



# Wall of Separation

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## Useful Advice: IRS Officials Brief Pastors On Illegal Political Activity

Jun 4, 2012 by Rob Boston in [Wall of Separation](#) |

The Conference of National Black Churches and the Congressional Black Caucus recently held a [joint event](#) for religious leaders that included presentations by top officials from the Internal Revenue Service about churches and politics.

The IRS issues a warning about partisan political intervention by churches.

Several right-wing groups promptly went ballistic. They portrayed the May 30 event as an effort by President Barack Obama and his congressional allies to instruct pastors in black churches (many of whose members tend to vote Democratic) on how to get around a federal law that bars non-profit groups from intervening in partisan politics.

In fact, the presentation was nothing of the kind. IRS Commissioner Douglas H. Shulman made brief introductory remarks and then turned the podium over to Peter Lorenzetti, an IRS regional manager and a 39-year veteran of the agency.

Lorenzetti gave a purely factual presentation that reflected the current state of the law. He distributed a do's and don'ts list for the pastors and reminded them that they may not use church resources to endorse or oppose candidates.

"There are a couple of activities that tend to jeopardize the exempt status," Lorenzetti told the pastors. Among them, he said, is partisan political activity.

Lorenzetti warned the religious leaders that they must avoid "direct and indirect support for a candidate in an election" and told them that making contributions to candidates, holding biased forums that favor one candidate over another and "making public statements for or against a particular candidate" are not permitted.

"A church or religious organization exempt under 501(c)(3) can never say, 'Vote for this candidate or don't vote for this candidate,'" Lorenzetti observed. He went to note that even-handed election-related activities, such as objective voter guides and candidate forums that are open to all, are permissible.

Far from being a strategy session on how to get around the law, the session was an excellent primer on what pastors need to do to follow it. Lorenzetti's talk is [available on C-SPAN](#). I wish every pastor in America could see it. (Lorenzetti discussed some other issues as well. The material on politics comes up at around the 24:00 mark.)

Lorenzetti was followed at the podium by U.S. Rep. G.K. Butterfield (D-N.C.) who stressed many of the same points. Butterfield reminded pastors that if a politician visits their churches, they can recognize him/her, but he told them not to offer an endorsement.

Butterfield also advised caution about letting candidates address the congregation.

"It is unwise and probably unlawful for a candidate to stand in front of a congregation in a church and say 'Vote for me and vote for the Democrats or vote for the Republicans in the next election,'" Butterfield said. (I might quibble with some of the other things Butterfield said, but overall he counseled caution and reminded pastors more than once that direct endorsements from the pulpit are not allowed.)

It's ironic that the right wing raised such a fuss about the event – and it turned about to be a sober analysis of the law. After all, the groups trying to get around this law tend to be affiliated with the Religious Right.

Consider the Alliance Defense Fund, which every year prods pastors to openly violate the law by endorsing or opposing candidates from the pulpit.

I also recall an incident from the 2006 "Values Voter Summit" sponsored by the Family Research Council during which a speaker recommended a variety of [deceitful tactics](#) to drag houses of worship into partisan politics, including attempting to determine how people plan to vote by calling them up and posing as a pollster.

There is indeed a push under way to undermine or openly violate the federal laws that bar tax-exempt religious organizations from intervening in partisan elections. It was not in display at the Conference of National Black Churches/Congressional Black Caucus' event. It is frequently on display, however, during gatherings of the Religious Right.

I hope the IRS steps up its efforts to combat the Religious Right's campaign of misinformation.

Tags: IRS, PETER LORENZETTI, DOUGLAS SHULMAN, G.K. BUTTERFIELD, CONFERENCE OF NATIONAL BLACK CHURCHES, CONGRESSIONAL BLACK CAUCUS

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