

Trump pledges to ‘destroy’ restriction on political pulpit speech

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WASHINGTON—In his first appearance at a National Prayer Breakfast, President Donald Trump promised to repeal a law that bars churches and many other charitable organizations from supporting political candidates without risking their tax-exempt status.

“I will get rid of, totally destroy, the Johnson Amendment and allow our representatives of faith to speak freely and without fear,” Trump told the Feb. 2 gathering. “I will do that. Remember.”

Baptists in attendance at the prayer breakfast included former Southern Baptist Convention Presidents Jack Graham, pastor of Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, and Ronnie Floyd, pastor of Cross Church in Arkansas, and former Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission President Richard Land—all members of Trump’s evangelical advisory board.

Congress passed the Johnson Amendment, named for Sen. Lyndon Johnson, in 1954. The law prohibits 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations—including religious congregations—from endorsing or opposing candidates or political parties without risking their tax-exempt status.

“Freedom of religion is a sacred right, but it also a right under threat all around us,” Trump said. He pledged to “fix” that perceived assault on religious liberty, saying: “That’s what I do. I fix things.”

Pastors already free to voice political views

However, some advocates of church-state separation challenged why something should be fixed they don't consider broken.

"Pastors are free now to express their views on political issues, but they cannot endorse political candidates as a function of the church if the church wants to be free from paying taxes," said Kathryn Freeman, public policy director for the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission.

Freeman called the Johnson Amendment "a centerpiece of church-state separation in the United States," adding it has "clearly protected the tax-exempt status of churches as nonpolitical entities dedicated to the common good of our communities, states and nation."

"The Constitution prohibits the federal government from establishing any religion, and it equally guarantees the free exercise of religion," she said. "The Johnson Amendment in no way hinders these constitutional requirements.

"From a church perspective, this proposal is even more devastating. When churches get caught up in partisan politics, it undermines their message of Christ's good news for all people."

'Politicizing churches does them no favors'

Amanda Tyler, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, called the proposed repeal "an attack on the integrity of both our charitable organizations and campaign finance system."

"Politicizing churches does them no favors," Tyler said, insisting involvement of churches in political campaigns would "fundamentally change" their character.

"It would usher our partisan divisions into the pews and harm the church's ability to provide refuge," she said. "To change the law would hinder the

church's prophetic witness, threatening to turn pulpit prophets into political puppets."

Trump addressed the Johnson Amendment one day after Sen. James Lankford, R-Oklahoma, and Rep. Jody Hice, R-Ga., introduced the Free Speech Fairness Bill. Both are Southern Baptists. Although the bill does not repeal the Johnson Amendment outright, it does protect political speech—including endorsement of candidates—by pastors and others "in the ordinary course of the organization's regular and customary activities."

In a 2015 [poll by LifeWay Research](#), eight out of 10 American adults (79 percent) said pastors should not endorse candidates in church, and three-fourths said churches should steer clear of endorsements.