

School Refuses to Apologize to Brooks Hamby for Anti-Christian Bigotry

A California school district says it will not apologize to a teenager who defied its orders and mentioned God in his graduation speech.

Attorneys representing the Brawley Union High School District have written a 10-page letter defending the school's right not only to censor graduation speeches, but also to ban any speech that references God or Jesus.

"It is well established in the Ninth Circuit and California that a public school salutatorian has no constitutional right to lead a prayer or include sectarian or proselytizing content in his/her graduation speech," reads a letter from the San Diego law firm of Atkinson, Andelson, Loya, Ruud and Romo.

Last month, 18-year-old Brooks Hamby made national headlines when he committed an act of civil disobedience by thanking Jesus in his salutatorian address. School administrators had redacted references to Jesus and the Christian faith in three previous versions of Hamby's speech.

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.

Liberty Institute, the law firm representing Hamby, has demanded that the school apologize for censoring the boy's speech and that it guarantee future graduation speakers will not face censorship.

The school district, in the certified letter its attorneys sent to Liberty Institute, says that's not going to happen.

There will be no apology.

"The district was legally obligated to ensure prayers and other sectarian, proselytizing content were omitted from Mr. Hamby's speech," the school's attorneys wrote. "Censorship of the speech was necessary to avoid an Establishment Clause violation."

In other words, the high-dollar attorneys are telling us the school district violated one constitutional amendment to avoid violating another.

The school district's attorneys also said the California Constitution prohibits public school districts from endorsing religious speech at their graduation ceremonies.

"Mr. Hamby was not permitted to use his salutatory speech to lead his classmates in a sectarian prayer," the attorneys wrote.

Instead, he was supposed to stand in front of his graduating class as a "representative example of the success of the school's own educational mission," the attorneys wrote, referencing a previous court case.

Are they trying to tell us the reason the district took offense was because Brooks Hamby thanks God for his success instead of the school district?

I spoke by telephone Thursday night with Hamby and his attorney, Jeremy Dys. Both were shocked by the tone, tenor and length of the school district's retort.

"The school does not want to put this issue behind them," Dys told me. "All options are on the table. Based on the amount of money it cost those attorneys to write that letter, I'd say the school district has a \$10-20,000 down payment for a lawsuit."

And Dys said if the school district is hankering for a legal

fight—"we may be willing to oblige them."

Hamby remains saddened and perplexed by how the school district treated him.

"I was really surprised the school would deny my speech not once, twice, but three times," he told me. "I just wanted to say a few nice words and allow people to see the good news—which is the gospel."

After the district rejected those versions, Hamby wrote a fourth—just hours before the graduation ceremony. In that speech, he refused to water down his faith in Christ. He never received a reply from the district—so he decided to deliver that version.

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

That's what led to the legal firestorm. That's what led the school district to hire a high-powered law firm to bully this Christian teenager.

If you believe the school district's version, Hamby turned his speech into a Billy Graham Crusade where he invited his fellow graduates to walk the aisle and convert to Christianity.

But that's not what happened at all. This young man simply talked about the values that shaped and flavored his life—the values that carried him through the difficult days of high school.

According to the school district, Hamby broke the law.

"Mr. Hamby's salutatorian speech was a sectarian invocation, which is not legally permitted in California or the Ninth Circuit," the district's attorneys wrote.

I'm surprised the principal didn't take out a warrant and

throw the kid in jail.

Hamby 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 Hamby was a victim of anti-Christian bigotry, and I hope Liberty Institute teaches the Brawley Union High School District a lesson it won't forget.

Hamby is Stanford-bound this fall. But I suspect the lessons he's learned will flavor the rest of his life.

"I'm not an attorney, so I can't speak on behalf of the law, but I think it should never be acceptable to silence students who mention the word God or Jesus," he told me. "I know in my heart that kind of thing is not OK."

Indeed, it is not.

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