

Pulpit Freedom Sunday Equips Pastors to Stand for Free Speech

Nearly nine out of 10 Protestant pastors believe that the government should not regulate their sermons. So says a new survey from the Alliance Defense Fund and LifeWay Research.

The survey asked the pastors about their agreement with the statement, "The government should regulate sermons by revoking a church's tax exemption if its pastor approves of or criticizes candidates based on the church's moral beliefs or theology." Eighty-six percent disagreed with the statement, including 79 percent who strongly disagreed.

"Pastors and churches shouldn't live in fear of being punished or penalized by the government," says ADF Senior Legal Counsel Erik Stanley. "Keeping the gospel central to what is preached is not in conflict with addressing the subject of political candidates when warranted. These results show that the desire to keep the gospel central does not mean that pastors want the IRS to regulate their sermons under the threat of revoking their church's tax-exempt status."

The national phone survey conducted Aug. 17-24 with 1,000 randomly drawn senior pastors.

"No one would suggest a pastor give up his church's tax-exempt status if he wants to keep his constitutional protection against illegal search and seizure or cruel and unusual punishment. Likewise, no one should be asking him to give up his church's tax-exempt status to be able to keep his constitutionally protected right to free speech," Stanley explains. "No government-recognized status can be conditioned upon the surrender of a constitutionally protected right. That's why ADF started Pulpit Freedom Sunday: to get the

government out of the pulpits of America.”

Pulpit Freedom Sunday is an event associated with the ADF Pulpit Initiative, a legal effort designed to secure the First Amendment rights of pastors in the pulpit. On Pulpit Freedom Sunday, participating pastors preach sermons related to biblical perspectives on the positions of electoral candidates or current government officials. In doing so, the pastors exercise their constitutionally protected right to free religious expression despite a problematic Internal Revenue Service rule that activist groups often use to silence churches. ADF hopes to eventually go to court to have that IRS rule, known as the Johnson Amendment, struck down as unconstitutional.

“Some groups claim that pastors should ‘stay out of politics’ and that church members don’t want their pastors to speak about ‘political issues’ from the pulpit. But that asks the wrong question,” Stanley notes. “This survey confirms what pastors of nearly every persuasion have told us for years: they don’t want the IRS, or any other governmental agency, to censor what they say from their pulpits.”