Keeping Our Sacred Spaces Sacred

Both as a place to foster community in the midst of difference and as a prophetic voice speaking truth to power, the church has been - and continues to be - a noble institution in public life.

But these roots are threatened by efforts to change tax laws governing nonprofits and religious groups.

For this reason, I’ll be calling Kentucky’s two U.S. senators on March 6 to let them know the damage they could do if they undermine one important protection in the tax code.

By law, 501(c)(3) organizations, including churches, cannot endorse or oppose political candidates for office and maintain their tax status.

This provision, often called the Johnson Amendment, protects the neutrality of these organizations.

Nonprofits - whether they are religious or not - are focused on supporting a mission, not candidates. Introducing partisanship to nonprofits and houses of worship could introduce headaches and hardships.

I am compelled to support the Johnson Amendment because it protects my voice as a pastor and the voices of churches and other nonprofits across the country.

The push to repeal the Johnson Amendment is often rooted in an argument claiming that this tax rule impedes the free speech rights of churches - and especially of pastors.

In actuality, the Johnson Amendment protects the prophetic voice that churches and pastors possess.

As a pastor, I am perfectly free to speak on any social or political issue, from the pulpit or otherwise.

In fact, refusing to acknowledge national, global and especially local events with implications for the community I serve would be a disservice to my ministry.

The restriction under the tax code is specific to endorsement or opposition of
political candidates.

This nonpartisanship on the part of religious leaders in our country has proven valuable in many causes of conscience throughout history.

For example, Martin Luther King Jr. recognized a great virtue in remaining nonpartisan during the struggle for civil rights. He was, in his own words, “free to be critical of both parties when necessary.”

While grateful for then-Sen. John F. Kennedy’s sympathy for his arrest and the larger movement for civil rights, King, as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), refused to formally endorse Kennedy in his 1960 presidential race.

This was in compliance with the law, but it was also strategically useful for the movement: If King had endorsed a candidate, he and the SCLC would have become vulnerable to critique on grounds of partisanship.

The civil rights movement would have unfolded much differently if racial equality became a political football.

Changing the current law would only extend the divisiveness currently evident in our politics into our churches.

Without the Johnson Amendment, churches and pastors could find themselves solicited by political candidates seeking endorsement, and congregants could pressure their leaders to endorse or oppose specific candidates.

A repeal of the Johnson Amendment would invite partisanship into our houses of worship, fracturing spaces where integrity and independence allow genuine community to be formed despite differences of political opinion and undermining our reverence for unity before God.

Allowing churches to endorse and financially support candidates could lead to congregations functioning as funding streams for campaigns.

The consequences of this would be devastating for organizations whose prophetic voice remains essential in the public square.

Churches would become indistinguishable from any other partisan interest group.
We would lose our original purpose of bringing together people of faith in spite of differences as well as our ability to speak when compelled to social and political issues that concern our communities; or at least we would lose the ability to do so without critique on partisan grounds.

As Congress finalizes the budget, some lawmakers may attempt to undermine this important piece of our tax code.

Because of this, I ask that you join me on Tuesday, March 6, in calling your U.S. senators to let them know you support keeping the Johnson Amendment exactly as it is.

The current law allows houses of worship to speak freely about issues important to them, and it keeps the influence of partisan politics from undermining our mission.

People of all faiths or no faith have a vested interest in keeping the protections of the Johnson Amendment intact. We cannot allow our houses of worship to become partisan battlegrounds.

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Editor’s note: Resources related to the Johnson Amendment are available on the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty’s website.