

Southern Baptists pull back from 'Free Speech' bill: Bill would allow candidate endorsements

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The Southern Baptist Convention's public policy arm has withdrawn support for a bill that would allow religious institutions to endorse candidates without threatening their tax-exempt status.

The SBC's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, once a vocal supporter of the bill, decided it could not affirm the latest version of the Houses of Worship Free Speech Restoration Act. Church-state separation advocates have voiced strong opposition in all three years the bill has appeared in the House of Representatives.

The bill (H.R. 235), sponsored by Representative Walter Jones (R., N.C.), failed a full House vote in 2002 and nearly passed as part of a larger bill last year before the controversial provision was gutted.

The most recent version sponsored by Jones does not permit political views expressed by religious leaders or congregation members to be distributed beyond those attending the service in which they are made.

The SBC commission, headed by Richard Land, thinks the changes leave churches open to the possibility of government intrusion and calls the latest version a "grotesquely bad idea," reported Baptist Press, the SBC news service.

"Under the new bill, the government would permit churches to endorse a candidate but then would allow government investigators to come in and determine when the church has exceeded the government's narrow parameters of permission," said Land. "It gives the government foxes a hunting license to enter the churches' hen houses, and we all know what happens when foxes get into hen houses—hens get killed, and foxes get fat."

The latest version of the bill would amend the Internal Revenue Code to prevent the tax-exempt status of religious organizations from being affected by the “content, preparation or presentation” of addresses, such as sermons, at religious meetings or services.

When they supported the bill, commission officials continued to call for Baptist churches to refrain from candidate endorsements, Land said.

Meanwhile, Americans United for Separation of Church and State said that a controversy over partisan politics at a North Carolina church shows the danger of electioneering in congregations.

Chan Chandler, the pastor of East Waynesville Baptist Church, reportedly told members in October that any member supporting John Kerry should repent or resign from the church. Chandler resigned after the issue came to a head this month when Chandler said anyone who disagreed with his political views should leave. (See adjoining story.)

Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United, said there was a lesson in the controversy. “Americans do not expect to be ordered to vote for [or against] certain candidates by their religious leaders,” Lynn said. “Introducing partisan politics into our churches is a terrible idea.”

Southern Baptists aren’t the only ones convinced that limitations on political practices of tax-exempt organizations stifle free expression. “Today, instead of separation of church and state, we have suppression of the church by the state,” wrote Rod Parsley, senior pastor of World Harvest Church in Columbus, Ohio, in a May 4 RNS opinion article. “Returning First Amendment protection to our nation’s clergy is critical to reversing our nation’s precipitous moral decline,” Parsley said.