

Christian right leader says it's payback time: Perkins not likely to get everything he wants

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Tony Perkins sits in a state-of-the art studio at the Family Research Council's headquarters in Washington, firing questions at new Louisiana Senator David Vitter for a weekly radio show broadcast over 150 stations nationwide.

Perkins praises Vitter for making history as the first Republican elected to the Senate from Louisiana since the Reconstruction era. But he also leaves Vitter with this message: You've voted 100 percent of the time to support the council's conservative agenda during your five-year House career, and "we anticipate" similar results now that you're in the Senate.

Since President Bush won reelection and Republicans increased their majorities in the House and Senate—developments Perkins credits largely to "values voters" concerned about gay marriage and the continuation of policies that "promote abortion on demand"—the Family Research Council president has not been subtle in suggesting it's payback time for Bush and the GOP Congress.

It's fine for the White House to champion Social Security and tax code overhaul, Perkins said, but what values voters really want is a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage and confirmation of conservative judges who will eventually create the impetus to overturn the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision that established abortion rights 30 years ago.

"These value issues, which have gotten very little play from the White House since the election, need to be kept front and center," Perkins said.

Perkins, 41, a former Louisiana state representative and unsuccessful candidate for the U.S. Senate in 2002, has emerged as one of the leading voices promoting the conservative Christian agenda. Thanks to the council's \$11 million budget and a

nationwide network of pastors he helped establish to champion the council's causes, Perkins is seen as a major player on the national scene.

His agreeable personality, good looks and ability to tell a joke—something he says isn't all that common among his fellow conservatives—has made him a favorite of producers who book cable news guests.

The council was created in 1980 with the help of James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family and an influential spokesman for Christian conservatives. Its mission statement says it “champions marriage and family as the foundation of civilization, the seedbed of virtue, and the wellspring of society.”

Perkins is undaunted by those who suggest that he is exaggerating the role of issues like gay marriage in the recent election. That includes some liberal religious leaders who say gay marriage is far less a threat to families than fathers who abandon their families or policies that make it hard for parents to provide for their children.

According Perkins, in Ohio alone a network led by hundreds of ministers helped increase turnout among Christian conservatives. He said that group included African-American ministers who helped Bush get a share of the black vote that historically goes overwhelmingly for Democrats. That was a decisive factor in giving Bush a 118,000-vote margin in a state he had to win to remain in the White House, Perkins said.

Patrick Guerriero, executive director of the Log Cabin Republicans, which advocates for gay rights, often appears opposite Perkins on cable news segments debating gay marriage. He praises Perkins for his civility. “Despite our fundamental disagreement on this one issue, we have always dealt with each other with respect,” he said.

While no one disputes his affability, Perkins also can play hardball. During the GOP presidential campaign, he criticized Vice President Dick Cheney for not expressing support for a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage. While expressing understanding that Cheney's position is shaped by the fact that one of his daughters is a lesbian, Perkins said the vice president should always back the president.

At the Republican National Convention, Perkins handed out copies of the book *Outrage: How Gay Activists and Liberal Judges Are Trashing Democracy to Redefine Marriage* and fortune cookies with sayings such as “No. 1 Reason to Ban Human Cloning: Hillary Clinton.”

As president of the Family Research Council since September 2003, Perkins has made a major effort to cement ties with GOP congressional leaders.

John Green, director of the Bliss Institute of Applied Politics in Akron, Ohio, calls Perkins an effective advocate who is trying to get as much as he can from the Bush administration and Congress. But Green doubts that Perkins will get everything he wants. "If Bush and the GOP adopt the entire agenda of conservative Christians, then they will alienate other parts of their base," he said. -Bruce Alpert, *Religion News Service*