

An Evangelical Landslide for Romney?

Although not widely noticed, **Mitt Romney** seems to be on his way to capturing as much of the white evangelical vote as George W. Bush famously did in 2004. Bush got 79 percent. A Pew poll conducted before the first presidential debate had Romney getting 74 percent of white evangelicals versus 19 percent for President Obama.

Although **President Obama** got only 26 percent of white evangelicals in 2008, according to exit polls, he got about 33 percent of young white evangelicals. The latter statistic inspired hopes by Democrats and liberal evangelicals for a generational shift away from social issues in favor of more liberal-focused causes. But a Public Religion Research Institute poll, pre-presidential debates, showed young white evangelicals choosing Romney over Obama by 80 percent to 15 percent. Hispanic evangelicals reportedly are not as strongly for Romney as they were for Bush, although they are much more pro-Romney than Catholic or non-religious Hispanics.

Full-throttle evangelical support for Romney was not widely anticipated. Evangelicals do not see the former Mormon bishop as one of their own, as they did Bush. And Romney has not strongly emphasized social issues that energize conservative evangelicals. Many prominent evangelical leaders endorsed Rick Santorum during the Republican primaries.

But Obama administration policies favoring **same-sex marriage**, indirect abortion funding through Obamacare, and the HHS mandate compelling religious groups to offer contraceptive/abortifacient coverage have antagonized many evangelicals. Several evangelical schools have joined Catholic schools in litigating against the mandate. The Democratic convention's awkward last minute restoration of God to the

party platform likely did not help.

Now the most revered American evangelical seems to have virtually endorsed Romney. On Oct. 11 Romney met with 93-year-old Billy Graham at his North Carolina mountain log cabin. Photos of the two with Graham's evangelist son, Franklin, were released and widely published. Graham was quoted as telling Romney: "I'll do all I can to help you. And you can quote me on that." A statement from Graham afterward was issued.

"It was an honor to meet and host Gov. Romney in my home today, especially since I knew his late father, former Michigan Gov. George Romney, whom I considered a friend," the statement said. "I have followed Mitt Romney's career in business, the Olympic Games, as governor of Massachusetts and, of course, as a candidate for president of the United States."

"What impresses me even more than Gov. Romney's successful career are his values and strong moral convictions," Graham continued. "I appreciate his faithful commitment to his impressive family, particularly his wife Ann of 43 years and his five married sons."

After noting that it was a "privilege to pray with Gov. Romney—for his family and our country," Graham noted he will turn 94 the day after Election Day and believes America "is at a crossroads." He then offered his virtual endorsement: "I hope millions of Americans will join me in praying for our nation and to vote for candidates who will support the biblical definition of marriage, protect the sanctity of life and defend our religious freedoms."

In contrast, after candidate John McCain visited Billy Graham in 2008 there was only a statement from Franklin Graham commending McCain's "personal faith and his moral clarity." Obama visited Graham in April, becoming the 12th American president with whom the evangelist has conferred across more than 60 years of public life.

Critics on the left grouched that **Franklin Graham** likely wrote the Romney statement and got his aged father's perfunctory approval. But there's nothing in the statement that sounds unlike **Billy Graham**. The evangelist has typically avoided the appearance of direct political endorsements, his famous last-minute decision to back away from endorsing Richard Nixon in 1960 being one example.

But he famously supported North Carolina's pro-traditional marriage constitutional amendment in May, which clearly contributed toward the amendment's large victory. Critics detected the hand of the son there too. But nobody believes that the elder Graham is anything less than pro-traditional marriage and **pro-life**. And certainly he must share **religious liberty** concerns over the HHS mandate. Critics also reported that the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association removed a reference to Mormonism as a "cult" from its website after the Romney visit.

Undeterred, on Oct. 18, Billy Graham's group placed a special message from the elder evangelist in a *Wall Street Journal* ad. "The legacy we leave behind for our children, grandchildren and this great nation is crucial," he succinctly declares. "As I approach my 94th birthday I realize this election could be my last. I believe it is vitally important that we cast our ballots for candidates who base their decisions on biblical principles and who support the nation of Israel. I urge you to support candidates who protect the sanctity of life and support the biblical definition of marriage between a man and a woman. Vote for biblical values this November 6, and pray with me that America remains one nation under God." The words are juxtaposed with a large photo of a white haired Graham stalwartly clutching a Bible, along with his signature.

The Graham ad apparently will appear in other newspapers in the coming days. The American Family Association, a large parachurch group based in Mississippi, additionally

disseminated the ad with permission from Graham's office and urged it be distributed in churches. Undoubtedly it will be.

Graham's pro-Romney efforts may further energize evangelicals in key states like North Carolina, Virginia, Florida, Ohio and some other Midwestern states. But polls indicated well before the Graham effort that evangelicals were already fully on board with defeating President Obama, whatever their stance towards the first Mormon presidential nominee.

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