



A Dangerous Muzzle: Political pulpit is the wrong target for IRS

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When the retired rector of All Saints Episcopal Church, a liberal congregation in Southern California, delivered an anti-war sermon during the 2004 campaign, he had no idea that his words would bring the Internal Revenue Service down on the church's head.

Tax authorities claim that the sermon, which presented an imaginary discussion among Jesus Christ, John Kerry and George W. Bush, violated IRS regulations prohibiting churches from endorsing candidates, at the risk of losing their tax-exempt status. Even hosting a discussion that appears to favor a particular candidate could be a violation of IRS rules. Though the Rev. George Regas said that "good people of profound faith" could vote for either candidate, Father Regas delivered a stinging broadside against Bush administration policies.

It's no bad thing for the federal government to refuse to use taxpayer dollars effectively to subsidize a religious organization's political activism. That said, American churches have a long and distinguished history of social and political activism. American history – abolition, the civil rights movement, temperance and the pro-life movement, to name a few – would not have been the same without the active involvement of religious folks in the public square.

In recent years, black churches have been heavily associated with Democratic politics, just as many white evangelical churches have been centers of activism that benefited Republican candidates and causes. While some prominent pastors go uncomfortably far with their advocacy of particular parties and candidates – one thinks of the Rev. Jesse Jackson on the left and the Rev. Pat Robertson on the right – by and large the participation of people of faith in the great struggles of our time is to be welcomed.

It's pretty outrageous, then, for the IRS to pick on All Saints church, especially when there are countless examples of other ministers going as far or farther in speaking truth (as they see it) to power from the pulpit. The fact that the IRS is putting the squeeze on a church critical of the administration currently in power is chilling.

According to All Saints' current rector, the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, the IRS has told him it would drop the investigation if the church would admit fault and promise not to do it again. Don't do it, Father Bacon. Knuckling under to the tax man would be a defeat for all churches, whatever their politics.

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