

Pulpit safety Sunday

By [Daniel Schultz](#)

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Much has been said about Pulpit Freedom Sunday already, but there's still a thing or two to add.

First, let's talk about the political and legal aspects of the story. [Reuters says it's "not entirely clear"](#) why the IRS hasn't gone after churches making endorsements in recent years. I'd say the reason is actually pretty clear: the U.S. House of Representatives.

The IRS can't count on the GOP-controlled House to back them up in a battle to draw up new audit procedures. So it's made the quiet calculation that it's better to wait for conditions to become more favorable. Why the House, rather than the Senate, Supreme Court or White House? Well, between timidity and ideology, the IRS probably can't count on any of them, either. But the House has oversight, and it sets the IRS budget—a power it has shown no reluctance to use.

Given their choices—either let a relative handful of churches off the hook or wade into a battle they can't win, thereby losing all control—the revenueurs have probably made the right call. Almost 1,500 churches reported participating in Pulpit Freedom Sunday this year. That sounds alarming until you realize it's less than half a percent of the estimated 350,000 congregations in the U.S.

But what about how Pulpit Freedom Sunday affects the church as church? [As Allan Bevere points out](#), it's not like America has never known political preaching before. Indeed, the Christian faith itself doesn't lack a political dimension: as far back as Amos and Isaiah, holy people have been mixing it up with political leaders.

Still, one has to wonder about the bravery of latter-day prophets thundering against the president from the vantage of a safe pulpit. When the point is to demonstrate the differences between "us" and "them"—and make no mistake, sharp distinctions between pure conservative evangelicals and fallen liberals is exactly what this is about—just how Christian an event are we talking about here?

Bevere says "Jesus, cross, resurrection, church, kingdom" are his "real politics," much to be preferred to the pale imitation that is an endorsement from an American pulpit. I'm sympathetic to this, but I'd put things differently. Even stipulating the conservative evangelical idea that liberalism and Christianity are antagonistic ideologies, there are better ways than pulpit endorsements to get the point across.

David Henson is [on the right track](#). A eucharistic celebration presents a profoundly different way to imagine and order the world, one deeply at odds with the division so endemic to political life. So different, in fact, that [it was used as a symbolic action](#) by protestors against the torture committed by the Pinochet regime in Chile. What greater, deeper, more primal symbol could there be of the coming kingdom—and what it has to say to the principalities and powers of today's world—than an invitation to the welcome table?

But it's hard to imagine a "values voter" protest carried out along these lines. Not because it wouldn't get the point across, and not because evangelicals tend to prefer word to sacrament. No, the problem with a eucharistic protest is precisely that it would go *too far*. The Lord's Supper presents us with a world with values constituted along God's lines, not our own. That's not what the "Pulpit Freedom Sunday" crowd wants. They'd prefer the same old world with the same old fractures, except with their churches on top and everybody else on the bottom. That's not in any communion liturgy or New Testament scripture I can find. Maybe if I used the King James?