

Pastors Rebuke Atheist Group That Bullied Football Coach for Praying

A Wisconsin atheist group is threatening another rural high school by attempting to silence the First Amendment rights of a football coach. But a group of area clergy on the field have made an “extra point,” saying attempts to prohibit free exercise of religion are premature.

Last week, the Freedom from Religion Foundation sent a letter to East Knox High School claiming it is illegal for public school athletic coaches to participate in students’ prayers because it violates the “Establishment Clause.” While the group’s bark is known to be worse than its bite, the jury is still out, with President Trump’s transformation of the federal judiciary underway.

Several pastors believe the “Free Exercise Clause” of the First Amendment is finally gaining ground on the establishment clause that has led to the judiciary’s past hostility toward religion.

“I believe our nation is going through a spiritual awakening,” says Pastor J.C. Church of Victory in Truth Ministries. “Elections have consequences, and the tide is turning. We need to continue appointing judges for the next generation that interpret the Constitution based on the original intent of our Founding Fathers.”

According to Pastor Aaron Boggs of Fredericktown Freewill Baptist, “there is no doubt the Founding Fathers designed the government based on Christian principles that do not prohibit the free exercise of religion.”

FFRF has made its living on the premise of “separation of

church and state," a phrase that does not exist in the Constitution nor the Bill of Rights.

The group has demonstrated hostility for religion losing several high-profile cases involving the Pledge of Allegiance, and the "In GOD We Trust" motto on American currency. In Ohio, the FFRF has been highly ineffective, even losing a case in 2013 when it actually opposed the construction of a Holocaust Memorial at the Statehouse.

East Knox Superintendent Steve Larcomb received a letter from the angry group on Nov. 27 regarding the involvement of varsity head football coach Cody Rees. Larcomb declined to comment on whether the district planned to take action in response to the allegations.

In calling the East Knox coaching staff's actions "unconstitutional," FFRF cited several U.S. Supreme Court decisions, including Santa Fe Independent School District v. Doe (2000), which ruled student-led prayer over the loudspeaker before football games was unconstitutional.

However, just two weeks ago, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit reversed a lower court decision supporting Cambridge Christian School's position stating that it was constitutional to pray over the loudspeaker before the kickoff for state high school football games.

Pastor Dave Jones of Millwood Church of Christ commented on the track record and legacy of FFRF.

"Since groups like FFRF have declared war on faith-based influence in culture, tragedies like school shootings, suicides and societal drug addiction have not decreased, they have increased. Clearly FFRF does not represent the best interests of East Knox schools; we are in a cultural crisis."

Church commented, "It is ironic that whenever there is a national calamity or a school shooting, the public

instinctively prays for wisdom and protection. This issue on religious freedom is about good and evil.”

Pastor Jones observes “Our community (East Knox) has a strong faith tradition. This is seen in the number of people that pray following the games. It is not a school prayer or even a team prayer because there are so many members of our community on the field to pray. It really is community prayer.”

Boggs says in the last seven high school football games he has attended this season, he has seen student athletes praying on the field after each game.

“Recently I was at a playoff game between Harvest Prep and Newark Catholic where they prayed after the game. What was striking to me was the good sportsmanship and respect for the referees I saw during the game. Looking at the message boards on this story, even atheists are realizing FFRF is going too far trying to impose their form of religion on our school district. “

Pastor Joe Beran of Berlin and Batemantown United Methodist churches makes the point that faith-based people should not be treated as sub-citizens.

“We need to ask the question, how is it that the federal judiciary allows Congress to have an opening prayer every session, but a high school is forbidden to allow a football coach to pray with his team? What is good for the goose should be good for the gander. There is an inconsistency here. Both of my congregations will be watching closely and praying about this.”

FFRF called for the district to take action before the next state semifinal game, so that coaches would not organize another prayer circle afterwards. For what that was worth, after the game, the East Knox coaching staff participated in the community prayer once again.

View the video below of the state championship-bound Lucas Cubs praying the LORD's Prayer after their victory in the semi-finals last weekend. The prayer begins at 1:34 into the video. {eo}

This article originally appeared at Frontlines Ohio.