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Interview with Hugh Hewitt: The Future of Evangelicalism

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I was pleased to talk to my Salem Radio colleague Hugh Hewitt on his radio program on February 2, 2009. Hugh is a great conversationalist and interviewer; whose radio show is always truly interesting. He is an attorney, law professor, commentator, and national radio host. Here is a [transcript](#) of that conversation, courtesy of the [Hugh Hewitt Show](#) and [Townhall.com](#).

HH: I'm devoting a series of conversations early this year with leading figures in the Evangelical movement about what happened in November, when so many self-proclaimed Evangelicals voted for Barack Obama, what does the movement do next if it does anything at all in politics, and why it ought to do one or the other. Joining me today to talk about this half hour is one of the leading influential Evangelical theologians and thinkers in the United States, because Dr. Albert Mohler is the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, where he presides over the education and spiritual formation of thousands of young men and women who will be entering into ministry across the United States. Dr. Mohler, welcome back to the Hugh Hewitt Show.

AM: Hugh, it's always good to be with you, thank you.

HH: Welcome back to the United States, by the way. You've just returned from Turkey. I don't know how much you can say about that trip, but any impressions for the rest of the country to know about?

AM: Well, I think it's really clear that Turkey's at a strategic turning point in the history of that nation in terms of its relationship to the West, its relationship to Islam, a pervasively Islamic civilization that had been nonetheless rather secular in terms of its government. The winds have changed there, so just given a lot of what we're concerned about, the future of Turkey's a pretty important question, especially given its geographic location, geopolitical significance. It's a big question for the future.

HH: I'll be looking to see what you write on your blog about that. By the way, Dr. Mohler blogs. All you have to do is put in blog and Albert Mohler, and you'll get there. Let's go to the big question, Albert Mohler. Were you surprised by how Evangelicals voted in the fall?

AM: I was not surprised by the time we got there, Hugh. I am surprised somewhat given the big picture, looking over the last two or three years, if you just look at the Evangelical voting patterns in the years 2000, 2004, and then jump to 2008, clearly something happened. And I think the biggest explanation there is a generational change. I think we're really looking at the fact that you've got a significant number of Evangelicals voting in 2008 who were in middle school or earlier than that in the year 2000, then in 2004. And clearly, there's a new agenda here. There are some new interests, some new concerns, and this is a new challenge for us, I think.

HH: As you talk with two distinct cohorts, the leadership elites in the Evangelical, with whom you are in daily contact, and your students, what are the reactions in those two groups to the events of November?



AM: Well, I'll tell you, the older Evangelical leadership is in danger right now of looking really old, and old not just in chronological terms, but more or less, kind of acting as if the game hasn't changed, as if we're not looking at a brand new cultural challenge, and a new political reality. And so I would say that the younger Evangelicals that I look at every single day, and they are so deeply committed, so convictional, they're basically wondering if a lot of the older Evangelical leaders are really looking to the future, or are really just kind of living in the 80s while the 80s are long gone. So I think there's a crucial credibility issue there.

HH: Now tell people a little bit about Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, so they understand, so this audience understands when you speak about young Evangelicals, you know of which you speak.

AM: Well, I'm looking at over four thousand of them. And we're a very clearly conservative institution serving as the flagship institution of the Southern Baptist Convention. Folks know what we represent – a very conservative, doctrinally defined Evangelical Christianity. So when I look out, I'm not looking at a lot of young people trying to find themselves. I'm looking out at young people who've felt a real call to ministry and have shown up at an institution that they understand is very conservative and committed to Evangelical understandings of the Gospel and Biblical authority. So they're not here by accident.

HH: Now I want to run down some of the standard issues about which I've written a lot and you've written a lot. But I'd like you to tell me what these four thousand, sort of the vanguard of Evangelicalism in America over the next thirty years, think about this. First of all, where do they get their political information from?

AM: Well, you know, that's really interesting. Very few of them will read a newspaper. Now they'll go to newspaper websites, but the reality is that this really is an internet, wired, digital generation. So when they're sending me information, and a lot of them are so generous to send me things they think I ought to see, it's always a link. I can't remember the last time I opened an envelope and pulled out an article. These days, it's all digital. They're getting their information from peer-directed sites, where someone will say look at this, look at that. They're reading blogs, and the blogs are really gaining in this generation in terms of a mainstream kind of orientation of news, especially when they link to established news sources. And then the other thing is, they're watching some of the most amazing things on television. There's not doubt that Stephen Colbert, John Stewart, they're really reaching a lot of young people with pseudo news.

HH: Even your students? Even these Southern Baptist kids who are going to become pastors of Word and Sacrament?

AM: They're at least looking at it. I'm not saying that they at all buy into the worldview, but they understand that their peer cohort, their friends, the people that they're going to run into, the people they're trying to reach, are watching that. And of course, they're seeing the same stuff.

HH: What about talk radio, like Rush and Sean and Michael Medved and Prager and me? Do these people listen at all to the traditional conservative venue?

AM: You know, they are interested, but in many cases, they just don't live the kind of lifestyle in which they're going to be in one place at one time to listen to talk radio. So they'll catch snippets here and there, they'll be in their car. They'll go to the websites. They'll go to your website, pull down your stuff. When they can, they'll listen to your program, the same thing with others. But you don't have the kind of commitment to talk radio you find among others. They're also a podcasting generation, Hugh, and so they're listening to you, but they're listening to you while they're doing their workout, and when they're doing other things. And that means they're not calling into our program, because they're listening to us at Two in the morning.

HH: How about Facebook, and Dr. Al Mohler is my guest, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, how are you communicating with them through the new social media – Twitter, Facebook, et cetera?

AM: I Twitter all day long, and I'm on Facebook with thousands of friends that are mostly in that age cohort. You know, like one of my students said to me, if you're not on Facebook, you don't exist. Now he meant that just as a word of help, in other words, to say we're looking at a generation here for whom social media are the main means by which they communicate. This is their accountability. It used to be that people feel like they had to call everyone to stay in touch. Every once in a while, in prehistoric days, they might actually write a note, letter or a postcard. But these days, it's all check the website, check what your friends are doing on Facebook, and make sure you're keeping in touch.

HH: Now by the way, what's your Twitter address, Albert Mohler, if people can follow you?

AM: Absolutely. It's just Mohler@sbts.edu. It's @AlbertMohler. It's pretty easy to find on Twitter, because their search engine's really, really good. And at Facebook, the same thing. Folks can find us pretty easily.

HH: Okay, now having...I want to skip back again, focusing on this younger generation of Evangelical leaders. Do they esteem the old leadership, and by esteem, I don't mean merely honor, but listen to them? And in this regard, well, there are usual suspects. I'm not going to run down them, we all know who they are. Do they still listen?

AM: You know, I think the honest answer to that is they listen occasionally. And you know, when you look at some of the older names, it's just amazing what kind of generational transition we're looking at now. Jerry Falwell has now been dead for as long as some of these people have been adults. It happens so quickly. And then you start looking at some of the other big names, they love so many of the big names. They love John McArthur and John Piper and so many others. But when it comes to many of the people who have been deeply involved in the issues that you and I are talking about, the reality is that they are not listening to them in the same way.

HH: Do they care about them? Do they care about abortion?

AM: They care deeply about abortion. And looking at the students on my campus, they are passionately concerned about abortion. They're not just concerned about not having abortions, they're concerned about having babies. This is a generation ready to have a much larger family than the average Evangelical family of the last twenty or thirty years. They're pretty comprehensively pro-life. They're afraid, however, that just being anti-abortion sends a signal that's just not enough. And so I'm glad to say that they're very, very pro-life, and I must give a word of warning, that among some younger Evangelicals, that's just not true. So the ones who come here, they know where we stand on these issues. But the reality is that especially on the issue of homosexuality, even more than the issue of abortion, this is a generation that is thinking in different terms. Not necessarily about the theological or Biblical status of homosexuality, but about how we should respond to it in the culture.

HH: Well, I've had that said to me many, many times at the Prop 8 referendum in California, may have been the last victory for a pro-marriage agenda, because the rising age cohort just doesn't care. Are you confirming that, Albert Mohler?

AM: I'm definitely confirming that, but not...I wouldn't put it in the fact they don't care. I wouldn't say that. I would say that what you have is a group of younger Evangelicals, and I disagree with them on this, Hugh, and they know it, a group of younger Evangelicals, many of whom simply don't think that's the right fight to fight.

HH: Wow.

AM: And so it's not that they don't care. But you know, I was just talking to an Evangelical leader in Massachusetts who said look, he said my high school seniors have never known a time since they've been in high school or middle school that same sex marriage wasn't legal in this state.

HH: It goes so fast. You're absolutely right.

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HH: Dr. Mohler, back to the subject of Evangelicals and the political project involving Evangelicals. Is there one? Is it broken beyond repair? And is there malaise among the movement?

AM: Well, I think certainly there is some malaise. And I call it fatigue. You know, Hugh, those of us who've been, for instance, in the pro-life movement in the trenches for the last thirty and more years, there is a sense of fatigue. After all these years of political involvement, there are many people just beginning to wonder is it all worth it. Now I obviously believe that it is. In fact, I think not only worth it, it's crucial. But the reality is that you've got folks who've been at this a very long time who are beginning to wonder. And there's good reason, looking at some of the trends in this society for them to be taking stock. But it means to me that in a time in which we have all this change, we've got to have a long term

strategy, and we've got to stay at it. But we also have to stay at it in a way that brings younger Evangelicals into this movement.

HH: Let me ask you about a pretty controversial proposition. I'm not sure if I believe it or not. Dispensationalism, in other words, End Times theory, for those who are not in this world. Do you think that's sapped some of the energy and purposefulness out of the commitment of Christians to politics in the here and now?

AM: Well, I think it's part of it. I don't think that's a ridiculous argument at all. I think if you are focused on the fact that you are absolutely certain that the Lord's going to be coming imminently, very soon, and that this age is going to come to a conclusion very soon, then you're not going to give much to investment in building a culture for the future. And I really think that is a matter of Evangelical concern.

HH: Now let me also ask you about some of the issues on which Evangelicals have not been heard very well – illegal immigration, the care of the poor, stewardship of the planet. Did that gap develop, and did it influence especially the younger voter?

AM: Well, it did. Let me just take the issue of illegal immigration here. You're dealing with a generation that expects that that kind of ethnic language, racial pluralism and diversity, and frankly sees immigration policy as something that is so remote that they're not going to get excited about it one way or the other, that they certainly are not going to sign onto any bandwagon that to them represents something that's a retreat from pluralism and from racial and ethnic diversity.

HH: Do they believe that there's a positive Christian commitment to take care of these people who are here in the country illegally, and often desperately in need of services?

AM: Well, I think that probably is somewhat by region, Hugh. And talking in Southern California, that would be very different than talking in the Midwest. But certainly, there are many who are involved in those kinds of ministries. But they're going to far more concerned with reaching them with the Gospel than reaching them with an issue related to immigration, per se'.

HH: Do they worry about some of the old cultural issues, the old culture wars, pornography, for example. You and I both know nowadays, it is completely available to anyone for free as much as you could, far beyond the worst thing you could have ever had thirty years ago at the dirty bookstore downtown. Do they care about that?

AM: Well, they're very concerned about it, because this is a generation that sees the pathology.

HH: Oh.

AM: And even as this is a generation incredibly tempted by pornography, very high rates of involvement with pornography among teenagers and young adults, this is a generation that knows how devastating it can be. And so you've got, for instance on our campus, you've got enormous concern about this. You've got young men in particular in accountability groups, and accountability relationships, a very open conversation. You know, it used to be that to talk about pornography, when I was a teenager, first of all, you couldn't much get at it anyway, but it was talked about in hushed tones. And even if Christians ever talked about it, it was something that was a sequestered conversation, and whispered. Now this is a generation ready to talk about it because they are looking at their peers being devastated by it.

HH: Now you've got a couple of new books out, one is *Desire And Deceit*, and the other one is *Culture Shift*. This is, we've been talking about the issues that are crucial to these books, right, AI?

AM: Absolutely, and I appreciate the fact that you're talking about them all the time.

HH: Well, I'm just curious, though, whether or not there's a sense of energy to deal with them, because that's what bothered me the most, the reason I started this series of conversations. And you know, we lose elections all the time. You can't help but win 50% and lose 50% in a democracy. But I don't like the sense that energy was ebbing out of the center-right movement when it came to cultural issues, especially the life issue.

AM: I think we've got to reframe it, Hugh. And just for instance, I think younger Evangelicals are ready to be active

on these issues and to contend for them, but they're first concerned to make sure that we, for instance, have our own families and our own marriages rightly ordered, that our own churches are healthy and convictional, and are people of integrity. They're not willing to sign onto what they see as a political platform that is divorced from authentic Christianity and the demands of following Christ in every dimension of life.

HH: Okay, last couple of questions. Do they care about the war? I mean, you're just back from Turkey, where creeping Islamization is happening, and not so subtle, that it's becoming much more fundamentalist in its orientation. Does Christians, do Christians within America have any general sense of alarm about the way the world is going?

AM: I think they have an enormous blind spot there, Hugh. I think this is one of the greatest issues of Evangelical ignorance. Evangelicals simply do not work hard at understanding the world, and I think the worldwide challenge of Islam is the greatest challenge before us, but most Evangelicals are just blissfully unaware of that challenge. If they went elsewhere in the world, they'd have to wake up to it fast.

HH: How do you deal with that on your campus?

AM: Well, we talk about it, and we get our students out as much as we can around the world, and get them off this campus and into active engagement with other cultures and other nations. But you know, the reality is that we have an enormous rock to push up this mountain, because as there's fatigue on the life issue, there's really fatigue on the war issue as well. And to tell you the truth, Evangelicals just haven't been talking much about it, probably because we just were distracted by other things. But we've got to talk about this challenge.

HH: Last question, Dr. Albert Mohler, and I know you have enormous influence on the younger age cohort, because I know who buys your books, and I've seen your students with you, et cetera. So take yourself out of this conversation. Who do young Evangelicals look to that you and I would be comfortable having them look to? Where are they getting their leadership cues from?

AM: Well, oddly enough, it's pretty diffuse. In areas of their life, they're going to read everything John Piper writes. They're going to be out there really looking for the kind of cultural analysis that they might be getting from someone who you and I wouldn't even know, simply because this is a peer-directed culture. They're going to be saying are you reading this? Are you reading that? I'm not sure I can come up with a long list of names, because I'll tell you, it's not that there are so few, it's that there are so many. This is a generation that reads a lot, absorbs a lot, thinks a lot, and I think it's going to take some time before we really have a grasp on who all is influencing them in these ways.

HH: Dr. Albert Mohler of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, I really appreciate you taking half an hour of an extraordinarily busy schedule to go over some of these issues, always insightful, Doc, and thanks for joining us.

AM: Hugh, it's always good to be with you, and thank you for all you do to make all of us aware of these issues.

HH: I appreciate that.

End of interview.

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