

Pulpit protest shakes fist at IRS, public opinion: Alliance Defense Fund's Pulpit Freedom Sunday

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Although only 33 churches nationwide signed up to participate in a conservative Christian group's "pulpit freedom" protest on the last Sunday of September, the planners viewed it as a success.

Attorneys with the Alliance Defense Fund, which encouraged pastors to endorse political candidates from their pulpits, said the purpose was not to inject politics into worship services. Rather, it was aimed at prompting a legal battle over an Internal Revenue Service restriction which, as a condition of churches' tax exemption, prohibits them from endorsing political candidates.

ADF officials said they are prepared to defend any pastor targeted by the IRS for endorsing a candidate on September 28 and would do so on the basis of the First Amendment guarantee of the right to free speech.

Attorneys for the Arizona-based alliance may be fighting both in actual courtrooms and in the court of public opinion.

A recent survey by the Pew Research Center for People and the Press found that a majority of Americans believe that churches should stay out of politics. In addition, a poll by the Southern Baptist-related LifeWay Christian Resources found that 59 percent of Americans disagreed with the statement: "I believe it is appropriate for churches to publicly endorse candidates for public office."

IRS spokesperson Eric Smith said in September that the agency was aware of media coverage of the initiative and "will monitor the situation and take action as appropriate."

Meanwhile, Americans United for Separation of Church and State filed complaints with the IRS against six churches for violating federal law by endorsing candidates

from the pulpit. “These pastors flagrantly violated the law and now must deal with the consequences,” said AU executive director Barry Lynn.

Rob Boston, AU’s assistant director of communications, said if any church loses tax exemption because of the event and files suit, the church-state watchdog group will file friend-of-the-court briefs opposing partisan politics in America’s pulpits.

“It’s a shame it has come to this,” Boston said. “But now the issue is engaged, and Americans United intends to see it through.”

In his Pulpit Freedom Sunday sermon, Curtis Parker, pastor of the independent First Baptist Church of Avoca, New York, compared voting records of the Democratic and Republican nominees on four issues: abortion, stem cell research, homosexuality and marriage.

“As we evaluate the candidates’ stand on these issues, we can make our decisions easy,” Parker said. “We can kind of do away with the rock-star personality, with the generation of excitement that comes along with individual candidates and kind of cut right to what’s important.

“After everything you’ve heard about Barack Obama and Joe Biden, is it possible that, as a believer [in Christ], you can cast your vote in their favor?” Parker asked. “I would say no.”

At Bethlehem (Georgia) Baptist Church, Pastor Jody Hice endorsed John McCain for president, telling worshipers that the Republican candidate has a more biblical worldview than Obama when it comes to such issues as abortion and gay marriage. “These are not political issues,” the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* quoted the Southern Baptist pastor and local talk-radio host as saying. “These are moral issues.”

“According to my Bible and in my opinion, there is no way in the world a Christian can vote for Barack Hussein Obama,” said Wiley Drake, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church in Buena Park, California. He used Obama’s middle name, which is a common Arabic name. Allusions to it have fed unfounded rumors that Obama is a Muslim. He is a practicing Christian.

But according to the *Los Angeles Times*, instead of endorsing McCain, Drake suggested that his parishioners vote for a different candidate—himself. A past vice president of the Southern Baptist Convention, Drake is on the ballot in California as

running mate of American Independent Party presidential candidate Alan Keyes.

Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, in an opinion article published prior to the event, termed the ADF initiative a “misguided” venture that “certainly will politicize churches more than it will Christianize politics.” Added Walker: “It will assuredly turn our pulpit prophets into political puppets.”

Dale Schowengerdt, legal counsel for the ADF, said his group is not telling pastors what to say or whether to endorse specific candidates, but stands ready to support them if complaints are filed against them. “We’re basically aiming to get these rules declared unconstitutional so that pastors have the right to speak freely from the pulpit without fear of punishment,” he said.

Said Eric Stanley, another ADF attorney: “It’s our contention that the government should not be the one regulating what a pastor can and can’t say from the pulpit. It’s the pastor’s job to determine the content of his sermons, not the IRS.”

Americans United’s Lynn says tax exemption is a privilege granted by the government, not a right. “Houses of worship exist to enrich people’s spiritual lives, not act like political machines that issue marching orders to voters,” Lynn said. “They are tax-exempt because their work is religious and charitable, not political.” - *Associated Baptist Press, Religion News Service*