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The Secular Left Goes on the Attack

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The First Baptist Church of Springdale, Arkansas traditionally holds a festive service featuring patriotic themes to commemorate the Fourth of July. This past July 4, the church held its service, which featured a multi-media presentation that included a message preached by Dr. Ronnie Floyd, the church's pastor. Within days, controversy erupted and a group known as Americans United for Separation of Church and State had filed a formal complaint with the IRS, charging the church with violating the IRS code and thus threatening its tax-exempt status.

What was Dr. Floyd's offense? In the course of his message, which looked to the moral state of the nation, the pastor gave particular attention to the most pressing moral issues of the day, including same-sex marriage and abortion. Underlining the Christian's responsibility in the civic sphere, Dr. Floyd pointed to the upcoming presidential election with a specific consideration of these moral issues.

As Floyd told his congregation, "One candidate believes that marriage is a God-ordained institution between one man and one woman and has proposed a constitutional amendment protecting marriage." In contrast, "the other candidate was one of only 14 senators to vote against the Defense of Marriage Act of 1996." As the pastor described the first candidate's position, an image of President George W. Bush appeared on a large television screen. When the second candidate was mentioned, a photograph of Senator John Kerry appeared on the same screen.

The pastor also gave major attention to the issue of abortion, crediting President Bush with signing the Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act of 2003, and criticizing Senator Kerry for his opposition to the measure. Of course, the president's signature and Senator Kerry's vote are matters of historical fact. Furthermore, First Baptist Church of Springdale, Arkansas—the state's largest congregation—has well-known and cherished convictions on behalf of the unborn and in defense of marriage. There can be no doubt that church members favored passage of the partial-birth abortion ban and celebrated its signing into law. Nevertheless, Americans United for the Separation of Church and State alleges that Dr. Floyd violated the tax code and the group called for the IRS to investigate the church.

Note carefully—the pastor did not call for his congregation to vote for one candidate or the other, nor was there any endorsement of either candidate by name. The pastor told his church that "this will be one of the most critical elections in U.S. history," and stated the obvious: "Rarely have we seen two candidates so diametrically opposed in their convictions."

Where is the scandal in this? In a letter to the Internal Revenue Service, Americans United Executive Director Barry Lynn argued that Floyd was clearly, if indirectly, endorsing President Bush. In his July 20 letter to the IRS, Lynn wrote: "It is clear that Floyd's message was intended to intervene in the election on behalf of [President] Bush. The pastor's

description of the candidates' stands and their personal religious beliefs was obviously aimed at encouraging congregants to cast ballots for Bush. The church is known for its stands on social issues and its opposition to legal abortion and gay rights. By lauding Bush's stands on these and other issues and attacking Kerry's, Floyd was plainly telling his congregation to be sure to vote for Bush."

In 1954, the IRS code was modified to include a prohibition of partisan political activity on the part of churches. This effort, led by Senator Lyndon B. Johnson, was inserted in an effort to silence one of Johnson's opponents. The result has been the constant danger of intimidation churches now face. The church must never become a political action committee or an arm of the state. The church's message is first and foremost a Gospel message. Nevertheless, that Gospel message comes with the full content of biblical Christianity, and the Bible's teachings have political consequences. While there is no sign that the IRS is plotting a hostile invasion of the churches, launching investigations of congregations and religious institutions, the current regulations put the agency in the position of making legal evaluations of pulpit proclamations. This is certainly not what the Founding Fathers had in mind.

Ronnie Floyd refuses to back down. The pastor insists that his message, and the totality of the worship service, were extensions of his pulpit ministry and biblical teaching. "I have never told anyone who to vote for, and I'm not going to start now," he stated in his sermon. At the same time, he castigated evangelicals for failing to vote in the 2000 elections. "Why would evangelical Christians stay at home and not practice the responsibility of Christian stewardship, when God's word, which we say we believe, calls us to stand up in our citizenship?," he asked.

The church—which telecasts its services nationwide—is defending its pastor and his message. "We just feel like we've done what we're supposed to do, and we're going to stick to our guns," said Alan Damron, the church's associate pastor.

The IRS has declined to comment on the case. Spokesman David Stell told The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette that such cases are judged on the basis of the particular circumstances of each disputed incident.

The IRS publishes a lengthy set of guidelines addressed to churches and religious organizations. Congregations "are absolutely prohibited from directly or indirectly participating in, or intervening in, any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for elected public office," the guidelines state. The very fact that numerous pages of commentary are required to explain the IRS code indicates the complexity of the questions raised. Churches are allowed to promote voter-education activities and to publish voter-education guides so long as these are done in a "nonpartisan" manner. Of course, "nonpartisan" is often in the eye of the beholder.

The difficulty of all this is, of course, when the church's moral teaching based on biblical authority is precisely at stake in the electoral process. This is certainly the case in the contemporary struggle over the question of same-sex marriage. No gospel church can be a disinterested party in this debate, nor can it forfeit its responsibility to arm its members with the full measure of biblical conviction and ample encouragement to take these convictions into the marketplace of ideas and the voting booth.

The effort launched by Americans United amounts to a campaign of intimidation directed at evangelical pastors and Catholic priests. The group, which bills itself as "a religious liberty watchdog group based in Washington, D.C." that seeks to educate citizens "about the importance of church-state separation and safeguarding religious freedom," is hardly neutral in these debates. AU represents the hard left of the secularist movement, taking positions that favor abortion rights and oppose prohibitions on same-sex marriage. Though the group files token complaints against liberal churches, its main attack is directed at churches it identifies with the "Christian right."

In the Kansas City area, a group known as the "Mainstream Coalition" is sending its members into local churches in order to gain evidence to use against congregations that would, for instance, be opposed to same-sex marriage. Jay Sekulow, chief counsel for the American Center for Law and Justice, asked: "Who deputized this group and its members to be the thought police in Kansas—or elsewhere?" Reverend James Conard, assistant pastor of the First Baptist Church of Shawnee told The Kansas City Star, "Somebody is trying to act like Big Brother when there's no need for Big Brother. It's obviously an intent to intimidate."

That intimidation is very real. As a legislative remedy to this threat, Rep. Walter Jones [R-NC] has introduced the "Houses of Worship Free Speech Restoration Act." The bill would revise the IRS code to remove the threatening language concerning churches and religious organizations. Thus far, the bill has been stalled in the House of

Representatives. If the secular left continues to act like the thought police and harass churches, that may soon change.

Even if the IRS restrictions on churches are removed, this does not mean that preachers and congregations should turn themselves into political operatives and partisan platforms. The political temptation is never far from sight, but the church must maintain its role as the vessel of the Gospel—even when it must also speak prophetically to the culture and the political process.

All this is the latest sign that the Culture War is heating up—and fast. The tactics of Americans United and similar groups are tantamount to a secularist Gestapo, seeking to intimidate pastors from fulfilling their responsibility in the pulpit. Churches and religious organizations must be careful to avoid the direct endorsement of political candidates. Nevertheless, the church will lose its soul and abandon its gospel if it lays down in subservience to the secularist agenda. For now, the real risk is intimidation. Nevertheless, if Americans United and its allies have their way, intimidation is just the tip of the iceberg.

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