

Graduates Urged to Stand Up for Their Faith

Graduation day has become one of the main targets on religious liberties. While grateful seniors want to thank God, administrators worry they might violate so-called separation of church and state. So it's increasingly important to know how to handle the situation.

As high schools nationwide get ready for graduation ceremonies, some seniors may face threats or lawsuits if they mention God or their faith during graduation speeches. But the message from attorney Jeff Mateer is, "Don't be afraid."

"Any student who's been asked to speak at graduation should know this: The school district cannot tell them not to mention their religious faith," Mateer, general counsel for Liberty Institute, told CBN News.

In 2011, a judge threatened to throw valedictorian Angela Hildenbrand in jail.

"The court's order said there could be incarceration if anyone mentioned Jesus or said 'amen' during any of the speeches," Liberty Institute attorney Justin Butterfield said, but a federal appeals court disagreed.

"The Fifth Circuit said 'No, it's OK for her to do that,'" Butterfield explained. "It's her private student speech and she's allowed to say whatever she wants and you can't discriminate against her message just because it's religious."

Hildenbrand concluded her valedictorian speech just as she'd planned.

"I thank You for Your great love for us and for our great nation where we are free. And it's in Jesus's name I pray.

Amen,” Hildenbrand said to a resounding “amen” by the audience.

Mateer says schools and school districts need to back off students who share their faith.

“They can’t tell them to pray or not to pray,” he said. “They can’t tell them to mention Jesus or not mention Jesus.”

If students are threatened, Mateer recommends they contact groups like the American Center for Law and Justice or Liberty Institute “because we will fight for them.”

“There are a lot of these situations that look really bad, but when Christians stand up and fight for what they believe in, fight for the truth, we win in the courts,” Butterfield said. “And a lot of the reason that we’ve lost so much ground is just because Christians haven’t been willing to fight.”

“The founders recognized that we needed a vibrant religious life,” Mateer added. “And that didn’t mean just keeping it in our homes. It meant it being active in public.”

Liberty Institute, headquartered in Texas, has been involved in enough graduation cases to assure students that neither their schools nor school districts can prevent them from mentioning God, Jesus or any other religious matter in their graduation speeches.

They do not lose their religious rights when they walk through their school’s door.