

Billy Graham Under Atheist Fire in IRS Complaint

Billy Graham is known for preaching fiery sermons that see even the hardest hearts converted. Now, the 94-year-old evangelist is under fire for newspaper ads that compelled voters to cast their ballots based on biblical principles.

A group of atheists is taking the Internal Revenue Service to court over its failure to enforce electioneering restrictions against churches and religious organizations, including the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.

Wisconsin-based Freedom From Religion Foundation filed a lawsuit Wednesday, claiming the IRS violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment and FFRF's equal protection rights.

The Rev. Billy Graham and his son Rev. Franklin Graham met with presidential candidate Mitt Romney last month. Romney asked the 94-year-old evangelist to pray for him for the duration of his campaign. Billy Graham reportedly told Romney, "I'll do all I can to help you."

A week after the meeting, BGEA took out ads featuring a photo of Graham. One reads:

"On November 6, the day before my 94th birthday, our nation will hold one of the most critical elections in my lifetime. We are at a crossroads and there are profound moral issues at stake. I strongly urge you to vote for candidates who support the biblical definition of marriage between a man and woman, protect the sanctity of life and defend our religious freedoms. The Bible speaks clearly on these crucial issues. Please join me in praying for America, that we will turn our hearts back toward God."

The secular organization argued that BGEA's "vote biblical values" full-page ads that ran in the three Sundays leading up to the presidential election were in violation of the IRS' rules on religious groups and political campaigning.

"The context of the ads and publications by BGEA evidence its intent to endorse candidate Mitt Romney," FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor wrote in an Oct. 31 letter to the IRS.

"Tax-exempt nonprofit groups are to be conducted with educational and charitable purposes, not for the purpose of political campaign advocacy. When nonprofit groups become involved in political elections, they should be investigated and lose their tax-exempt status," she said.

However, a statement from BGEA says no general ministry funds were used for the ads.

"A number of friends who support the ministry of the BGEA have contributed funds designated for the purchase of newspaper advertising space to publish an ad featuring Billy Graham's image and a call to support candidates who will support biblical values," the statement reads.

The group is now asking the federal court to enjoin IRS Commissioner Douglas Shulman from continuing "a policy of non-enforcement of the electioneering restrictions against churches and religious organizations."

In October, more than 1,500 pastors and other religious leaders participated in Pulpit Freedom Sunday, which the FFRF claims violated electioneering restrictions.

The atheists have sent letters of complaint to the IRS involving 27 other cases.