

Crackdown on Unlawful Church Campaigning

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For reasons explicable only to people lost in a world of political rationalization, Republicans and Democrats use churches for electioneering. Ironically, some churches revel in being so used. When confronted by this fact, both sides say that the other side is just as guilty. What a circular piece of reasoning. Since when do Christians justify unlawful behavior by claiming that everyone else does it? Churches acting illegally and immorally stinks to high heaven.

For once, in the myriad disagreements that churches have with one another, we have a simple solution. Churches should not become the political prostitutes of any party or candidate. A church has higher loyalties. Christians serve the Prince of Peace more than the president. Christians owe allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, not the Republican Party or the Democratic Party. No matter how we dress the modern nation, it is a dangerous institution as it offers with one hand to provide us with services and goods, and with the other hand, it invites some of us to die on its behalf. As Alasdair MacIntyre says, "It is like being asked to die for the telephone company."

The church exists as an alternative *polis* (to use the Greek word for "city" before we slimed it with the word "politics") constituted "by the new reality of the kingdom of God as seen in the life and destiny of Jesus Christ" (Stanley Haurewas). The church lives to interpret, critique, and often rebuke the politics of America, not invite it into the house of worship, baptize it, and pretend it has become godly.

Opening the church as a surrogate to a political party violates federal tax laws. The Internal Revenue Service has released a new report outlining its enforcement of the federal tax law barring partisan political activity by churches and other charities. In 2004, the IRS examined activities of 132 non-profits. Approximately 75% of the 82 organizations examined, including churches, engaged in some level of illegal political activity. As IRS Commissioner Mark W. Everson pointedly says, "The law does not allow charities to participate in political campaigns." He also notes that a disturbing amount of political intervention took place in churches and warns, "We are going to provide more and better guidance and move quickly to address prohibited activities."

Some of the illegal activities of churches include distributing materials recommending their members to vote for a particular candidate, pastors using their sermons to endorse/oppose a candidate (19 alleged; 12 determined), disseminating voter guides that encourage members to vote for particular candidates, placing signs on their property that show they support a particular candidate, giving improper preferential treatment to certain candidates by permitting them to speak at church functions, and making cash contributions to a candidate's political campaign.

While there are preachers telling lies that they have a right to engage in partisan political activities, they should know better, and probably do. Their claims are false and their activities are illegal. There is not a single reason that gives churches the legal authority to engage in partisan political activity.

This doesn't mean churches and pastors shouldn't preach a biblical message of justice, hope, peace, and courage. It doesn't mean that pastors are prohibited from speaking truth to the powers and principalities. Any church or church leader not actively involved in the life of our culture and society is an anachronism and an irrelevance. Preachers, however, are called to be prophets of God, not religious spin doctors or spiritual shells for a particular candidate.

The Ohio governor's race has been making national news because of the increased involvement of religious leaders. Christians on both sides of the political debate have a moral obligation to report egregious violations of the federal tax law regarding political campaigns. The church's integrity, credibility, and honesty are at stake. After all, we experience a grave loss when we can no longer tell the church from the K Street lobbyists, and we can no longer tell which came first, Southern Baptist preachers looking like Texas politicians or Texas politicians looking like Southern Baptist preachers.

Any church in Ohio that violates the election laws should be reported, investigated, and if necessary, lose their tax exempt status. This is not a difficult law to understand. All churches of all kinds should be able to abide by the law.