

Mike Huckabee: We Are Moving Rapidly Toward the Criminalization of Christianity

Still, Republicans hopefuls, including some familiar faces, remain eager to court Iowa conservatives.

"We are moving rapidly toward the criminalization of Christianity," Huckabee said in conference call with conservative pastors organized by the Family Research Council, a Christian public policy organization. An audio recording of the call was obtained and posted online by Right Wing Watch, a progressive group that criticizes conservatives.

Huckabee picked up the thread again on Saturday.

"Let me be clear tonight: I'm not backing off because what I'm saying is true," he said. His words were greeted with murmurs of "That's right" from the crowd, along with strong applause.

Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker echoed the warning. "We should be standing up for religious freedom," he said at Saturday's forum. "In America, we should be the shining star that says you should be able to practice your religion."

Two prominent potential Republican contenders were missing at the Faith and Freedom gathering: Former Florida Governor Jeb Bush and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie. Both are perceived as being from the party's more moderate wing. Bush has argued for comprehensive immigration reform, and Christie, as governor of New Jersey, ultimately opted not to appeal a court decision that legalized gay marriage in his state.

A more moderate stance, especially on gay marriage, may

resonate particularly with young voters. Among 18-to-29-year-olds, according to Reuters/Ipsos, 76 percent now support gay marriage. Even among Republicans in that age group, same-sex marriage enjoys 51 percent support.

Raymond Starks, a 21-year-old student at Drake University who interned on Mitt Romney's 2012 campaign, said on Saturday he favored same-sex marriage, although he also valued religious liberty.

"I would support laws allowing for conscientious objection in some circumstances," he said.

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