

Evangelical body supports politicking in the pulpit

by [John Dart](#) in the [September 18, 2013](#) issue

Bucking popular opinion and a decades-old IRS policy, a group of conservative evangelicals is urging that pastors be allowed to endorse political candidates in church without risking their congregations' tax-exempt status.

A report prepared by the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability—a watchdog body that advises evangelical churches and ministries on good business practices—was given to Sen. Charles Grassley (R., Iowa).

Grassley had previously sought ECFA guidance in examining the finances of six televangelists. Instances of their lavish spending, favoritism to insiders and lack of financial transparency were not unexpected, but the senator's probe in 2011 drew praise for its spotlight on some ministries unwilling to make full disclosures.

But the ECFA's recommendations August 14 on what some advocates call "pulpit freedom" drew quick fire from church-state experts. Americans surveyed have opposed the idea of allowing political endorsements from the pulpit. And a poll of Protestant pastors in 2012 showed overwhelming opposition.

IRS regulations since 1954 have permitted clergy to address political and ethical issues in church services and activities. But clergy efforts to back or attack candidates and political parties puts a congregation at risk of losing its nonprofit tax exemption.

That should not be the case, ECFA commission chairman Michael E. Batts wrote to Grassley: "It is both disturbing and chilling that the federal government regulates the speech of religious organizations." His Commission on Accountability and Policy for Religious Organizations asserted in its report that "members of the clergy should be able to say whatever they believe is appropriate" in their religious contexts. IRS guidelines also "are often vague, causing uncertainty as to what is permissible," added the report.

Two organizations, Americans United for Separation of Church and State and Interfaith Alliance, sharply disagreed.

“The law on church electioneering doesn’t need to be changed, it needs to be enforced,” said Barry W. Lynn, Americans United executive director. “ECFA’s proposal would reduce America’s houses of worship to mere cogs in political machines.”

Lynn noted in a statement that the IRS has been working to change an internal regulation that governs its ability to investigate congregations. Americans United has reported 128 violations of church politicking to the IRS since 1996. “It’s time for the IRS to act,” Lynn said.

In a similar vein, Baptist pastor C. Welton Gaddy, president of the Interfaith Alliance, said, “The rights of clergy to preach about the most pressing issues of the day and to provide moral guidance to their congregations are not in danger and rightly must be protected.

“But those rights are very different from standing at the pulpit—shrouded in your faith—to announce that your congregation should vote for one candidate or party over another,” Gaddy said on August 14.

The ECFA said its recommendations came from 14 commission members and “66 panel members representing every major faith group in America.” But Gaddy countered that “no one should misunderstand this report as representative of all people of faith,” noting that some advisors wrote position papers opposing the report’s conclusions.

Those brief statements of opposition on the ECFA website were signed by six non-Christian advisors. One disclaimer said if political endorsement emanated from the pulpit or in a church’s regular communications, such a change would pose “grave risk to America’s religious communities.”

In another demurrer, Sayyid M. Syeed of the Islamic Society of North America said his organization was allied against the report with the Jewish Federations of North America, represented by Steven Woolf, its senior tax policy counsel.

The makeup of the ECFA commission, noted Lynn of Americans United, includes Mat Staver of Liberty Counsel, affiliated with Liberty University, and Erik Stanley of

Alliance Defending Freedom. The latter group sponsors the annual Pulpit Freedom Sunday in which pastors are encouraged to preach sermons that evaluate candidates running for office in the light of scripture and make recommendations. Nearly 1,100 churches participated last June 9.

A survey last year of 1,000 Protestant pastors showed that only 10 percent believed that pastors should endorse political candidates from the pulpit. The polling by Nashville-based LifeWay Research found that 87 percent believed (71 percent strongly and 16 percent somewhat) that clergy should not back candidates for public office in church services. Three percent of the pastors were not sure.

Mainline Protestant pastors were against pulpit endorsements by a greater margin (91 percent) than pastors who consider themselves evangelical (87 percent). The differences by political affiliation were bigger: 98 percent of Democrats opposed such endorsements whereas 90 percent of independents and 82 percent of Republicans stood opposed.

In another survey, a Pew Research Center poll asked churchgoers last October whether their clergy had spoken about presidential candidates at their churches. About one in five (19 percent) said they had. Four in ten worshipers in black Protestant churches said their pastors have spoken directly about the candidates.

Slightly more than half (52 percent) said clergy spoke in general about “the importance of voting”—from the high of 79 percent in black churches and the low of 32 percent in white mainline churches. Pew pollsters said: “Most regular churchgoers say the messages they are hearing in church are neutral when it comes to the 2012 election—whether or not they mention the candidates directly.”

Activists for or against political preaching in pulpits have faced a stalemate because the IRS in recent years has not been penalizing offenders. Americans United declared in its mid-August statement that Congress has no obligation to consider the “pulpit freedom” report from the unofficial evangelical groups.

Will a lawsuit brought by a national group of atheists and agnostics provide the needed push? The Freedom from Religion Foundation, based in Wisconsin, filed a suit after the 2012 elections, complaining that the lack of IRS enforcement of its 1954 code barring political endorsements was unfair.

Though the IRS sought to have the case dismissed, saying the FFRF lacked standing to bring the suit, U.S. District Judge Lynn Adelman in Wisconsin denied that motion on August 19. She said the FFRF “has standing to seek an order requiring the IRS to treat religious organizations no more favorably than it treats the Foundation.”

“The time for a free ride for churches is over,” Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF’s copresident, said in a statement. “If these churches—which are accountable to no one in government yet get so many favors—are allowed to engage in tax-exempt politicking, it would be the ruination of our democracy.”