

After Defending Right to Blaspheme Jesus, Purdue Removes 'God' From Plaque

Purdue University, which once defended the right of a private speaker to blaspheme Jesus, has banned an alumni donor from using the word *God* on a plaque because it might offend someone.

Dr. Michael McCracken and his wife made a \$12,500 pledge to the university's school of mechanical engineering. In return, Purdue, a large public university in Indiana, offered the McCrackens the opportunity to name a small conference room in a lab building. They were also invited to supply language for a plaque that would be installed in the room.

McCracken chose to name the room after his father, Dr. William McCracken, who graduated from Purdue with a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering, and his mother Glenda, who died recently.

The plaque was inscribed with the following message: "To those who seek to better the world through the understanding of God's physical laws and innovation of practical solutions. In honor of Dr. William 'Ed' and Glenda McCracken."

McCracken says the university rejected the message because it amounted to an "impermissible government endorsement of religion." He was stunned.

Without notifying the family, the university installed a plaque that only mentioned McCracken's parents.

A staff member in Purdue's communications office told me they were looking into the matter, but so far they have not offered an official comment.

“Purdue is not a God-free zone,” says Jeremiah Dys, a Liberty Institute attorney representing the McCrackens. “Purdue’s ban on any reference to God by a private speaker violates the First Amendment of the Constitution.”

Dys tells me they have petitioned the university to install the original message, but so far they’ve met a stone wall of resistance in Boilermaker Land.

“They said it might offend someone and might possibly cause a violation of the Establishment Clause,” Dys says.

I spoke to McCracken by telephone. He said he and his wife carefully chose the words they wanted to put on the plaque.

“My wife and I were simply trying to honor the legacy of my parents, the things they instilled in me—one being a love of education, the other being a passion for solving problems and [the] third being a desire to understand the physics that God put into motion,” he said.

They even offered an alternative that would make it quite clear the message was coming from the family and not the university. But the university still declined, he said.

Ironically, in 2001, Purdue University defended the rights of a private speaker to blaspheme Jesus in a university space, says attorney Robert Kelner, another attorney representing the McCrackens.

Kelner reminded Purdue officials in a letter that they successfully defended a court case involving a student production of *Corpus Christi* that referenced Jesus Christ as a homosexual who had sexual relations with His disciples.

“It is difficult to imagine that the First Amendment permits a private speaker to blaspheme Jesus at length in University spaces, yet simultaneously prohibits the McCrackens from mentioning ‘God’s physical laws,’” Kelner wrote.

That certainly appears to be a double standard. I wanted to ask the university to explain why it was OK to blaspheme Jesus, but they still haven't returned my telephone calls.

"By permitting secular expression and expression that portrays deity in a negative context while simultaneously refusing to permit private religious speech, the university has engaged in just the type of 'egregious ... content discrimination' that constitutes impermissible viewpoint discrimination," Kelner wrote.

Indeed, it seems to be the case. Again, the university hasn't called me back, so we can't know for certain.

McCracken told me he's not all that happy with his alma mater.

"I've always been a proud Purdue alum," he said. "I was deeply disappointed in the university's decision to refuse the words I'd chosen to honor my parents."

So, there you have it, folks—a sad situation, indeed.

Hopefully someone from Purdue University will return my telephone call so we can be enlightened on why it's OK to blaspheme Jesus but it's not OK to reference God in a way that doesn't blaspheme the Almighty.

And if for some reason I don't answer my phone, Mr. Boilermaker, feel free to leave a message.

Wait for the beep.

Todd Starnes is host of Fox News & Commentary, heard on hundreds of radio stations. Sign up for his American Dispatch newsletter, be sure to join his Facebook page, and follow him on Twitter. His latest book is God Less America.