

Religious conservatives were predictably delighted by Donald Trump's pledge at the national prayer breakfast to repeal the Johnson amendment, which prohibits pastors and other religious leaders from endorsing candidates from the pulpit. And the most recent news of his "religious liberty" executive order to relax tax rules on churches will undoubtedly excite politically engaged evangelicals.

He is giving a conspicuous nod to conservative religious leaders like Jerry Falwell, Franklin Graham, and Robert Jeffress, Trump's "religious advisers" who condemn same-sex marriage or women who exercise control over their bodies. He is thinking of prosperity gospel preachers, like Paula White and Wayne Jackson (also Trump supporters), whose voices echo through airwaves reaching nearly every part of the globe. Where are the progressive Christian voices who understand the opportunity that this executive order world could give? They are sitting on the sidelines, continually ceding ownership of morality in public life to the Religious Right.

As a candidate for president, Donald Trump embraced the mistaken view that the federal government was violating religious freedom by prohibiting churches — and other organizations that received the benefit of a tax exemption — from endorsing candidates for public office. On Thursday, President Trump seemed prepared to do something about that.

Gathering religious leaders in the Rose Garden, he announced that he would be signing a document that would restore their voice. "For too long, the federal government has used the power of the state as a weapon against people of faith....," the president said, associating himself with the persecution complex that afflicts some on the religious right. "You are now in a position where you can say what you want to say."

Fortunately, and not for the first time, there was less to a Trump promise than met the eye. The president's "Executive Order Promoting Free Speech and Religious Liberty" turns out to be mostly a restatement of the legal status quo combined with some ringing rhetoric about the importance of religious freedom. It doesn't reverse the ban on churches endorsing candidates that is contained in a 1954 law known as the Johnson Amendment (which isn't aggressively enforced in any case). Rather, it directs the IRS to evaluate political expression by religious nonprofits using the same criteria it employs for judging expression by nonreligious tax-exempt groups.

Although Trump's order doesn't go as far as some feared, it still is troubling. It sends the message that the IRS won't be held accountable by this administration for continuing to turn a blind eye to even blatant examples of politicking by churches and other religious organizations.

The Johnson Amendment is not terribly restrictive. It doesn't bar members of the clergy from sermonizing about issues from poverty to climate change to terrorism, or from endorsing candidates in their personal capacities. Rather, it tells churches (and other nonprofits) that if they seek a tax exemption — which can be worth millions of dollars — they must refrain from a small subset of political speech. The underlying principle is that when the taxpayers provide a financial benefit to charitable organizations, they shouldn't be asked to subsidize political views with which they might disagree.

Trump is on record as saying that he wants to "totally destroy the Johnson Amendment." If he were to persuade Congress to repeal the law, the effects could extend beyond priests and preachers issuing endorsements from the pulpit. Churches could become major factors in the financing of political campaigns and conduits for unaccountable special-interest political contributions. That would be bad for both politics and religion.