



"The Johnson Amendment"

Recently a church member asked me what I thought about the Johnson Amendment and President Trump's pledge to repeal it. I responded by confessing that I pay no attention to the Johnson Amendment. I ignore it.

Of course, many Americans have no idea what the Johnson Amendment is. In 1954 a law was passed that threatened the removal of tax exemption from religious and other non-profit groups that engage in partisan politics. The law does not prevent church leaders from addressing issues of the day or even taking positions on moral or ethical topics related to politics. It prohibits churches from endorsing candidates and engaging in electioneering. The law is named for its sponsor, then-Texas Senator Lyndon Johnson who went on to become president.

When I said I ignore this law, I was not admitting to lawlessness. The Christian is plainly told in the Bible to submit to every ordinance of man (I Pet. 2:13). God's people, in whatever country they live, ought to be the most loyal and law-abiding of citizens. However, the Bible is equally clear that when forced to choose between obeying God and obeying man, God is to be obeyed. When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego were commanded to bow before an idol of gold, they refused. Daniel persisted in praying when prayer was prohibited by law. When the apostles were forbidden to preach the gospel, they kept on preaching. I ignore the Johnson Amendment in the sense that I am not intimidated from speaking from the pulpit on any issue the Word of God addresses - including partisan politics. If preaching the whole counsel of God overlaps with partisan politics or political candidates, I will remain faithful to my calling. There may be negative consequences, but so be it. We serve the Lord Jesus Christ.

In spite of my commitment to the Savior, and the principle of liberty of conscience and religion, I do have concerns about the president's intention regarding this law.

One simple reason that so few are familiar with this law is that it is very rarely enforced. There are churches and non-profit groups that regularly, openly violate this law, and do so with impunity. Numerous non-profit groups from a liberal perspective - advocates of so-called "social justice" - routinely engage in partisan politics and endorse candidates. Predominantly black churches in the inner city have for decades been a part of the Democratic Party's election "machine." I do not want Bible-believing, traditionally conservative churches to degenerate into engaging in the same activity. I say "degenerate" first of all because there is a temptation to replace the teaching and preaching of the Word of God with political campaigning. We dishonor God when we turn the sermon into a political stump speech. The devil would be delighted if we allowed ourselves to be distracted from the Great Commission, and instead spend our energies getting people elected. Secondly, when a church links itself with a candidate or party, trouble inevitably comes. Evangelist Billy Graham's reputation was seriously damaged when he publicly defended President Richard Nixon during the Watergate investigation. Graham insisted that Nixon was a fine Christian gentleman and innocent of all charges. Oval office tapes later revealed Nixon to be profane and vindictive. He was eventually forced to resign from office when his guilt was established beyond question.

The Bill of Right's guarantee of religious liberty is consistent with the Bible. The Christian's conscience is bound to God far more than the state. Any law that would restrict our freedom to worship and serve the Lord should be repealed, and if not repealed, ignored. But we also must resist the temptation to be distracted and drawn into politics. Our church's mission is to glorify God by ministering His Word, not to campaign to get people elected.