

Take a memo: Prophetic violations

From the Editors in the [November 29, 2005](#) issue

The Internal Revenue Service says that a sermon opposing the U.S. invasion of Iraq preached at All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena, California, just prior to the 2004 presidential election may have violated IRS rules. The IRS prohibits churches and other nonprofit organizations from endorsing political candidates. (See [Century report](#).)

Memo to: Field Officers

From: E. A. Squirmwood, Chief, Division of Religio-Political Violations

Our investigation has revealed that hundreds, perhaps thousands, of sermons preached in churches during electoral campaigns are veiled forms of political discourse. Our agents have discovered that church leaders are directly addressing issues with obvious political implications, such as war, health care, social justice, taxation, care for the poor and racial equality. There can be no doubt that these sermons are designed to influence people's political actions.

Our agents have been distressed to find that even the textual basis of these "sermons" is blatantly political, which only invites violations of this kind. Some samples that have crossed my desk:

"The righteous know the rights of the poor; the wicked have no such understanding" (Prov. 29:7).

"Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out" (James 5:4).

"God executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing" (Deut. 10:15).

The circulation of these texts indicates our need to exercise extreme vigilance. Be prepared as you carry out your duties to hear outcries from church leaders who feel that the IRS inquiry is intruding into areas of protected religious speech. Be advised that the IRS will soon issue guidelines for churches to assist them in keeping their religious discourse appropriately nonpolitical.

Remind violators that the vast majority of churches—indeed, many of the most successful—easily carry out their work without overstepping IRS regulations. These churches do not challenge churchgoers to think about how the political order should be organized, or how government spending should be prioritized, or how the nation should exercise its military might. They address only IRS-approved topics of concern—that is, they soothe people's anxieties, reconcile people to life's hardships and encourage cosmological speculations.

Our staff is preparing a list of texts in sacred scriptures that lend themselves to sermons on approved topics. Though investigators in this field recently told me they need more time for research, I expect the report any day now.