

# Lifting Johnson Amendment Challenges Pastors to Preach All of God's Word

Christian evangelical voters were key in the election of President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence. The faithful made their choice at the ballot box based largely on the promises Trump and Pence made on the campaign trail and the support they showed to pastors and churches.

On Thursday, one of those promises came to fruition, as Trump signed an executive order that ensured the protection of religious liberties in America and relaxed the rules of the Johnson Amendment, which has for six decades restricted the free speech of pastors and churches.

The American Pastors Network (APN) praised the order and celebrated the freedoms it will return to the pulpit and the pews.

"Pastors' voices had been silent on the most important cultural, societal and political issues of our time," said APN President Sam Rohrer, "because of a fear of repercussions stemming from the Johnson Amendment. President Trump's action on Thursday returns decades of freedom to churches and enables pastors to freely speak truth about social issues from the pulpit.

"However, the signing of this executive order does not remedy all the issues in today's church," Rohrer continued. "This brought back into line what the government's role should be in the church, but it does not completely solve why pastors have not been preaching the whole counsel of God. The path to freedom may have been paved, but it's now up to pastors and churches to begin preaching boldly. For some, the Johnson Amendment has been a convenient excuse to shy away from the

tough issues. The challenge before the pulpit has always been fear, and that's the challenge of any leader. The Johnson Amendment has been the fear factor. Pastors now must understand that this fear factor has been temporarily removed."

Trump said on Thursday during a National Day of Prayer ceremony at the White House just before he signed the order that sermons should no longer be censored and pastors should no longer be targeted.

"In America, we do not fear people speaking freely from the pulpit," Trump said. "We embrace it. America has a rich tradition of social change beginning in our pews and our pulpits. Perhaps there is no greater example than the historic role of the African-American church as the agent for social progress, spurring our nation to greater justice and equality. We must never infringe on the noble tradition of change from the church and progress from the pew. Under my administration, free speech does not end at the steps of a cathedral or a synagogue or any other house of worship. We are giving our churches their voices back; we are giving them back in the highest form. With this executive order, we also make clear that the federal government will never, ever penalize any person for their protected religious beliefs."

For more than 60 years, the Johnson Amendment, proposed by then-Senator Lyndon B. Johnson and passed by Congress in 1954, had prohibited tax-exempt organizations—including churches and other nonprofits—from lobbying elected officials, campaigning on behalf of a political party and supporting or opposing candidates for office. The Johnson Amendment had instilled fear in pastors, wary of losing their church's tax-exempt status if they speak truth into cultural, societal or political issues.

"On the campaign trail," Rohrer added, "Donald Trump and Mike Pence vowed to work on behalf of pastors to restore their

pulpit freedoms, especially at a time when Christians need biblical truth and God-centered guidance spoken into their lives regarding the pressing issues of the day.”

APN also noted that research by George Barna of the American Culture & Faith Institute found that three out of four SAGE Cons (Spiritually Active, Governance Engaged Conservatives) turned to resources such as voter guides, websites and other resources to gain information about their choices for the 2016 election. Overall, 61 percent specifically identified voter guides as a resource they used to help them decide how to vote. Under the current Johnson Amendment, churches may distribute voter guides as long as they are neutral in nature.

This research, Rohrer says, is a telling indicator that Christians are looking for guidance on important issues, and will likely look to the church.

“Pastors are charged by God to always speak biblical truth from the pulpit,” Rohrer said. “From abortion and marriage to tyranny in office, the Bible is very clear on social, cultural and political issues. Efforts by government to intimidate pastors on preaching biblical truth not only violate God’s direct command but are also unconstitutional. Churches, by their very nature, operate under God’s jurisdiction and, as such, have historically been tax-exempt. They predated the IRS and any other manmade provision. When it comes to preaching the truth of God’s Word, the pastor’s obligation is to God, not government. Thursday’s executive order is a step in the right direction to end these violations and restore pastors’ rights and duties.” {eo}