

Three in four pastors say Mormons aren't Christian

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—As a prominent evangelical pastor and supporter of Texas Gov. Rick Perry is taking heat for calling Mormonism a "cult," a newly released poll says most Protestant pastors in U.S. agree Mormons are not Christians.

Three out of four pastors surveyed by Southern Baptist-affiliated LifeWay Research said they disagreed with the statement that Mormons are Christians. The poll was conducted in October 2010 but was not released until Oct. 9.

The poll of 1,000 Protestant clergy reflects a continuing challenge for former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, a Mormon, in connecting with evangelicals, who are a key GOP constituency.

Responses to the poll differed somewhat by denomination, with two-thirds (67 percent) of evangelicals strongly disagreeing that Mormons are Christians, compared to only 48 percent of mainline Protestants.

Robert Jeffress, senior pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas, on Oct. 8 called Mormonism a "theological cult," and told Fox News that evangelicals "ought to give preference to a Christian instead of someone who doesn't embrace historical Christianity."

Mark DeMoss, a leading evangelical publicist who's supporting Romney, said voters should look primarily at a candidate's values and qualifications, not his or her faith.

"There's a theological distinction that's fairly obvious (between Mormonism

and mainstream Christianity) ... but I think it's largely irrelevant in a political context," he said.

DeMoss noted Jeffress said he would still support Romney over Obama if Romney clinches the GOP nomination.

"Even he can ultimately separate a theological difference from a political decision," DeMoss said. "If he can do that, as critical as he has been, I suspect the average voter in the pew will have no problem doing that."