

Will Trump tape be tipping point with conservative Christians?

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NEW YORK (RNS)—By going on the offensive in the second presidential debate, Donald Trump may have righted his listing campaign enough to halt the defections that followed the shocking video showing him bragging about groping women and exploiting them for sex.

But even after a weekend spent huddling in Manhattan plotting strategy, a crucial question for the Republican nominee was whether this latest outrage would finally repel conservative Christians who are key to the GOP's hopes for recapturing the White House.

So far, the verdict appears mixed.

'We're all sinners'

Many of Trump's longtime Christian supporters, especially in the party's white evangelical base, stuck by the New York real estate mogul and reality television star.

Liberty University President Jerry Falwell Jr., an early and vocal Trump backer who had remained silent since the damning video came out Oct. 7, lavished praise on Trump in a tweet posted right after the debate at Washington University in St. Louis.

Falwell later expanded on those comments, telling WABC radio in New York City the video leak "might have even been a conspiracy among the establishment Republicans who've known about it for weeks and who tried

to time it to do the maximum damage to Donald Trump.”

Trump had been “contrite” about the comments, Falwell said, adding: “We’re all sinners, every one of us. We’ve all done things we wish we hadn’t.”

The next day, Focus on the Family founder and Trump supporter James Dobson indicated in a statement that he still would back Trump.

“The comments Mr. Trump made 11 years ago were deplorable, and I condemn them entirely,” Dobson said. “I also find Hillary Clinton’s support of partial birth abortion criminal and her opinion of evangelicals to be bigoted. There really is only one difference between the two. Mr. Trump promises to support religious liberty and the dignity of the unborn. Mrs. Clinton promises she will not.”

Locker room banter

After the 2005 video came out, Trump initially dismissed the comments about grabbing women’s genitals and forcing himself on them as “locker room banter,” and he said Hillary Clinton’s husband, former President Bill Clinton, was “far worse.”

As the backlash against Trump mounted, he released a video from his Trump Tower home apologizing for the comments but pivoting again to argue that Bill Clinton was worse and Hillary Clinton was complicit in covering up for her husband.

Dozens of Republican officials began withdrawing their endorsements of Trump or calling on him to withdraw, and his campaign appeared to be in freefall.

But Trump continued to insist his transgressions were nothing compared to what a Clinton presidency would do to the country—a line he used in the

debate as he repeatedly attacked his opponent in harsh and personal terms.

Hierarchy of concerns

If that logic made some in the GOP nervous, it resonated with many evangelical leaders.

“People of faith are voting on issues like who will protect unborn life, defend religious freedom, grow the economy, appoint conservative judges and oppose the Iran nuclear deal,” said Ralph Reed, the founder and chairman of the Faith & Freedom Coalition and a Trump supporter.

“In their hierarchy of concerns, an 11-year-old tape of a private conversation with a talk show host on a tour bus ranks very low,” Reed said, arguing the video would have “little or no impact.”

Robert Jeffress, pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas and a member of Trump’s Evangelical Executive Advisory Board, said the comments were “lewd, offensive, and indefensible.” But he said he would still be voting for Trump over Clinton.

“Here is a woman who lied to the families of the Benghazi victims, she destroyed 33,000 emails while under subpoena, and she’s attacked the women who attacked her husband,” Jeffress told The Daily Beast. “The fact is we’re all sinners, we all need forgiveness, and God doesn’t grade people according to their level of sin.”

Shared concerns, not shared values

Tony Perkins, another prominent evangelical adviser to Trump and leader of the conservative Family Research Council, also stood by the candidate.

“My personal support for Donald Trump has never been based upon shared values; it is based upon shared concerns about issues such as justices on the Supreme Court that ignore the constitution, America’s continued

vulnerability to Islamic terrorists and the systematic attack on religious liberty that we've seen in the last 7 1/2 years," Perkins said in an email to BuzzFeed News.

Michele Bachmann, a former Republican congresswoman and outspoken evangelical who has been one of Trump's main champions, dismissed the tape as "bad boy talk" in an interview on MSNBC and said she would still support the GOP nominee.

Eric Metaxas, a popular Christian author and vocal Trump defender, initially made light of Trump's comments in Twitter but then deleted that comment after sharp criticism. He later wrote that Trump's remarks were "ugly stuff," but he did not renounce his support for Trump.

David Brody of the Christian Broadcasting Network also sought to minimize Trump's culpability. "This just in: Donald Trump is a flawed man!" he tweeted. "We ALL sin every single day. What if we had a 'hot mic' around each one of us all the time?"

Reaffirmed #NeverTrump views

On the other side, Christian leaders who have long been in the #NeverTrump camp indicated that the latest tape only reaffirmed their prophecies about Trump's unsuitability for the Oval Office.

They also lamented the spectacle of their fellow believers defending him.

"What a disgrace. What a scandal to the gospel of Jesus Christ and to the integrity of our witness," tweeted Russell Moore, president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention and a staunch Trump foe.

Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, echoed that view: "I am humiliated by arguments about character I am

hearing tonight from some evangelicals. Lord, help us.”

Owen Strachan, director of the Center for Public Theology at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, wrote that Christian men have to speak out against Trump if the church is to maintain a credible witness.

“We ... boggle at how some Christians and conservatives still defend Donald Trump,” Strachan wrote. “Without telling anyone who to vote for, let me speak directly: His words are inexcusable. His conduct is reprehensible. He deserves no defense.”

“Cannot be defended, but ...”

Others who have backed Trump seemed to try to thread the needle—distancing themselves from a full embrace of the candidate but still signaling that Christians could, and perhaps should, support him.

Franklin Graham, who has praised Trump while not officially endorsing him, wrote on Facebook that “the crude comments made by Donald J. Trump more than 11 years ago cannot be defended.”

“But,” he continued, “the godless progressive agenda of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton likewise cannot be defended.”

Graham said the next president’s nominations to the Supreme Court are what matter most—a rationale deployed by Christian conservatives to justify voting for Trump based on his promises to appoint justices who will rule against legalized abortion.

Backpeddling theologian

The most prominent in this camp was evangelical theologian Wayne Grudem, whose endorsement of Trump earlier this year provoked a split among evangelical leaders.

A few hours before the debate, Grudem backtracked on his praise of Trump as “a morally good choice” and said that if he had known then what he knows now, he would not have written that.

He called on Trump to withdraw in favor of another nominee, but he also said that Christians must vote and the Republican Party is a far better choice than the Democrats.

In the end, what matters will be what conservative Christian voters think, and Trump could be in bigger trouble with the rank and file than he is with the leadership.

Even before this latest episode, he appeared to be significantly underperforming with white evangelicals, earning less than 70 percent support from that critical bloc as opposed to the nearly 8-in-10 white evangelical voters who have gone for the Republican candidate in recent presidential election cycles.