

IRS Settlement With Atheists Could Mean Beginning of End for Your Pastor's Free Speech

The Internal Revenue Service has settled a lawsuit with the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), and as a result, the IRS will adopt standards to determine whether churches and religious organizations have violated restrictions on political activity.

Details of the settlement have not been released, but the IRS has said it will amend its policies to enforce tax laws on what the atheist organization FFRF calls "rogue political churches."

American Pastors Network (APN) says the new development should serve as a wake-up call for pastors in every pulpit who cherish First-Amendment rights.

"As a result of this settlement," said APN President Sam Rohrer, "the Justice Department, according to its own statement, will begin to crack down on political speech from the pulpit. This is literally a call to arms and should not be taken as idle commentary but as a warning shot across the bow. With this decision, pastors' freedom of speech from the pulpit is in danger. ... There is nothing stronger than speaking with unity and strength as pastors address the real issues of the day."

In the case, FFRF demanded that the Johnson Amendment, a controversial IRS rule added in 1954 that precludes nonprofit organizations from engaging in campaign activity, be enforced against churches.

Rohrer said implications of the settlement could mean that churches cannot distribute voter guides to congregations, and

pastors may not be able to talk from the pulpit about political issues in relation to the Bible.

Erik Stanley, an attorney with Alliance Defending Freedom, said the IRS settlement with the atheist group should create concern, telling *The Blaze*, "Every American should fear an IRS that uses its vast power to target, threaten and punish political opponents. Churches have succumbed to this regime of fear for the last 60 years under the Johnson Amendment, which was added to the tax code specifically to silence speech a politician didn't like."

ADF has been a longtime opponent of FFRF and has organized the annual "Pulpit Freedom Sunday" event, set this year for Oct. 5.

The settlement comes in the middle of an IRS scandal that found that the tax agency was unfairly targeting conservative organizations by delaying or denying their applications for tax-exempt status.