

Dobson disparages Fred Thompson as candidate: Consternation among social conservatives

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One of the most powerful leaders in conservative evangelical Christianity has discouraged his colleagues from supporting Fred Thompson as a presidential candidate.

James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, sent a private e-mail to many of his fellow religious right leaders criticizing some of the Republican contender's stances and statements, according to the Associated Press.

"Isn't Thompson the candidate who is opposed to a constitutional amendment to protect marriage, believes there should be 50 different definitions of marriage in the U.S., favors [the] McCain-Feingold [campaign-finance reform law], won't talk at all about what he believes, and can't speak his way out of a paper bag on the campaign trail?" Dobson wrote.

The widely heard radio broadcaster continued, "He has no passion, no zeal, and no apparent 'want to.' And yet he is apparently the Great Hope that burns in the breasts of many conservative Christians? Well, not for me, my brothers. Not for me!"

Dobson's comments on September 19 came weeks after the former Tennessee senator settled speculation about his intentions by announcing that he would seek the GOP nomination. Prior to Thompson's entry, several religious right leaders had expressed deep reservations over the conservative bona fides of the party's top tier of candidates: former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani, Arizona senator John McCain and former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney.

Several conservative Christian leaders, such as Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention and Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council, have spoken glowingly in recent months of a possible Thompson candidacy.

But in the weeks since his announcement, Thompson has made statements that have caused some consternation among social conservatives. He has admitted that he doesn't attend a church near his home in McLean, Virginia, an exclusive Washington suburb. He also said he doesn't like to talk about his personal faith on the campaign trail and has reiterated his opposition to a constitutional amendment that would ban gay marriage nationwide, preferring to let states do that.

But Thompson has also said that he would support an amendment barring state judges from imposing same-sex marriage and would prevent states that don't approve of gay marriage from having to recognize legal unions performed in other states.

Some conservative religious leaders have also panned Thompson for supporting the McCain-Feingold law when he was in the Senate because they believe it unfairly restricted the contributions that religious and pro-life groups can make to candidates who support their causes.

Dobson had expressed reservations about Thompson earlier. He told *US News & World Report* he didn't believe Thompson is a committed Christian.

Although Dobson, through a Focus on the Family spokesperson, has backtracked on some of those comments, he seemed to reinforce them in his latest message. He told recipients that his suspicions "about the former senator's never having professed to be a Christian are turning out to be accurate in substance."

Thompson spokesperson Karen Henretty told the AP: "Fred Thompson has a 100 percent pro-life voting record. He believes strongly in returning authority to the levels of government closest to families and communities, protecting states from intrusion by the federal government and activist judges."

Laura Olson, a political science professor at Clemson University, said that she was surprised at Dobson's missive. "When Fred Thompson comes into the race, the obvious constituency that he appeals to—the greatest—is certainly going to be evangelical Protestants. He comes, supposedly, with these gold-standard credentials on all the values issues," she said. "My sense, living on the ground in a state with lots of 'values voters' and lots of Christian right . . . activism historically, is that lots of folks of that ilk have sort of been getting behind Thompson."

Olson also speculated that Dobson may be worried about Thompson's electability. "If you are a values voter and you want a Republican candidate who's got the chance

to, A, get nominated and, B, win, [then] why would he come out that strongly against Thompson?" she asked. "There's got to be some reason beyond 'I don't exactly like where he's at on the issues.'" -*Robert Marus, Associated Baptist Press*