

Mitt Romney heads to Liberty University to woo evangelicals

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c. 2012 USA Today (RNS) Presumptive Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney, who struggled to gain the support of evangelicals during the primaries, will deliver a commencement address Saturday (May 12) at Liberty University, one of the largest Christian universities in the country.

The Republican primaries have been effectively over for weeks, but disquiet about Romney among some evangelicals remains, and the speech could allow him to reassure them of his conservative credentials.

Initial backlash from some students at the university prompted the Liberty Champion, the campus newspaper, to editorialize that the commencement speaker does not necessarily have to share their same faith doctrine. Romney is Mormon.

Chancellor Jerry Falwell Jr. also weighed in to explain the policies "regarding the doctrinal beliefs of graduation speakers" in a recent email to students.

"The ultimate purpose of having a prominent Commencement speaker is not to promote the speaker or his views but rather to inspire and challenge the graduates and showcase Liberty and its mission," Falwell wrote, noting that past speakers did not necessarily share Liberty's Christian beliefs either.

University spokesman Johnnie Moore said the majority of students were excited for Romney's address and the letter was issued because of "perceived negative reactions that were fueled by the media."

Richard Land, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, said Romney should emphasize that although he has a different faith, he shares with the students "a similar world view, about how every child has a right, a God-given right, to have a mother and a father, and you can't separate the financial malaise we are in from the moral malaise."

Other conservative leaders said President Obama's statement that he supports gay marriage will help rally social conservative voters around Romney, who does not support extending marriage to same-sex couples.

Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, said, "Mitt Romney needs to take what the president gave him (Wednesday) and I think it could very well be the key to the White House."

"It doesn't need to be the hood ornament of his campaign, but it needs to be in the vehicle, and he needs to talk about it," Perkins said.

Liberty University was founded in 1971 by the now-deceased Jerry Falwell, a conservative televangelist. His son is chancellor of the university.

The university's code of conduct "teaches discipline and promotes a lifestyle of biblical morality," according to the website.

The Romney campaign declined to release details of the speech in advance before press time, but if he uses the speech to mend fences with evangelicals, he would not be the first.

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., made the pilgrimage to the Lynchburg, Va., university in 2006 to make amends with the Christian conservative community in advance of his 2008 bid for president.

McCain had previously referred to Falwell as an "agent of intolerance." Romney and McCain are two of a long line of high-profile commencement speakers at the university, including President George H.W. Bush, Oliver North and actor Chuck Norris.