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In Rebuking Minister, McCain May Have Alienated Evangelicals

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By Kimberly Kindy
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Thursday, May 29, 2008; A08

The Rev. [Rod Parsley](#) paces the stage, wiping his forehead and shouting to his congregation in a taped sermon that marriage is under attack by "tortured and angry homosexuals."

During another of his nationally broadcast television shows, he compares [Planned Parenthood](#) to the [Ku Klux Klan](#), saying that its goal is to "eliminate" blacks. And at another service at his 12,000-member World Harvest Church in Columbus, Ohio, he punches the air and calls Islam a "false religion" that God has told America to destroy.

"We were built for battle! We were created for conflict! We get *off* on warfare!" he adds.

Images of one of the nation's rising stars of television evangelism are widely available on DVDs and Web sites, with sermons that are almost certain to inflame some segment of the voting public. But in its quest to secure support from evangelical Christians, the campaign of presumptive Republican presidential nominee [John McCain](#) did not note a long record of inflammatory statements by Parsley and the Rev. [John Hagee](#) of Texas, another TV evangelist, until long after McCain had accepted their endorsements.

The move backfired last week when clips of the ministers' sermons gained national attention, prompting McCain to reject their support. The candidate's abrupt turnabout brought criticism not only from secular viewers, who questioned why he had aligned himself with controversial religious voices, but also from evangelicals, who said he may have alienated a powerful bloc of potential Republican voters.

"He wants us to support him, but as soon as his back was against the wall, he overreacted. He is now less likely to get the evangelical vote and will have a difficult time getting strong endorsements from other ministers," said Bishop Harry R. Jackson Jr., founder and chairman of the High Impact Leadership Coalition, an evangelical group that advises ministers on political and policy issues.

"For McCain to have to repudiate these people is much worse than ever having their endorsement in the first place," said Doug Wead, a political consultant who ranked 1,000 evangelical pastors for former president [George H.W. Bush](#) to court for endorsements. "If evangelical Christians feel this is an attack on them, even if they don't agree with Parsley and Hagee or follow them, it could galvanize them against McCain."

In February, McCain appeared with Parsley to accept his endorsement and called him a "spiritual guide." But last week, after learning more about Parsley's sermons, the senator said: "I believe that even though he endorsed me, and I didn't endorse him, the fact is that I repudiate such talk, and I reject his endorsement."

A McCain campaign official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the matter, blamed the problem on short staffing early this year, when a handful of people were charged with screening potential endorsers. With more staff now aboard, he said, such oversights should not happen again.

Parsley said in a statement that he does not fault McCain, and he blamed the fallout on unidentified "political hit squads."

Parsley has growing clout among evangelical Christians, a group he calls the "largest special interest group in America." The pastor has said that he was divinely placed in Ohio to help influence presidential elections, telling a Christian magazine that he believes "in the geographic locating abilities of the Holy Spirit."

Like Hagee, Parsley is a leader in a nondenominational movement within evangelical Christian churches, called "Word of Faith," that subscribes to a "prosperity gospel." It teaches that followers not only save their souls when they accept Jesus but also gain power to claim personal wealth and physical health through prayer and the spoken word.

"It's a comprehensive salvation plan," said Shayne Lee, a sociologist and religion expert at [Tulane University](#) in New Orleans. "It teaches that you can pull your own self up by your own bootstraps."

Parsley tells people that he lives his own message. He and his family reside in a 7,462-square-foot house, valued at more than \$1 million, on a 24-acre gated property.

At age 51, he is more than two decades younger than [Pat Robertson](#), the 78-year-old chairman of the Christian Broadcasting Network, and is considered to be among the next generation of leaders who will be major political players. Last year, the Religion News Service called Parsley one of the nation's top 10 influential "kingmakers."

Using his mega-church, his television and radio shows, and two best-selling books, Parsley elevated his status among the political elite. In 2004, he campaigned for [President Bush](#) in Ohio, where he won a narrow victory.

"He started appearing on 'Larry King Live.' He wrote books that many people were reading. He became a force among politicians," Lee said. "McCain had to take him seriously."

Parsley's merging of church and politics has triggered charges of illegal electioneering, which prompted him in 2004 to found the Center for Moral Clarity as an outside force to advocate for laws banning abortion and same-sex marriage, and limiting pornography and sexually oriented businesses. It sent voter's guides to thousands of pastors.

"He wants us of one accord, that's for sure. He has regular teleconferences with us to tell us where he stands on things," said Michele Hughes, a Detroit pastor who was ordained by Parsley.

In 2005, Parsley created a voter registration organization called Reformation Ohio, telling Christians that it was time to "lock and load" and to prepare for a "Holy Ghost invasion" of government.

Parsley's effort to create a separate political operation has not silenced his critics. In January 2006, a complaint filed with the [Internal Revenue Service](#) by 31 Ohio clergy accused Parsley's operations of improper partisan activities. The IRS has declined to comment.

In response to McCain's repudiation, Parsley said in a statement that he still supports the candidate and that he does not plan to disappear from the political scene.

"I will continue that work in the belief that I serve my God and my nation by doing so," he said. "Yet I will continue to believe that faith should inform public policy."

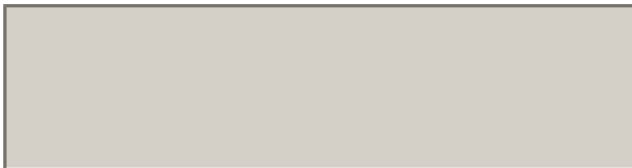
Research editor Alice Critics and staff researchers Meg Smith and Madonna Lebling contributed to this report.

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