

Huckabee: Is church tax-exemption worth it?

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HOUSTON (ABP)—Former Arkansas governor turned media personality Mike Huckabee asked Southern Baptist pastors to consider whether tax breaks from the government are worth the accompanying restrictions on political speech.

The former pastor and president of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention said at a pastors' conference prior to the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in Houston recent reports the IRS targeted certain groups for greater scrutiny should cause great concern about religious freedom in the United States.

"The recent revelations that the Internal Revenue Service has been targeting people of faith—people who are conservative, people who are pro-Israel—and have been picking out the parts of belief and speech and faith that government seems to approve and that which it doesn't approve has brought up a very important reality that I think, sooner or later, as believers, we need to confront," said Huckabee, host of a top-rated Fox News Channel weekend program.

Reconsider tax deductions

"You may not clap real loud for this, but at least hear me out and think about it and pray about it. I think we need to recognize that it may be time to quit worrying so much about the tax code and start thinking more about the truth of the living God, and if it means that we give up tax-exempt status and tax deductions for charitable contributions, I choose freedom more than I choose a deduction that the government gives me permission to say what God wants me to say."

Huckabee said it may be time for churches to say: "Keep your deductions. Keep the exemptions. We stand more faithful with what God would have us to say, and we choose our freedom more than our financial benefit."

"I must be very honest and tell you; I have never given a dime to God that I gave solely because it was a tax decision," Huckabee said. "And if you've got people in your church who are giving because it's a tax decision, then they ought to keep their money. They need it more than God does."

A word to the GOP

Huckabee, who finished second to John McCain for the Republican nomination for president in 2008, said the GOP should not take conservative evangelical votes for granted.

"I'm not here to be political, but I want to be prophetic and clear in saying this," Huckabee said. "Of late, the Republican Party has tried to tell those of us who are evangelicals that maybe we need to dial it back a little bit when it comes to issues like the sanctity of life and the holiness of marriage and maybe just ease off.

"Well, I've got a news flash for the GOP. I plan to take my last ride in life on a white horse, not on an elephant and not on a donkey, and I will stick with the word of God and if the party, any party, goes a different way, I stick with Jesus. I believe he is forever."