the way, I have made arrangements for what happens after that, and it’s all good. It’s all good.”

No one missed his allusion to the afterlife at North Greenville, a Southern Baptist college, where the college president pulled back Mr. Huckabee to expand on his “salvation experience” as a 10-year-old at summer Bible school.

“I didn’t want to get dirty, because I have never felt so clean in my life,” Mr. Huckabee told a hushed crowd of several hundred.

Between his droll performance and heartfelt encore runs the delicate line that Mr. Huckabee, a Southern Baptist minister before becoming governor of Arkansas, walks as he tries to fire up his fellow evangelical Christians to vote for one of their own without unnerving more secular-minded voters.

His advisers say he has counted on the support of existing networks of conservative Christian activists to help propel his shoestring campaign to a victory on Saturday in the [South Carolina](#) Republican presidential primary, just as they did in the Iowa caucuses two weeks ago.

Evangelicals are expected to make up an even larger share of South Carolina primary voters, and recent polls show Mr. Huckabee locked in a close race with Senator [John McCain](#) of Arizona.

“What we didn’t know initially was would all the Christian right activists that [Karl Rove](#) built up over the last eight years come to us and give us a ground force, and that is what we have proved over the last several weeks,” said Ed Rollins, Mr. Huckabee’s national chairman. Mr. Rollins described a two-pronged pitch, playing up Mr. Huckabee’s Christian convictions to fellow evangelists and his empathy for working people to more secular voters.

But as Mr. Huckabee has moved to the front of the Republican field and as the race will now quickly move beyond the Bible Belt, his ability to harmonize both elements is under new scrutiny from the liberal and

conservative sides of the pew.

Some evangelical observers say they marvel at Mr. Huckabee's knack for making even the most conservative tenets of orthodox Southern Baptist faith, about creation, the accuracy of the Bible or gender roles, sound downright moderate when he is speaking in television interviews or at public debates.

"He is like Houdini," said Oran P. Smith, president of a Christian conservative group, the Palmetto Family Council, admiring Mr. Huckabee's recent defense of an official Southern Baptist statement about the family that he endorsed eight years ago.

The statement said, "A wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband," and "serve as his helper in managing the household and nurturing the next generation."

Many Southern Baptists understand that to mean that just men are meant to occupy certain leadership roles like church pastor.

But in a debate last week in Myrtle Beach, S.C., Mr. Huckabee said the position required no subordination at all. It meant, he said, both husbands and wives "mutually showing their affection and submission as unto the Lord."

"Biblically," he added, "marriage is a 100-100 deal. Each partner gives 100 percent of their devotion to the other."

Mr. Smith said, "It was masterful." He was "still struggling," Mr. Smith added, to understand just how Mr. Huckabee had put together his answer.

Mr. Huckabee has not always been so graceful. Speaking to a not-particularly religious crowd near Detroit on Monday, before the Michigan primary, he slipped into an argument to amend the Constitution to ban abortion and same-sex marriage, "so it's in God's standards, rather than try to change God's standards."

"Does it mean that the Constitution does not measure up to God's standards? Is the Constitution anti-God?" asked Ted Olsen, an influential online commentator for an evangelical standard-bearer, Christianity Today. "Honestly, I'm thinking that this quote probably cost Huckabee more evangelical votes than it won him."

By Friday morning, Mr. Huckabee had backed away from his comments, saying in an interview with CNN that he understood the Constitution as a "secular document" and had described his support for those amendments "a little more awkwardly than I have in the past."

In debates and other interviews, Mr. Huckabee has frequently complained he is unfairly singled out for theological questions. "Everybody says religion is off limits, except we always can ask me the religious

question,” he said in the recent Republican debate in Myrtle Beach.

And he has deflected some religious questions like his views about the eternity awaiting non-Christians. He has definite views about that, he said, but they are not relevant to public office.

In another debate, though, he interrupted [Rudolph W. Giuliani](#) for a chance to answer a religious question.

“Can I help you out, Mayor, on this one?” Mr. Huckabee volunteered.

But although his closing speeches barely mention religion, his final commercials here, on television and Christian radio, have entirely focused on his Christian credentials. “Faith doesn’t just influence me,” Mr. Huckabee says in one commercial. “It defines me.”

He has indeed made an art of escaping politically delicate questions about theology. He has said he favors the biblical account of creation over Darwinian evolution, but he also said he considered the two approaches largely compatible, with God’s potential role limited to the original jump-start, a view many liberal Christians endorse.

“Did he take the rib out of Adam?” Mr. Huckabee told [Charlie Rose](#) in an interview. “I have no reason to believe he didn’t. But I don’t know.”

He said there was “a strong body of science that really can put forth the argument for an evolutionary process,” but also “room for believing” in God as “a prime mover” in the process.

Such answers may not be complete statements of Southern Baptist orthodoxy, Mr. Smith of the Palmetto Family Council said, but a fuller statement of a “judgmental” faith is not likely to win Mr. Huckabee many votes outside the evangelical world.

The real question, Mr. Smith added, is, How does he decide when to say, “I am not going to answer that,” and when to do his Houdini routine?

David D. Kirkpatrick reported from Washington, and Michael Powell from South Carolina.

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