

Conservative Christian Evangelicals Take Friendly Fire from Ken Connor

by Bill Berkowitz

In a series of columns in Ideas in Action, Connor, the former head of the Family Research Council, lambastes Tom DeLay, GOP opportunism and the Christian Coalition, and suggests engaging in civil debate with an emerging "Christian left"

In early April, Ken Connor expressed his dismay that the scandal-ridden former Congressman Tom DeLay had been rapturously received by the crowd at the late-March "War on Christians and the Values Voters in 2006" conference. In a column, he observed that "the willingness of far too many Christian conservatives to cast a deaf ear and a blind eye to DeLay's misdeeds was extremely disheartening.

In another column, Connor criticized the Christian Coalition of Alabama for its "series of scathing attack ads" that were an "inaccurate and unfair attack on trial lawyers." And in another, he suggested that liberal religious leaders shouldn't be dismissed out of hand, and should be engaged in a sincere and civil debate. In yet another column, he maintained that it would be mistaken if "some conservatives" dismiss Al Gore's arguments [about Global warming] simply because he is Al Gore.

In a recent column for the Center for a Just Society's Ideas in Action newsletter, Connor cautioned Christian conservatives about becoming total pawns of the Republican Party.

Ken Connor is a trial attorney and Chairman of the Center for a Just Society, who knows the powerful organizations of the Religious Right from the inside, having once headed the Family Research Council (FRC), Washington, D.C.'s most prominent "family and faith" lobbying group.

Connor, who had succeeded former Reagan administration official Gary Bauer at the FRC, resigned from the organization in July 2003, citing unspecified "professional and personal reasons." According to a posting at Christianity Today, Connor left the organization because "of a disagreement with members of the board of directors over the proposed Federal Marriage Amendment." Some have speculated that Connor resigned because the organization was determined to strip the "Research" function "the gathering facts and documentation -- from the operation and was more interested in raising its profile through rhetoric and speechifying.

In 2005, Connor, along with Colin Stewart -- who served as Executive Vice President for the FRC -- and Genevieve Wood -- who served for three years as Vice President for Communications at the FRC -- co-founded the Center for a Just Society. In addition to being the organization's Chairman he is also one of its principle spokespersons. . .

Only a pawn?

In Connor's provocative late-July column entitled "Diamonds and Pearls: Are Christian Conservatives Being Bought Off?" Connor suggested that the GOP was trying to buy off "values voters" by presenting a flurry of conservative legislative initiatives that would hopefully appeal to its base:

As we approach the upcoming election, the Senate has been trying to energize the evangelical base by voting on bills supported by many at the grassroots level. The constitutional amendment against flag burning had little chance of ultimate success, but was brought to the floor anyway. The Federal Marriage Amendment had even less chance, but was voted on all the same. There are some authentic diamonds and pearls in the Senate's agenda. The bill that would prohibit the transport of minors across state lines for abortion without parental notification was brought before the Senate, and passed. Also, congress may soon debate a voucher program for students trapped in poor public schools.

We are glad these subjects are finally being debated. Nevertheless, few of these issues have been on the radar screen for the last year-and-a-half. Now, however, just before the election they become "priorities." Coincidence or calculation? A cynic might argue that most Republican senators really don't care about these subjects and that they are just doing what needs to be done to win in November. One who is not a cynic might easily come to the same conclusion.

Tony Perkins, the current head man at the Family Research Council has a less nuanced view of the GOP's legislative machinations. Recently, Family Research Council Action, the legislative action arm of Perkins' Family Research Council -- along with co-sponsors Dr. James Dobson's Focus on the Family Action, Rev.

Donald Wildmon's American Family Association Action, and Gary Bauer's Americans United to Preserve Marriage " announced the first annual "Washington Briefing: Values Voter Summit," scheduled for Washington, D.C. on September 22-24.

In late-July, Perkins issued the following statement:

We have seen an intense two weeks of value votes in Congress with the Pledge Protection Act, Internet Gambling, Preserving Mt. Soledad, Disaster Recovery and a Resolution supporting Responsible Fatherhood. We've had victories with the Broadcast Decency Enforcement Act of 2005, Fetus Farming Prohibition Act, Freedom to Display the American Flag Act, and the Children's Safety and Violent Crime Reduction Act all signed into law in the past six weeks. We continue to see victories in the courts recognizing the will of the voters on traditional marriage. This conference in September will be a celebration of our victories and a strategy ensuring that values issues are high on the agenda for the upcoming elections. The nation saw two years ago what value voters can do at the voting booth. The past few weeks showed results. Now, we must continue the momentum behind this nation's strongest movement, Values Voters."

Recognizing an emerging Christian left

Connor's early-July column entitled "Come Let Us Reason Together" which later in the month appeared in the Washington Times -- recognized that the "Christian left" was finally "making its voice heard," and suggested that conservative evangelicals "should not be afraid to engage the evangelical left's ideas in a spirit of love. It would be a mistake, as we begin this dialogue, to view these men and women as "political enemies" rather than fellow members of the body of Christ. From the outset, we should insist that our discussions be grounded in our mutual love of Christ rather than our differing political commitments. Let Christ be the foundation upon which we all stand."

Many liberal evangelicals claim that the church, in its political thinking, has neglected a major aspect of

Christ's concern: the poor and vulnerable. Their most cherished phrase is "social justice", and they say we conservatives have neglected it. Again, let's not dismiss this criticism out of hand. As I have written in the past, the Bible is unequivocal about our responsibility toward the poor. As Christians, we should not be shy about discussing our responsibility toward the "least of these," and we should think creatively about different ways in which we can serve them.

Connor pointed out that "The emergence of a progressive evangelical movement affords a wonderful opportunity to foster a public discussion about the role of faith in civic life. Sometimes, it must be admitted, we get lazy in our political thinking. We know that at some point we thought through the reasons behind our positions, but maybe that was years ago. It is always helpful to remember why we believe what we believe, reviewing our old arguments to see if they are still strong. Even worse, sometimes we allow others in the "conservative coalition" to do our political thinking for us, even when they come from very secular starting points. Liberal evangelicals help us because they share our foundational commitment to Christ, yet they see political questions in a different light. As we actively dialogue with them about our political positions, hopefully both sides will benefit. Most importantly, let us pray that Christ will be glorified in the way we conduct our conversation."

Connor has also weighed in on corporate malfeasance and greed. In his column entitled "Pierced With Many Sorrows: Greed and Corporate Corruption," Connor pointed out that while the Center for a Just Society is a "strong supporter of the capitalist economic system [and] the value of free markets." But "when capitalism is unrestrained by moral scruples the result is often rapacious greed. Sweat shops, child labor, unsafe workplaces, exploitation of the poor, dangerous products" all are manifestations of a form of economic Darwinism that measures success solely in economic terms. All are emblematic of what happens when the love of money trumps everything else. Market mechanisms are very efficient, but they can also be costly to the disadvantaged and powerless. If we are to have a just society, market mechanisms need to be buffered with virtues like honesty, love, and unselfishness. If we are to have a just society, we must reclaim the moral code that once served as an important counter-balance to the excesses of capitalism."

Make no mistake, Ken Connor is conservative to the core " he represented Florida Governor Jeb Bush in the Terri Schiavo case, and headed up Florida Right to Life, opposes embryonic stem cell research and has campaigned for a robust conservative judiciary. In taking on Tom DeLay, rapacious corporations, the GOP's recent legislative strategy, and recognizing that an emerging evangelical left is worthy of being dealt with in a civil and measured manner, however, Connor strays from the GOP's traditional talking points. In this period where the shrill paranoid style of Ann Coulter and the know-nothingness of Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity reign supreme amongst conservatives, whether Connor's kinder, gentler and more thoughtful approach has legs remains to be seen.

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