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Huckabee seeking South Carolina's evangelical vote

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SPARTANBURG, S.C. — Former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee tiptoed around any mention of his run for the Republican presidential nomination. And the ex-Baptist minister assured 5,000 members of First Spartanburg North Baptist that that he'd come to their church Sunday to give a sermon, not a speech.

But if church protocol forbade Huckabee from overtly asking for their votes in South Carolina's hotly contested GOP primary on Saturday, he still managed to court them in code.

At the 9:30 a.m. service and again at 10:50, preacher Huckabee talked about his ties to past Southern Baptist leaders, read a passage from Luke's Gospel, led the congregation in bowed-head, eyes-closed prayer, even mentioned the day he accepted Jesus — it was at Vacation Bible School, when he was 10 years old.

In other words, Huckabee said without having to say it: Unlike those other guys on the ballot, I'm one of you.

That could prove to be a winning message in a state where, according to the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, white Christian evangelicals make up at least 53 percent of likely Republican voters.

Because the South Carolina evangelical vote is so dominant, Huckabee's rivals aren't about to concede it to him. Each has his own strategy for getting a fair share.

Former Sen. Fred Thompson, R-Tenn., who was baptized into the Church of Christ, is waving his endorsement from National Right to Life. Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., grew up Episcopalian — a liberal mainline Protestant denomination — but has been telling voters that he now attends a Baptist church.

And, though they're no longer running as hard in South Carolina, former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, a Mormon, and ex-New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, a Catholic, both picked up endorsements from prominent conservative Christian leaders. Bob Jones III, president of Bob Jones University, is backing Romney, while televangelist Pat Robertson, a long-ago GOP presidential candidate himself, favors Giuliani.

But if some of the old-guard evangelical leaders have refused to give Huckabee their imprimatur, the preacher-turned-politician appears to be the favorite with grass-roots flocks.

John Hunter, 80, a retired educator from York, S.C., traces his political activism back to Robertson's candidacy in 1988.

This year, he's helping with phone banks and yard signs for Huckabee.

"We're working hard and praying hard," says Hunter, who attends an evangelical Presbyterian church. "Huckabee is right on families and abortion — he doesn't believe in killing babies. And he doesn't apologize for his faith."

That view was echoed Sunday by the Rev. Mike Hamlet, senior pastor at First Spartanburg North Baptist and a Huckabee friend for decades.

From the pulpit, Hamlet urged all evangelicals to consult their Biblical principles when they vote Saturday — just as they do when they deal with everything from finances to parenting.

And while he said his comments shouldn't be called an endorsement, Hamlet saluted Huckabee's "strength and character."

"It is refreshing," he said, "to have someone (in politics) who is not afraid to say the name Jesus."

In his sermon, Huckabee told the congregation that if he gets to heaven, it won't be because he was good, but because "at the cross, (Jesus) did something for me."

If he wins Saturday, it may well be because, like evangelical voters who gave Huckabee a victory in Iowa, South Carolina evangelicals feel the same connection.

Oran Smith, president of the Palmetto Family Council, says Huckabee tried to send that same message last fall when he spoke at the council's pro-family, anti-abortion political rally in Columbia.

"He said 'I want to remind you, ladies and gentlemen, that I speak the language of Zion,'" remembers Smith. "That means he's saying, 'I speak the biblical language. I know the secret handshake.'"

But there were signs Sunday that, even as Huckabee woos fellow evangelicals in South Carolina and beyond (he preached Sunday night at a church in Michigan), he is worried about getting a label — the "Baptist minister candidate" — that could limit his national appeal.

At an airport news conference later Sunday, Huckabee sounded testy when asked about whether he believed only Christians would go to heaven and whether a Huckabee administration would discourage the teaching of evolution.

On the heaven question, he refused to answer.

"I'm going to stick to the things that make it critical for me to be president of the United States," he told reporters. "I have deep convictions about who goes and who doesn't, but as far as who makes that decision, it isn't me, it's God."

In an interview with the Charlotte Observer, Huckabee complained about such questions, saying he followed his preaching career with 10-plus years as governor of Arkansas — more executive branch experience, he said, than any of the other candidates.

"(As governor) there's not one iota of evidence that I ever ran over people with my faith," he said. "There's been an unfair focus on the details of my (religious) doctrine. (Romney) was a (lay) bishop in the Mormon church. He wasn't one who just showed up. But I've never heard anybody bring (doctrine) up with him."

South Carolina Republicans have a history of anointing the party's establishment candidate — a title McCain seems closest to this year. But Huckabee hopes his win in Iowa will convince seasoned South Carolina voters that he, too, is

electable in November.

On Sunday, Huckabee was trying, from the pulpit, to convert voters such as Melinda Phillips, 45, a homemaker who attended the 9:30 a.m. service.

McCain, Thompson and Huckabee are all still in the running for her vote. But Sunday's sermon, she said, made her feel more confident that, with less than a week to go, Huckabee "is probably the top of the top three. Morally, I agree with him."

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