

Billy Graham faces backlash over Mormon 'cult' removal

by [Daniel Burke](#)

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The Rev. Samuel Wynn admired Billy Graham and his evangelistic association for decades, joining its spiritual crusades and urging fellow Christians to do the same. But no more.

"I will never again support anything by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association," said Wynn, the superintendent of a United Methodist Church district in Fayetteville, N.C.

The source of Wynn's ire: The BGEA's recent removal of language on its website calling Mormonism a "cult."

The scrubbing followed GOP presidential nominee Mitt Romney's pilgrimage to Billy Graham's mountaintop home in Montreat, N.C. After the Oct. 11 meeting, Graham pledged to "do all I can to help" Romney, according to a campaign aide.

The BGEA said it cut the "cult" language "because we do not wish to participate in a theological debate about something that has become politicized during this campaign."

But Wynn and other conservative Christians accuse Graham of putting partisanship above piety and risking Christian souls to help Romney, a Mormon, win the White House.

"My question to Billy Graham is, What's more important for the kingdom of God: politics or the message of Jesus Christ?" said Wynn.

For evangelicals, berating Billy Graham is like Catholics dissing the pope. Through his globe-trotting crusades and passionate preaching, the nearly 94-year-old evangelist has converted countless Christians and almost single-handedly ushered evangelicalism into the modern age.

But when "the greatest proclaimer of the gospel in the last century," as one Southern Baptist called Graham, embraced Mormonism last week, he confirmed conservative evangelicals' worst fears about the 2012 election: That Romney's rise would lift his Mormon church to cultural prominence and acceptance within mainstream Christianity.

Howell Scott, senior pastor Bethel Baptist Church in Alamogordo, N.M., said the BGEA's declassification of Mormonism as a cult "will have disastrous unintended consequences."

"The most immediate consequence will be the acceptance and approval of Mormonism as a legitimate Christian 'denomination' or faith group," Scott wrote on his blog last week. "The blurring will only increase if Mitt Romney is elected president."

Most evangelicals do not consider Mormons Christian because Latter-day Saints revere Joseph Smith as a prophet, consider the Book of Mormon on par with the Bible and conceive of the Christian Trinity as three separate gods. Mormons acknowledge those differences but insist they are Christians.

Graham has been accused of crossing sectarian lines before, said Bill Leonard, a professor of church history at Wake Forest School of Divinity in North Carolina. The evangelist irked fundamentalists decades ago by inviting mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics to join him on stage during his crusades.

But Graham's implicit acceptance of Mormonism last week came on the heels of a much-hyped study showing that Protestants are losing ground in the United States and amid a presidential campaign that includes – for the first time in history – a GOP ticket without a Protestant.

"There's a sense that Protestants are beleaguered right now," said Leonard, "and in another four years may be even more so."

Leonard and other experts suspect that Billy Graham's son, Franklin, who is also the BGEA's president and CEO, was behind the move to declassify Mormonism as a cult. The younger Graham is a more eager culture warrior, while Billy Graham has expressed regret for his past partisanship.

Just this week, Franklin Graham published an editorial entitled "Can An Evangelical Christian Vote for a Mormon?" The answer was an enthusiastic yes.

Several conservative Christian bloggers, including Scott, note that the BGEA, Franklin Graham and his Christian aid group, Samaritan's Purse, are all longtime clients of public relations executive Mark DeMoss, a Romney campaign adviser.

DeMoss said he knew nothing about removing the "cult" language until he read media stories last week. In fact, DeMoss said, for the last six years – since Romney's first White House run – he has urged evangelicals to forget about candidates' theology and focus on their values.

"I am not advising anyone about how they discuss or treat theological differences in a political context," DeMoss said, "and there is no evidence I have done so with Franklin Graham or his father."

The BGEA did not respond to a request for comment.

In a recent article in Christianity Today, a magazine founded by Billy Graham, several evangelical leaders supported the BGEA's cult declassification.

"One very good thing about the Romney candidacy is that it is causing both evangelicals and Mormons to clarify terminology in civil dialogue – as among friends," Jerry Root, director of an evangelism institute at Wheaton College in Illinois, told the magazine. Other evangelicals quoted in the article disagreed with the decision.

In the end, the Grahams' endeavors to ease evangelical consciences about voting for a Mormon may backfire.

Bart Barber, pastor of First Baptist Church in Farmersville, Texas, said he had been prepared to vote for Romney – until last week.

"The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association probably cost Mitt Romney my November ballot when it stopped calling Mormonism a cult explicitly because of this election," Barber wrote on his blog.

"For the sake of my congregation, when Billy Graham is muddying the waters of the gospel, I have an obligation to provide clarity," Barber continued.

"For the sake of Mormons in my community who need to know of their need for the gospel of Jesus Christ and who are being reassured in their damnable heresy by none less than Billy Graham," Barber said, "I have an obligation to provide clarity."
—RNS