

Falwell faces IRS scrutiny after urging support for Bush_72604

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Religion News Service

WASHINGTON (RNS)—A church-state watchdog group has filed a complaint with the Internal Revenue Service after Jerry Falwell told supporters to “get serious about re-electing President Bush” and solicited funds for a political action committee that supports Bush.

Falwell, in a July 1 “Falwell Confidential” e-mail, said: “For conservative people of faith, voting for principle this year means voting for the re-election of George W. Bush. The alternative, in my mind, is simply unthinkable.

“To the pro-life, pro-family, pro-traditional marriage, pro-America voters in this nation, we must determine that President Bush is the man with our interests at heart. It is that simple.”

Jerry Falwell

The Washington-based Americans United for Separation of Church and

State, which has tussled with Falwell before, told the IRS that Falwell's letter violated rules that prohibit churches or nonprofit groups from endorsing candidates. It also asked for an investigation.

"Falwell is thumbing his nose at the IRS," said Barry Lynn, the group's director.

"He must not be permitted to use a tax-exempt ministry to engage in partisan politics. The vast majority of America's religious institutions play by the rules. He should too."

Earlier this year, Lynn's office filed a similar complaint against the Roman Catholic bishop of Colorado Springs, Colo., who said Catholics could not vote for candidates who support abortion and gay marriage.

Lynn charged Bishop Michael Sheridan with trying to steer votes toward Republicans.

Falwell's e-mail was posted on his Web site, www.falwell.com.

It also encouraged supporters to donate to the Campaign for Working Families, a political action committee founded by former Republican presidential candidate Gary Bauer.

"I believe it is the responsibility of every political conservative, every evangelical Christian, every pro-life Catholic, every traditional Jew, every Reagan Democrat, and everyone in between to get serious about re-electing President Bush," said Falwell, who 25 years ago rallied Christian conservatives by founding the Moral Majority.

Falwell told The New York Times the e-mail was paid for by his tax-exempt lobbying group, Liberty Alliance, which falls under the larger Jerry Falwell Ministries.

The website makes several references to the tax-exempt Jerry Falwell

Ministries but not Liberty Alliance.

The letter contained his personal views and did not constitute an endorsement, he said, noting he routinely supports Bush in public when preaching at his home congregation, Thomas Road Baptist Church, in Lynchburg, Va.

“I support President Bush,” he told The Times.

“I support him on Sunday mornings from the pulpit where it doesn't cost the church or anybody anything.

“I make it very clear, just like at most African-American churches and many liberal churches, that as a tax-paying citizen I vote. And I tell people who I vote for.”

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