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(Unedited Transcript)

Thank you so much, and I certainly want to thank the conference for the invitation. I don't think that it's an accident that after lunch, we also have the two Baptist preachers, because we know how difficult it can be right after a nice meal. And so we are pretty good at throwing things, and hitting deacons who fall asleep that practice perhaps might be useful at this time.

(Laughter.)

I've heard so much since I have been here. I did not know Father Baroni personally. But having served at Ebenezer Baptist Church as a full-time assistant pastor, co-pastor for six years, and having worked with the Southern Christian leadership conference in a national capacity, I certainly have heard of Father Geno and his dedication 0174and his work.

I want to talk specifically -- though it has already been alluded to -- the black church. And faith in politics, and most particularly do I want to focus on the whole question of faith-based initiative from an African-American perspective, and how that will impact, I believe, everybody in this room.

The black church I believe is under assault from without and from within. These assaults take on social, economic, political, and moral dimensions. But the motivation behind these assaults, lies, deceptions, is number one, to cause division among black religious leadership; secondly, to create and promote a new breed of black leadership that is defined by conservative ideas, ideologies, and theologies. And thirdly, to bring a small percentage of black voters into the Republican Party.

Some might argue this is a fairly new phenomenon. However, with just a cursory view of history we will find that there has been an organized and intentional strategy to bring a 0175few black voters into the Republican Party taking back to the days of Ronald Reagan. Even the fact that is given, that white America, white voting America is primarily divided right down the middle: 50-50, Democrats-Republicans.

The discontent of some African-Americans with their advancement has become an opportunity for infiltration, particularly by conservative evangelicals. I firmly believe that every time a black pastor crosses over to the Republican Party, or to the side of conservative evangelicals, it will affect your civil liberties. Every time a black pastor crosses over, it will affect your child and your grandchild's education. Every single time a black pastor, particularly those from mega-churches, crosses over, it will affect your health and your health care.

Because the percentage of difference that African-American pastors bring to the political process and to the electorate is what tilts the balance. The effect that it will have on your retirement and your Social Security, whether or not your son or your 0176daughter will be able to get or afford a higher education to a great degree, in my humble opinion, is determined by to what degree we allow black pastors to continue to be wooed by conservative evangelicals. And by that I mean faith-based initiatives.

Every time another black pastor crosses over, it is going to impact our environment. It's going to impact and determine how much you pay for your gas when you go to the pumps.

Therefore, this phenomenon is one that we all need to take a critical look at. It is a phenomenon that we all must examine, because whether you are black or Hispanic or an immigrant, it will impact public policy.

And that's where the rubber hits the road. It's about public policy. It is a given fact that the gatekeepers in the African-American communities are our pastors and our religious leaders. There's no way to get around it. We love politicians, we love doctors, we love lawyers, we love teachers, but the gatekeepers in the African-American communities are our pastors and our religious leaders. The black church gave birth to our colleges, our universities, our businesses, and many of our social and political institutions.

The black church has been a vehicle for white politicians seeking the support of black voters for decades. It is almost a given that if any politician could garner the support of the black pastor, then the votes of the parishioners were to follow. As black pastors became more politically astute, and sophisticated, white conservative evangelicals, radical white conservative evangelicals, had to devise a more appealing enticer to get the black vote.

African-American pastors are historically socially and politically progressive. But when you begin to deal with the Bible and morality, we are historically conservative. White conservative evangelicals, in my humble opinion, have sought to exploit this dichotomy. They get it, they understand black pastors. Sometimes I believe more than some black pastors understand black pastors.

There are some who believe that it was Jimmy Carter -- thanks to Geno and others -- who in 1976, started (unintelligible) to talk about his faith. Remember the question, "Mr. President, have you ever lusted?" Mr. President, Jimmy Carter, began to talk about his faith. He was a Southern Baptist, he was an evangelical. He won the election. However, he did not survive.

This practice, though, began to give rise to questions about the separation of church and state, because Carter was not conservative enough for some evangelicals. A more aggressive element of the conservative evangelicals sided with candidate Ronald Reagan. Reagan won, and evangelicals began to take credit for Reagan winning. And they began to make certain demands upon President Reagan, and the Republican Party, when in reality, it was a number of factors that won the election for Ronald Reagan.

Conservative evangelicals became more and more involved in the formation of the platform of the Republican Party. They began to talk more and more about moral decay in America, and the need to get America back on track, whatever that means. They understood that only elected and appointed officials set public policy. As the economy began to get more and more difficult, and worse and worse, they raised many questions then about affirmative action, about employment opportunities, and about education, or vouchers.

As the Reagan era was coming to an end, the radical conservative evangelicals sought a candidate for the highest office in the land. That candidate, brothers and sisters, was Pat Robertson. Pat Robertson emerged as the new voice of the conservative evangelicals. Pat Robertson ran in 1988, but gave birth and lost to the Godfather of all political conservative theological movements; known as the Christian Coalition. It was neither.

That went right over some of you all, but you'll get it in a minute.

(Laughter.)

Under the leadership of Ralph Reed, who served as his executive director of the Christian Coalition, the notion of establishing a theocracy emerged. A theocracy, a government of God. Their aim was to have their version of Christianity as the dominant political force in American politics. No longer were they concerned about the separation of church and state. They desired a government of church governing and setting the policy of the state.

The Christian Coalition developed what they call a "bottom-up" political strategy, that started organizing at the grassroots level and took over local school boards, local governments, they took over your communities without your even knowing it. They were able to acquire large sums of money from conservative foundations, and they began to purchase political clout. As their numbers and influence began to grow, they sought out ways and strategies to build alliances.

One obvious alliance for them was the black church, black pastors, who they believed shared their religious views on some key issues. Key to the success of the Christian Coalition's agenda was getting black pastors to support them on two fronts: anti-abortion, an anti-homosexuality. These two wedge issues resonated with the belief systems and the biblical interpretation of many African-American pastors. It did not matter to the Christian Coalition, or the radical conservative evangelicals, that these two issues would cause great consternation and division within the African-American community.

All that mattered to them was that they could get a few more votes on their side of the agenda. Some pastors saw these two issues as overriding and determinative issues for casting their votes. African-American pastors began to make distinctions between religious issues and political issues, between moral issues and economic issues. The irony is that no conservative evangelicals made such distinctions. For the evangelicals, all that they were concerned about was the vote.

Be clear. Faith-based initiatives is not about meeting personal needs. Faith-based initiatives is not about the social, nor is it about compassion. It is not about human rights. Faith-based initiatives is about politics. It is about votes. And that is the only reason that many adhere to it, and abide by it. African-American pastors, when forced to choose between religious beliefs and political expediency, would choose their religious beliefs in a second.

This is what happened to us. In 1994, the Christian Coalition and the conservative evangelicals had achieved their goal of taking over the United States Congress. Under the leadership of Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, they launched -- as you heard about this morning -- the "Contract with America" campaign. This was their attempt to solidify their evangelical base, and to bring into the fold more African-American support. They

continued to promote good government as a government under God, with Christian moral values as the standard. And they sought to legislate morality, and to impose their views upon the American population -- impose. Even though Bill Clinton was elected in 1992, we had to contend with the rising tide of radical conservative evangelicals, who were finding and exercising their newly-found political strength.

With a Republican-controlled House of Representatives in 1996, Charitable Choice was passed. Although this legislation was not initially funded, it opened the door to more monies going to faith-based organizations, most especially churches. And it should be noted that not a single dollar of new money has ever gone to the faith-based initiatives. The monies were simply diverted from already existing, struggling, social federal programs.

What has emerged since conservative evangelicals have come to power is a politics of morality. It is a morality as defined by one group, with the intent to impose its legislative agendas upon the masses. It is a politics that narrowly defines biblical interpretations, that seek to excite the emotions of a people. It is first and foremost a divisive politics. It would be safe to say that our nation is perhaps more divided now than it has ever been. It is clear that one group thinks that they alone speak for God, and all who disagree with them, especially like Father Baroni, would be considered immoral and non-Christian, by their definition. It does not concern them that this narrow view of morality negates and neglects the other mandates of the Gospel that relate to the poor. For some strange and irreconcilable reason, the radical conservative evangelicals do not see their own contradictions. Unfortunately, for too many African-American pastors have fallen prey to this politically pragmatic, morally deficient, narrowly-defined view as well.

We have witnessed through the use of money, faith-based initiatives, attempt after attempt to buy favor from black pastors. Due to the fact that black churches are already struggling for cash to support very worthy and needed social programs, they become easy prey for deception, money grabbing. Churches, synagogues, and other faith-based entities have been receiving government monies for decades. That's what Geno did. It is not a new phenomenon. Some folks just discovered the family, as if the family is some new phenomenon. This can be achieved by setting up -- as Father Baroni did -- your own organization, a 501(c)3, a separate board of directors, separate account; we have been doing this for decades.

It is a mistake to believe that faith-based is a new initiative. It is an old initiative by a somewhat new name with one major difference: under this new initiative, monies can be given directly to churches, and some even promote commingling them funds.

Religious entities and churches can discriminate. They can require religious practices in order to receive the benefits of the monies, and they can proselytize. All of this can be done while using taxpayer monies. This violates several of the basic principles of our democracy, as well as our Constitution.

Now, black pastors are being forced to compete for limited money against some of their own colleagues in the ministry. Clearly some black pastors who perhaps might share some of the religious views of the conservative evangelicals on issues regarding abortion or homosexuality, or gay marriages, they have been granted special privileges for acquiring access to the faith-based grants.

Black pastors, however, who did not share the social agenda of the Republican Party find themselves, like me, on the outside. This concept and loyalty reached a fever pitch just a few months ago in the gay marriage issue, which found its way on the ballot in approximately 13 states in 2004, and passed in 11 states. People voted not for George W. Bush, but against gay marriage. In order to achieve an increase in black support, the radical conservative evangelicals had to select their own black leaders. They had to redefine black leadership. They achieved this not only through shared ideological and theological views, but also, they awarded faith-based grants. There are churches that received in excess of \$1 million for their support. I can name a few of them.

Even some evangelicals who were initially opposed the faith-based grants because -- they were very solid at the beginning. You may recall that one of the first opponents was Pat Robertson. Went on the air of the 700 Club, and then got a half \$1 million grant for Operation Blessing, and we have not heard a word from Pat Robertson since then. Even under the Katrina relief, as FEMA and Red Cross and others are distributing, if you look at it closely, one of the major recipients of monies that we have been donating has been operation Blessing. As a few black pastors have been awarded faith-based grants and other foundation and corporate support for their various ministries, they have become more and more silent against harmful governmental social policies.

Among those who fall prey, I'm gonna call a few names: Reverend Eugene Rivers of Azusa Christian Community in Boston. Bishop Charles Blake of the West Angeles church of God in Christ, in Los Angeles. Bishop Harry R. Jackson of the Hope Christian Church in Maryland. And then there is a brother who really needs prayer, Reverend Jesse Lee Peterson of the Bond organization that in Los Angeles. Even on his web site it has the Heritage Foundation as one of his sponsors.

Now conservative black pastors are being sought to promote the agendas of the radical evangelicals.

Five more minutes. I'm a black Baptist preacher, I've got to do it.

(Laughter.)

This new conservative political morality is narrow, intent in its deception, short on its theological reflection, and committed in its quest to establish a new theocratic reality. By employing conservative think tanks, conservative radio and television, conservative foundations, conservative scholars, conservative theologians, conservative pastors, conservative legislations, and most importantly now, conservative judges; they aim to create a national and world view that represents their understanding and interpretation of Scripture.

As long as some black pastors allow "Focus on the Family" with James Dobson, "Traditional Values" with Lou Sheldon, the Heritage Foundation, to dictate the direction of their work, the black church and the black community is in peril.

We must demonstrate by example that the black church is not for sale. We simply cannot allow our -- as one of our members says -- our nonprofits to make us non-prophets. We understand and we affirm that it is hard to bark when you have a big bone in your mouth. And therefore -- and I think Father Geno would say this -- number one, fight the

budget reconciliation amendment, with perverse cuts to Medicaid, Medicare, food stamps. The budget is a moral document.

Number two, I believe that Geno would say, fight the \$7 billion tax cut to the rich.

Number three, increase community block grants to our states and our local communities.

Number four, expand support for technical education in urban and in rural sectors.

Five, disband the whole notion of minimum wage, and establish a federal living wage amendment.

Six, progressive funders and donors must produce a cadre of young scholars and journalists to carry the progressive message and agenda. This means providing fellowships, scholarships, as well as publications.

Number seven, establish progressive alliances on colleges and University campuses across the country, like Young People For, and 0190we are doing that.

Eight, support black religious voices and other progressive voices in the media, in print, and TV, to balance and to counter the conservative radical evangelicals.

Nine, help to establish and support more community development corporations in urban centers across America, so as to empower people at the grassroots level.

And 10, seek authentic, authentic voter reform, that makes it easier for every American citizen to fully participate in the democratic process. Something is wrong when it's easier to vote in Iraq that it is to vote in the United States of America.

As we critically examine the plight of the Americans and the African American community, and how this administration has misled, deceived, and wooed black pastors, we must decide to make jobs, healthcare, education, economic empowerment, Medicaid and Medicare, Social Security, taxes, voting rights, and human right, war and peace; the critical moral and theological issues of our agenda, and of our time. 0191 We cannot yield another inch, nor devote a single moment to the perpetuation of bigotry and hatred under disguise of Christian morality. We can no longer allow faith-based grants to be used as a political tool to hijack true, authentic prophetic voice.

In the practice of the black church: the black church must regain its voice in a political arena gone mad with prosperity, greed, and deception. We must affirm, as I believe Father Baroni would affirm, that we pay taxes just like everybody else pays taxes, and are entitled to monies from our government, just like any other group. But we will not sell our history, we will not sell our heritage, nor our future, for political patronage or favor.

We will reclaim the voices of Amos, and Isaiah, and the other prophets, as we fight for justice, for truth, for tolerance, for diversity, for compassion, and fairness, for every American citizen. Thank you.