

Why "Pulpit Freedom Sunday" misses the point

By [Allan R. Bevere](#)

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It has become an exercise in free speech and a challenge to the federal government. ["Pulpit Freedom Sunday,"](#) the birth child of the group Alliance Defending Freedom, is designed to challenge the 50-year-old Johnson Amendment (501 c 3), which prohibits tax-exempt charities from publicly endorsing or opposing a candidate for office or working on their behalf. On Sunday, October 7, pastors who choose to participate will stand in the pulpit and endorse and/or oppose candidates for office—and no doubt focus on the presidential candidates themselves. Pastors who participate are to preach on the election, endorse a candidate for office, and send a video copy of the sermon to the IRS. The ultimate goal of "Pulpit Freedom Sunday" is to force the Johnson Amendment back into court consideration so that it will be declared unconstitutional.

I suppose in one respect from the perspective of American history, these pastors have a point. Up until the Johnson Amendment pastors did wade into politics from the pulpit and often in quite a robust way. I have two large volumes in small print on my book shelf entitled, [Political Sermons of the American Founding Era](#). There is no doubt that nation state politics was fair game in the founding years of America, which makes sense. One does not need an amendment to the tax codes prohibiting politics in the pulpit if no one is preaching on politics.

So I understand the point, but for this preacher who stands in the pulpit every Sunday, "Pulpit Freedom Sunday" misses the point. Indeed, it more than misses the point: it undermines and distorts the preaching of the gospel and the very character of the gospel itself.

First, I have never endorsed a candidate from the pulpit nor will I ever do so, and it has nothing to do with a concern that the church will lose its tax exempt status. I could care less about that. The gospel is not a commodity. No one will buy my silence nor my voice with a threat over money.

Second, I don't think most of my parishioners care in the least who I vote for nor do they want to hear why I am voting for a particular candidate from the pulpit. That is not why they are there. I am not going to waste their time with irrelevancies.

Third, the gospel is true freedom, which only the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ can secure. I don't need the Alliance Defending Freedom on one hand, nor Americans United for the Separation of Church and State on the other, telling me that obeying the law or defying it is necessary for the freedom of religion. The gospel is inherently liberating in the fullest sense of the term, legislation and tax codes notwithstanding. I will preach the gospel of Jesus Christ from the pulpit and I don't need the state defining for me what that does and does not mean, nor do I need a group of pastors telling me that if I do not endorse a candidate from the pulpit I am allowing the state to muzzle me. And that leads me to my fourth point, which I mentioned above.

Pulpit Freedom Sunday misses the point when it comes to the proclamation of the gospel itself. Not only that, it undermines and distorts the very nature of the gospel. The Good News is about Jesus Christ who comes as King and brings the Kingdom. This kingdom reorders the lives of its citizens, including in the realm of politics. The politics of the kingdom is manifest in and through the church. The church is a politic that is to bear witness to the nations of the intrusive, transforming, and redemptive ways of God in this world in Jesus Christ. Every Sunday when I stand in the pulpit to preach, I am being political. Have I ever endorsed a candidate from the pulpit? Nope. Have I ever endorsed the platform of a particular political party? Hardly. But every Sunday I preach politics because I proclaim cross and resurrection and the new community, the new polity, they bring. To proclaim that Jesus is Lord is a political claim that puts all other leaders on notice. To affirm that God's kingdom has arrived in Jesus Christ is a warning that all earthly kingdoms are on borrowed time. To speak of church is to remind the people of God that the church is God's politic, that it is the vehicle by which the God's kingdom is at work.

The church of Jesus Christ and its mission in the world is where the political action is; it is not to be found in the nation state. When Christians hear the word "politics," they should think "church," not "state." It is wrong to endorse a candidate from the pulpit, not because of some vague and amorphous notion of separation of church and state. It is wrong because it makes the state God's replacement kingdom and takes the center of the church's worship off of King Jesus and focuses instead on an earthly leader who will die, along with his empire (if he is elected) that will one day

crumble.

I preach real politics--Jesus, cross, resurrection, church, kingdom-- and I refuse to substitute such proclamation for second-rate presidential endorsements. The gospel is about Jesus and nothing less. If the gospel becomes less than that from the pulpit, it is not the gospel; and those entrusted with the message are responsible and accountable for what they say. It is a dangerous thing to lead people away from the kingdom politics of Jesus, and political endorsements from the pulpit do just that.

Barack Obama may win a second term as president. Mitt Romney may win a first. Whatever the outcome of the election, Jesus will still be Lord just as he has always been. On the Sunday after the election, I will be proclaiming the same gospel I did the Sunday before.

There are those who think candidates for political office are too important to ignore from the pulpit. I say they are not significant enough to mention.

Originally posted at [Bevere's blog](#)