

September 28, 2008

Dear Concerned Citizen,

Early immigrants to the United States came to the New World to practice their respective religions free from governmental control or religious persecution. Freedom of religion is one of the fundamental building blocks of American democracy. America's founders believed religious freedom to be our "first liberty."

The U.S. Constitution is the central instrument of our government and the supreme law of the land. It contains specific guarantees of the most important rights and freedoms necessary to a democratic society, including freedom of religion, speech, press, and assembly. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution includes a guarantee that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

The Free Exercise clause provides everyone in the United States broad freedom to practice their respective religions. The Establishment clause prohibits the influence of federal and state governments on religious thought and practice. Together, the Free Exercise and Establishment clauses inform and support the separation of church and state.

The U.S. Constitution, along with the Bill of Rights, has often been described as our National Covenant. "Covenant" is a deeply religious value that inspires all parties to commit in words and actions to the wellbeing of others. A covenant is a sacred promise, freely but not easily made, that brings people together, with diverse histories and hopes, needs and opportunities, and beliefs and convictions, in our common pursuit of a shared vision. As a nation our shared vision is the American dream of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

I have a deepening worry that the Alliance Defense Fund has a different vision for our nation. In soliciting clergy across the country to participate in its September 28 Pulpit Freedom Sunday and in counseling those who preach how to clearly violate federal tax law, the ADF seeks to challenge the separation of church and state and to erode the rights and freedoms articulated in our National Covenant.

I have a deepening suspicion that the timing of the Pulpit Initiative fits a larger agenda of the Alliance Defense Fund—to promote a massive pulpit endorsement during the weekend before Election Day. All of the interviews that I've read, heard and participated in with ADF clergy indicate that every participant will be preaching to endorse or support the same presidential candidate.

I have a deepening frustration that the IRS lacks the courage to enjoin the Alliance Defense Fund from soliciting churches to participate in its Pulpit Initiative even though

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Columbus, Ohio

the ADF has openly demonstrated violation of federal tax law. The September 8 request to enjoin was strenuously requested by 55 clergy because the violation is flagrant and its potential impact is both pervasive and corrosive. I cannot remain silent while ADF attorneys are free to advise clergy on how to preach in violation of laws that protect our religious freedoms.

I have a deepening concern that many clergy today are exchanging their historic religious authority for a fleeting promise of political power, and that their congregations will lose both their tax-exempt status and the mutual respect of their religiously diverse neighbors. God's prophets in the Jewish Scriptures and Jesus in the Christian Gospels warned the religious leaders who colluded or collaborated with the political leaders of their day that any entanglement of religion and government would bring judgment and suffering to the nation. The history of religion bears out this warning.

I have a rising hope that our shared national vision will continue to inspire every segment of society, every community of faith and every person who cherishes the freedoms of democracy to respect and serve all who call this great nation "home." Our many differences are the many gifts we bring to forming community and extending liberty. Our different roles secure society from cultural and political abuses, and contribute to our national wisdom. The role of the church—of congregation, synagogue, temple and mosque—and of its religious leaders is to stand apart from government, to prophetically speak truth to power, and to encourage a national dialogue that transcends the divisiveness of electoral politics and preserves for every citizen our "first liberty."

If you share similar hopes and concerns, I invite you to speak to your religious leaders, contact your government officials, organize community forums and, above all, vote your personal convictions on Election Day.

Sincerely yours,

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