

School Bars Praying Football Coach As Student Invites a Satanist Group to Pray

A showdown over private prayer will likely move to court after school officials in Bremerton, Washington, suspended a high school football coach for privately praying after games, something he's done for seven years without prior incident. Coach Joe Kennedy is barred from the final game of the season at Bremerton High School, his attorneys said.

"I am devastated that the school district is denying me an opportunity to privately and silently pray for my players at the fifty," Kennedy said in a statement issued by the Liberty Institute before the news of his suspension broke. "I love my players and I hope I can continue coaching them and being a part of their lives."

Meanwhile, a student at Bremerton High School has invited representatives of The Satanic Temple to conduct their own private prayer after the game, media reports said. Kennedy's actions made the 50-yard line – where the coach prayed after players departed the field – into an "open forum," according to *The Seattle Times*.

At the same time, dozens rallied outside of Bremerton High School on October 23 to pray for the coach and administrators, the local *Bremerton Patriot* reported.

Mike Berry, a Liberty Institute senior counsel, said, "The school district violated federal law by denying Coach Kennedy's request for religious accommodation. Their violation of the law cannot go unanswered. We are committed to protecting Coach Kennedy's right to religious freedom."

Although Bremerton school district chief Aaron Leavell

asserted Kennedy's prayers violate the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, the Liberty Institute disagrees: "Teachers and administrators do not lose their private rights to express their religious beliefs upon entering the schoolhouse—or the football field. Nor are students banned from voluntarily joining religious activity involving teachers," the group said.

In a letter to the school district, Hiram Sasser, deputy chief counsel for Liberty Institute, said "No reasonable observer could conclude that a football coach who waits until the game is over and the players have left the field and then walks to mid-field to say a short, private, personal prayer is speaking on behalf of the state. Quite the opposite, Coach Kennedy is engaged in private religious expression upon which the state may not infringe. In fact, any attempt by Bremerton School District to ban or prohibit Coach Kennedy—or any private citizen—from praying violates the First Amendment."

Kennedy and the Liberty Institute say they've initiated legal proceedings to secure the coach's rights, although no case had been filed as of deadline.

According to the group, former NFL coach Tony Dungy supported Kennedy with a Twitter message: "I appreciate Coach Kennedy staying true to his convictions. Glad I never faced anything like this in my career," Dungy said.