



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on November 23, 2011

Christian Faith and Values on Display in Iowa GOP Forum

A half dozen Republican candidates capitalized on their faith in an attempt to woo conservative voters in Iowa November 19, meeting with the faithful at an event entitled the Thanksgiving Family Forum (at left, candidates Ron Paul, Michelle Bachmann, Rick Santorum). Sponsored by a state organization called the Family Leader, with the help of Focus on the Family's Citizen Link and the National Organization for Marriage, the event was "meant to mimic the holiday dinner, with six candidates — Michele Bachmann, Herman Cain, Newt Gingrich, Ron Paul, Rick Perry, and Rick Santorum — gathered around a table participating in a discussion moderated by [conservative pollster] Frank Luntz," reported the Los Angeles Times. The Times identified the lead sponsor of the event as Bob Vander Plaats, "a three-time gubernatorial candidate [who] founded Family Leader to be a galvanizing force for social conservatives ahead of the state's lead-off nominating caucuses."



While the evening at Des Moines' First Federated Church was devoted to conservative values, it began with Luntz offering individuals from the small army of "Occupy Des Moines" protesters two minutes to speak their mind. While no one from that group stepped forward, a man did take the main stage to make a comment about the Federal Reserve. "I think that we need to speak about this bank tonight," he told the crowd, challenging that the Fed is "not part of the United States."

When no candidate offered to take up that debate thread, the evening began in earnest, with each candidate given the opportunity to speak "about their values, ideas, sense of morality, and the proper roles for religion and government in society," reported [CNN](#). "Common themes were criticisms of government intrusion into family lives, an emphasis on individual liberties, a calling out of judicial 'activism,' and the need for greater economic freedoms."

While the candidates were, by and large, let off the hook concerning their past and present stands on issues, Paul and Santorum found themselves in disagreement over the government's response to homosexual marriage, with Paul opposing a federal marriage amendment, while Santorum insisted that the federal government had a role in enforcing morality. (The Constitution is silent on the subject and the Tenth Amendment states: "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.")

"Cain was also pushed on his shifting and confusing stands on abortion issues," reported [Politico.com](#),



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“which he made in a string of comments a few weeks back.” When a member of the audience asked if he would sign a bill outlawing abortion, Cain responded that if the legislation reached his desk, “I would absolutely sign it.” The questioner wondered: “Will you push hard to get it to your desk?” to which Cain responded that *Roe v. Wade* needed “to be overturned.”

At one point in the evening Luntz steered the forum toward personal spiritual matters, asking the candidates to recount an experience that helped define their faith. “If ever there was a place to bare your soul,” challenged Luntz, “... this is the place to do it.” One by one the GOP hopefuls recalled poignant and impacting episodes in their lives.

Cain tearfully described leaving a doctor’s office with his wife after being told he had cancer. “I will never forget, before my wife and I were about to get in the car, I said, ‘I can do this.’ She said: ‘We can do this,’ ” Cain said as he wiped away tears.

Perry described a time in his life when he was “too busy for God.” Remembering how lost he felt, he told the crowd, “In every person’s heart, in every person’s soul, there is a hole that can only be filled by the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Ron Paul described growing up during the Depression, working his way through medical school, and “sharing new life” as a doctor delivering babies.

Bachmann recalled the pain of living through the divorce of her parents and her father leaving home. “It is amazing to me how God uses those challenges to shape your life,” she said, adding that it influenced the decision she and her husband made to be the foster parents to more than 20 children — besides their five biological children.

The twice-divorced Gingrich recalled a period in the 1990s when personal failure prompted him to turn to the Alcoholics Anonymous handbook. “I wasn’t drinking but I had precisely the symptoms of somebody who was collapsing under this weight,” he said. While saying that he has been “very blessed,” and that he and his wife, Callista, “have a wonderful marriage,” he added that it all came with “a great deal of pain, some of which I have caused others, which I regret deeply. All of which required having to go to God to seek both reconciliation, but also to seek God’s acceptance that I had to recognize how limited I was and how much I had to depend on Him.”

Rick Santorum offered an emotional recollection of his personal conflict as he witnessed his disabled daughter struggle for life. “I had seen her as less of a person because of her disability,” he confessed to the audience, adding that he had decided “the best thing I could do was to treat her differently and not love her the way I did because it wouldn’t hurt as much if I’d lost her.”

At one point Luntz queried Ron Paul on his dual careers as physician and statesman. “Are you prouder that you are a duly elected member of Congress or are you prouder of your medical profession?” the moderator asked the Texas Congressman. “Oh, medical profession, by far,” Paul answered.

Conspicuously absent from the event were the GOP’s two Latter Day Saint (Mormon) candidates, Jon Huntsman and Mitt Romney, who both skipped the religious event. “Huntsman wrote Iowa off immediately after joining the race,” reported the *Los Angeles Times*. “Romney has maintained he is competing in all of the early states, but his absence Saturday ... only confirms the notion that he is focusing on those contests later in the calendar.”

Vander Plaats, however, accused Romney of disrespecting Iowa’s conservative Christian contingent by his absence. “If Gov. Romney were here, and if he could’ve displayed half the heart of these candidates



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around the table, it would've done his candidacy a world of good in Iowa and especially if he became the nominee," Vander Plaats was quoted by CNN as saying. He warned that Romney's absence could come back to hurt him, noting that "if he ends up being the nominee, this base has to be inspired to go to work for him. We're still a swing state. And I think that's why he can't move his numbers." Vander Plaats suggested that Romney's no-show might mean "he lacks judgment, and if he lacks judgment, I think people all across America have to say, 'Is he the right candidate?'" "

The majority of the 3,000 assembled to hear the Republican candidates were evangelical Christians, many with strong opinions on what they require in a candidate. "We want a Christian in office, and I'm afraid some of those votes are going to be divided because we have three really strong Christian candidates tonight," one attendee told [CBN News](#), adding this jab at the absent Romney: "And there's a certain one that didn't come tonight, and I'm afraid he might win because our votes are divided."

Other attendees said they came to hear some strong faith rhetoric, and the predictable candidates came through with flying colors. "The way you fight back is not be afraid to express your faith in any setting, rather than worrying about the political correctness police," Cain told the audience.

Perry declared that "somebody's values are going to decide what Congress and the president of the United States does, and the question is whose values?"

Following the event, Focus on the Family President Jim Daly reflected that the forum "showed America something that almost always gets lost in presidential politics: These candidates are real, regular people who face the same challenges as the rest of us. The sincerity and transparency of their responses to questions about their most meaningful life experiences, and the faith that shaped them, was remarkable to see and hear — such a dramatic departure from the usual array of debate sound-bites and glib gotchas."

The "gotchas" came later, however, as Michele Bachman's campaign followed up the event with an e-mail accusing Gingrich of failing to meet "a consistently pro-life standard." Charged Bachmann: "Gingrich has positioned himself as open to watering down the Republican Party's commitment to the inalienable right to life and failed as the leader of the U.S. House of Representatives to stem the flow of taxpayer dollars to Planned Parenthood, the largest U.S. provider of abortions."

Asked by reporters for a response to the e-mail, Gingrich replied, "I'm not going to comment on e-mails I haven't read...."

Notwithstanding the requisite political bickering, Kristi Hamrick of the conservative [Campaign for Working Families](#) thought the forum came off well, giving voters a look at issues that are largely ignored by the major media in a presidential campaign. She said the forum was "unique in that the purpose of it was to explore the social issues, which are the things that really impact the base and change the character of the country. I think it's interesting that some people tried to portray it as narrowly defined. If you had a debate focused on foreign policy or the economy, that would just be good government. But social policy is equally important, because it becomes a political issue through the intrusion of government."



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