

Baptist pastor quits after political dispute: Told Kerry supporters to "repent or resign"

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The pastor of a North Carolina Baptist church has resigned after controversy over allegations that he told members to "repent or resign" if they intended to vote for Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry in the last election.

Chan Chandler left his East Waynesville Baptist Church in Waynesville on May 10 after giving a brief statement, the Associated Press reported. "For me to remain now would only cause more hurt for me and my family," said the 33-year-old minister, who had led the church for three years.

News reports that nine church members, including three deacons, who didn't agree politically with the minister were forced to resign raised the possibility that the Internal Revenue Service would investigate whether the church had violated its tax-exempt status. (Another 40 members allegedly left in protest.)

Chandler told Baptist Press, the news service of the Southern Baptist Convention, that he cited "unbiblical values" of some political candidates on abortion and homosexuality but did not go as far as some claim with comments related to the election.

"I don't know how these folks voted," he said of the members who alleged he had forced them out.

Chandler told the news service that he differed with some Southern Baptists who think politics and religion shouldn't mix. The Southern Baptists' Richard Land, a frequent commentator on faith in politics, told Baptist Press earlier, "I believe it would never—never—be appropriate for a local Baptist church to decide membership based upon how a person votes."

Chandler said the turmoil stirred by his preaching was not about politics. "It's always been about whether the Bible applies to the entire life of a Christian," he said.

Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, said that if Chandler's pulpit statement about Senator Kerry did not indicate he was speaking only for himself, it would be a "pretty clear" violation of IRS rules against political endorsements by churches.

In a commentary for Baptist Press, a seminary professor defended his former student for standing up for his beliefs even if he "was not as diplomatic as he could have been." Wrote Waylan Owens, vice president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina: "Since I believe that America should protect freedom of conscience and the right to speak freely in a religious pulpit, I am saddened that a young minister should be subject to such an inquisition for standing for biblical morality and the teachings of his church."