



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on October 5, 2012

Majority of Pastors Uncomfortable With Endorsing Candidates

As hundreds of pastors across America prepare to defy the IRS on Sunday, October 7, by endorsing political candidates from their pulpits, a survey by LifeWay Research, a division of the Southern Baptist Convention, finds that nearly 90 percent of America's clergy think that they should not use their pulpits for such endorsements. The survey of 1,000 Protestant clergy revealed that only 10 percent believe that it is appropriate to influence their parishioners in the pulpit by favoring a particular candidate, while 87 percent said it is inappropriate.



LifeWay research director Scott McConnell said the research indicated that pastors "clearly respect the sacred desk of the pulpit enough to discourage its use to affect elections."

The survey also revealed that only 44 percent of pastors had personally endorsed candidates outside of the pulpit. "Less than half the pastors indicated that they had done that this year," said McConnell, while adding that it appeared "two-thirds of them have to some extent, because only 33 percent 'strongly disagree' that they've endorsed candidates from the pulpit."

There were differences in the responses between those who self-identified as "evangelical" pastors and those who said they were "mainline," with 86 percent of the evangelicals saying that pastors should not endorse a candidate from the pulpit, compared to 91 percent of mainline pastors.

Likewise, political affiliation seemed to make a difference. Among clergy who identified themselves as Democrat, 98 percent frowned on political endorsements made from the pulpit, compared to 90 percent of Independents and 82 percent of Republicans.

McConnell noted that previous LifeWay research showed that "pastors believe the government has no place in determining what is and is not said from their pulpits regarding candidates. Yet most pastors don't believe endorsement of candidates should be made from the pulpit."

He added that while the research indicated "most pastors have opinions on who the best candidates are, and those convictions may be heavily dependent on biblical principles ... very few pastors choose to make those endorsements from the pulpit."

The findings come in the run-up to "Pulpit Freedom Sunday" October 7, during which the group Alliance Defending Freedom is encouraging pastors around the nation to defy the 1954 IRS statute, called the Johnson Amendment, that prohibits tax-exempt organizations, including churches, from endorsing candidates for office. "The purpose is to make sure that the pastor, and not the IRS, decides what is said from the pulpit," said Erik Stanley, an ADF spokesman. "It is a head-on constitutional challenge."

As reported by [The New American](#), pastors participating in Pulpit Freedom Sunday "will use their pulpits to preach sermons focused on a specific candidate, encouraging parishioners to show their support for that candidate at the polls. The sermons will be recorded and sent to the IRS."



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Stanley told [Fox News](#) that the hope is that the IRS “will respond by doing what they have threatened. We have to wait for it to be applied to a particular church or pastor so that we can challenge it in court. We don’t think it’s going to take long for a judge to strike this down as unconstitutional.”

According to the 1954 law, tax-exempt entities such as churches are “absolutely prohibited from directly or indirectly participating in, or intervening in, any political campaign on behalf of [or opposing] any candidate for elective public office.” IRS guidelines for churches specify that violation of the code “may result in denial or revocation of tax-exempt status and the imposition of certain excise tax.”

However, Stanley, said, while the IRS has often threatened churches for violating the code, it has seldom followed through with prosecution because the federal tax collectors fear the legal challenge that would result. He said the Johnson Amendment is “blatantly unconstitutional,” adding that the IRS prefers “to put out these vague statements and regulations and enforce it through a system of intimidation.... Pastors are afraid to address anything political from the pulpit.”

The ADF indicated that there has been a shift in that intimidation, with more clergy stepping forward each year to challenge the IRS. In 2008, the first year the ADF sponsored Pulpit Freedom Sunday, only 33 pastors across the nation participated. In 2009 the number increased to 80, and by last year had risen to nearly 600. This year, over 1,000 pastors have signed up thus far, agreeing to preach sermons comparing the positions held by candidates with scriptural admonition, then making specific recommendations about candidates, including recommendations about candidates for which parishioners should vote. The pastors will then bring their sermons “to the attention of the IRS in the hopes that an audit of their churches would spark lawsuits challenging the constitutionality of the Johnson Amendment,” explained the ADF.

The legal advocacy group noted that so far in its yearly campaign “none of the participating churches have had their tax exemption revoked, nor have any received penalties from the IRS for what was said during their sermons.”

Photo: [Minister delivering a serious sermon in church](#) via Shutterstock



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