

Romney's evangelical hurdle starts with core theology

by [Daniel Burke](#) in the [February 8, 2012](#) issue

Good news for Mitt Romney: he won the New Hampshire GOP primary. Bad news for Romney: evangelicals remain reluctant to support him. Rick Santorum got 35 more votes than Romney in Iowa although no official winner was declared because of missing ballots from eight precincts. In addition, Rick Perry, an evangelical favorite before his campaign gaffes, bowed out shortly before the South Carolina primary, leaving evangelicals a choice of Santorum or Newt Gingrich as an alternate to Romney.

In Iowa, just 14 percent of evangelicals supported the former Massachusetts governor, according to entrance polls—a third less than he won during his 2008 campaign. Steve Scheffler, president of the Iowa Faith and Freedom Coalition, said Romney failed to convince evangelicals that he cares about their issues, particularly outlawing abortion and same-sex marriage.

"What evangelicals are saying is: We don't know what this guy believes," Scheffler said. "Does he have any public policy philosophy other than wanting to be elected president?"

Yet numerous polls and anti-Mormon statements suggest that deeper disagreements rooted in core elements of Christian theology are also in play.

A prominent Texas pastor (and Rick Perry supporter) has called Mormonism a non-Christian cult. A Florida pastor says a vote for Romney is "a vote for Satan." The associate publisher of a leading evangelical magazine said a Romney presidency would "normalize the false teachings of Mormonism." A former staffer for Newt Gingrich's campaign said thousands of evangelical pastors stand ready to "expose the cult of Mormon."

Romney has acknowledged that his lifelong membership in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will cost him some votes. He told the *New York Times* in December that "most people don't decide who they're going to vote for based on the religion that they happen to be a member of. But there will be some for whom that's an issue, and I won't get those votes in some cases."

The number could be as high as 15 percent among white evangelicals, according to a November poll by the nonpartisan Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. That may not prevent Romney from winning the GOP nomination, but it could mean that millions of evangelicals will stay home during the general election.

"Evangelicals have come to regard the presidency as a spiritually potent office," said Mark Silk, an expert on religion and politics at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. "And the idea of electing someone who will use it on behalf of a religion they consider beyond the pale really bothers them."

All of which begs the question: Why does Mormonism makes some evangelicals uneasy?

"At root, this is a theological argument," said Patrick Mason, a professor of Mormon studies at Claremont Graduate University in California. Among the disputes are the nature of God, the doctrine of the Trinity and the acceptance of revelations and books beyond the Christian Bible.

"For the people on the inside of these kinds of discussions, these are not just matters of life and death but of salvation. There is nothing more important for them than having a proper relation to God and an idea of who Jesus is," said Mason, author of *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South*.

In a sense, Mormons and mainstream Christians have been at odds for nearly 200 years, Mason said. Mormonism's founding prophet, Joseph Smith, said God told him that every existing church and creed was "corrupt" and "wrong." Drawing on personal revelations—published in the Book of Mormon and other texts—Smith set out to restore the church.

Smith preached fairly orthodox Christian theology at first but "became increasingly radical, breaking more and more from standard Christianity with every year that he lived," said Craig Blomberg, a professor at Denver Seminary who has been active in evangelical-Mormon dialogue.

A sermon Smith preached three months before his death in 1844 planted the seeds for Mormonism's biggest break with traditional Christianity, according to scholars. In it, Smith preached that God was once a flesh-and-blood man who had attained godhood. Likewise, Smith taught, humans could advance to godlike status in heaven.

"It has become important for traditional Christians to maintain an unbridgeable

creature-Creator chasm," said Robert Millet, emeritus dean of religious education at Mormon-owned Brigham Young University in Utah. "For Latter-day Saints, God and man are the same species. God has substance—he is not just a force or power. He is an exalted, glorified man, and one of the purposes of the Gospels is to help us become what he is."

The idea of humans becoming gods runs counter to mainstream Christianity, said Richard Mouw, president of the evangelical Fuller Theological Seminary. Confusing the two has traditionally been considered blasphemous, he said. Yet the Mormon idea does approach the Eastern Orthodox Christian notion of *theosis*, or partaking in the divine energies of God, said Mouw, a 20-year veteran of Mormon-evangelical dialogue.

The God-as-exalted-man doctrine has profound effects on other areas of Mormon theology, according to scholars. For example, Mormons believe that God has a celestial wife, to whom Jesus was born in a premortal existence.

"We believe that Jesus and all humanity had a life before this life," Millet said, "and in that world, Christ was the eldest —Jesus was our elder brother." Thus, Jesus is a step below God on the stairway to heaven—and not an equal member of the Trinity.

Traditional Christianity holds that God the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit coexist and share one substance. Mormons "deny the [doctrine of the] Trinity, and that's huge," said Mouw.

But for all the theological fissures between Mormonism and evangelicals, some scholars say they have discovered a fair amount of common ground through dialogue. "We are so close in some respects that when we differ it can lead to inflammatory conversations," Blomberg said. "It's like a sibling rivalry." —RNS