

How One High School Grad Rebelled Against His School's God-Censorship

Brooks Hamby never wanted to be a rabble-rouser. He just wanted to thank Jesus in his high school graduation speech.

But the Brawley Union School District in Brawley, California, said the references to Jesus and prayer in Brooks' graduation speech were "inappropriate" and violated "prevailing legal standards."

School officials rejected three versions of the young man's graduation address, and one administrator went so far as to redact every religious reference with a black marker—as if it were some sort of top secret government document.

"The first and second draft speeches proposed oppose government case law and are a violation of the Constitution," read a warning letter sent to the young man. "The district is advising you that reference to religious content is inappropriate and that the two drafts provided will not be allowed."

So the 18-year-old Christian did what any red-blooded, Constitution-loving American would do—he defied school officials and thanked God anyway.

"I didn't want to compromise my faith," Brooks told me. "I wasn't interested in removing every trace of God or Jesus. I wasn't interested in conforming to those demands. I did not want to compromise my values. I didn't want to water down the message."

The Stanford University-bound student's troubles started last Monday when he was notified that he had been selected as the

salutatorian. He was instructed to turn in his speech on Wednesday—the day before graduation.

The first draft of his speech was written in the form of a prayer. “Heavenly Father, in all times, let us always be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven us.”

Brooks was called to the front office, where he was advised by a counselor that the speech had been rejected. So he began writing a second draft that he turned in later that day. That draft referenced the school’s censorship of his original speech.

“Certain interpretations of the law, school policies and conditions have stifled my ability to speak freely to you this evening and prohibited me from doing otherwise,” he wrote. “However, if I could pray with you this evening, I would say something along these lines.”

On Thursday morning, just hours before graduation, Brooks and his parents were summoned to a meeting with the principal. The Hambys were given a notice from the district advising them that if their son “interjects religious content, the sound will be cut off, and a disclaimer to the entire audience must be made explaining the district’s position.”

After the meeting, Brooks decided to seek the counsel of his pastor at Western Avenue Baptist Church.

“We talked and brainstormed for a while and prayed for guidance and direction on what to do in words and actions,” he told me.

Afterward, Brooks delivered a third version of his speech—this time to the superintendent. That speech, too, was rejected. He was emailed a copy of the speech with every religious reference marked out in black.

With just a few hours left before graduation, Brooks was at a crossroads.

"I went home and thought, time is ticking down," he said. "I wanted to impart something that would be meaningful and having some lasting positive impact."

And Brooks was not interested in outright rebellion. He bristled at the notion that the school might consider him to be a rabble-rouser.

"I did not want to compromise my values but I wanted to work with them as much as possible," he said.

So Brooks wrote a fourth version of his speech. At 5:09 p.m. he emailed the speech to the superintendent, principal and counselor. By the time he stood before his fellow graduates, Brooks had not received a reply.

"In simply coming before you today, I presented three drafts of my speech—all of them denied on account of my desire to share my personal thoughts and inspiration to you in my Christian faith," he told his fellow graduates in the fourth version of his speech. "In life, you will be told no. In life, you will be asked to do things that you have no desire to do. In life, you will be asked to do things that violate your conscience and your desire to do what is right."

He concluded his remarks with a reference to the Almighty—in defiance of school administrators.

"May the God of the Bible bless each and every one of you every day in the rest of your lives," he said.

Some might call what happened next – a bit of a minor miracle. School officials did not attempt to silence the young scholar. He was allowed to finish his remarks uninterrupted.

Hiram Sasser, an attorney for the Liberty Institute, told me Brooks was on firm legal ground to deliver the original

version of his speech.

"It is outrageous that a government school official would demand that a salutatorian submit his speech for government review for the purpose of censoring religious speech," Sasser told me.

"Even in the Ninth Circuit, no government official may censor simple references to God that served as personal acknowledgment by Brooks of something greater than himself."

Brooks is not the first graduation speaker to have his Christian voice silenced—and I predict he won't be the last. In my new book, *God Less America*, I write about other teenage Christians whose speeches were deemed inappropriate by government representatives.

Brooks is still coming to terms with the national attention generated by his thoughtful act of defiance. He told me that it's important for Christians to take a stand.

"I would tell young Christians to be bold and always speak with gentleness and kindness, to leave the sweet taste of Christ in their mouths, allow them to want and search for more," he said.

It's truly stunning to think that in this progressive age of thought and reason, a young man like Brooks Hamby might be considered to be a dangerous religious radical whose voice must be silenced by agents of the government.

That being said, I find it quite appropriate to conclude this dispatch with words that Brooks shared with his classmates.

"So I will leave you with this, with a quote from the biggest best-selling book of all time in history: 'You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot,' " he said. "Be the salt

of the earth, be strong and stand for your convictions and do what is right, ethical, moral and Godly, no matter the cost to you.”

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