

What the Johnson Amendment really prevents churches from doing

There are constitutional arguments against allowing nonprofits—including congregations—to endorse political candidates. But the religious one is stronger.

By [David Williams](#)

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The video below is worth watching, particularly in our current context. It was produced, distributed, and played in conservative evangelical churches all around the country on the Sunday before the election. Mike Pence, governor and vice-presidential candidate, right there up on the sanctuary screen, talking about how good Christians should feel called to vote for Donald Trump. Why? Because he's 1) pro-life and 2) going to press for the repeal of the Johnson Amendment, which forbids congregations from endorsing candidates or parties.

Of course, the video itself seems a pretty flagrant violation of said rule. I mean, "Mike Pence and Donald Trump: Men of God?" Pence, I can see. He's right out of central casting. But Donald? Lord have mercy. Were there alternatives? Did, after showing this, those pastor show their congregations "Bernie Sanders: The Lord Descends from Heaven As a Sparrow" and "Gary Johnson: Jesus Totally Gets High With Him?" I think not.

Out of curiosity, I went to my sermon blog and ran a search. When, I wondered, was the last time I mentioned Donald from the pulpit?

It was in October 2015, back when he was a joke candidate, out on the periphery of the national consciousness, just the reality-television absurdly-coiffed conspiracist buffoon who capered and leered and entertained us with his offensiveness. Before that, I'd used his name twice, both times in the context of talking about someone

being "fired."

Since things got ... weird, I've committed to making no explicit mention of him from the pulpit. Lord have mercy, the Drama Queen in Chief takes up too much of our bandwidth as it is.

Again out of curiosity, I did a second search. In the last eight years, I mentioned Barack Obama twice. Once in the context of directing the congregation to the [Epic Rap Battle Youtube](#) video between Romney and Obama, a rap battle won most notably by Abraham Lincoln and a giant American eagle and which was watched millions of times more than the actual debate between the two candidates. The second time, in the context of calling out both Democrats and Republicans for the pernicious influence of money in politics.

It is, of course, technically against the law for a pastor to endorse a candidate or political party from the pulpit. If you want to be a 501(c)3, and exempt from taxation, you can preach on social issues all you want. You can be pro-life or pro-choice. You can preach in favor of sane gun safety or hand out Smith and Wesson M&P 15 Sport II tactical carbines to every new member. You can do these things, and still be nonprofit.

But you cannot endorse or explicitly support a candidate or party and hold on to your nonprofit status. Well, that's how it's supposed to work.

An argument for this, from the position of the Constitution, is that formally favoring churches with both exemption and the ability to preach partisan politics is a violation of the Establishment clause of the First Amendment. From that slippery slope, it becomes easier and easier for congregations to become just another arm of the party in power.

But the argument for this from the position of the church is stronger.

Whenever the gospel becomes the servant of a particular political perspective, it is betrayed. Whenever a church chooses to be explicitly in the camp of one party or another, the gospel is no longer served. When the state has the power to co-opt faith, as the [Barmen Declaration](#) embraced by my denomination so pointedly notes, that faith has become corrupted.

Even if our administration and Congress delivers this spiritual Trojan horse to America's churches, I have no intention of changing what I am currently doing. My religious liberty and the integrity of the Word matters too much to me.

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