

Why in the World Did NASA Just Ban the Word 'Jesus'?

The name of Jesus is not welcome in the Johnson Space Center newsletter, according to a complaint filed on behalf of a group of Christians who work for NASA.

The JSC Praise & Worship Club was directed by NASA attorneys to refrain from using the name "Jesus" in club announcements that appeared in a Space Center newsletter.

"It was shocking to all of us and very frustrating," NASA Engineer Sophia Smith told me. "NASA has a long history of respecting religious speech. Why wouldn't they allow us to put the name Jesus in the announcement about our club?"

Liberty Institute, one of the nation's largest religious liberty law firms, threatened to file a federal lawsuit unless NASA apologizes and stops censoring the name "Jesus."

The JSC Today newsletter is distributed electronically and includes a number of Space Center events—from salsa dancing lessons to soccer camp.

NASA's media team tells me they are looking into the matter.

Since 2001, employees had gathered during their lunch hour to pray and sing and read the Bible. There had been no censorship issues until last year.

Liberty Institute attorney Jeremy Dys told me the club had placed an announcement in the Space Center's newsletter—announcing the theme of their meeting, "Jesus is our life."

Following is the complete posting that appeared in the May 28, 2015 edition of JSC Today:

Join with the praise and worship band Allied with the Lord for a refreshing set of spring praise and worship songs on Thursday, June 4, from 11:15 a.m. to noon in Building 57, Room 106. (The theme for this session will be "Jesus is our life!") Prayer partners will be available for anyone who has need. All JSC civil servants and contractors are welcome.

"Soon after that, the legal department called the organizers and told them they could not use the name Jesus in their announcements," Dys told me. "They said no Jesus."

The club's leadership was told that "NASA would be censoring all future club announcements that featured the name, 'Jesus,'" Liberty Institute alleged in its complaint letter.

NASA's legal department explained that including the name "Jesus" within the club's announcement made that announcement "sectarian" or "denominational."

They also alleged such announcements would cause NASA to violate the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution.

Dys said the club organizers offered to provide a disclaimer, notifying readers that the announcement was private speech and was not endorsed by NASA or any other government agency. However, that offer was rejected as "insufficient."

"The club members knew right away that NASA was censoring them and they were not comfortable with that," Dys told me.

And so began a long process to resolve the matter.

"The bottom line is that NASA should not be censoring this club just because they use the name 'Jesus' in an employee advertisement," Dys told me. "That is blatant religious discrimination."

And NASA's behavior is quite frankly baffling.

On Christmas Eve, 1968, the crew of Apollo 8 read the Creation story as they orbited the moon. Astronauts Jim Lovell, Frank Borman and Bill Anders took turns reading from the book of Genesis.

NASA defended the astronauts after atheist Madalyn Murray O'Hair filed a federal lawsuit. The Supreme Court dismissed the suit due to lack of jurisdiction.

And astronaut Buzz Aldrin received Communion on the lunar surface during the 1969 Apollo 11 mission.

"NASA should continue its tradition of protecting the great religious expression of its employees," Dys told me.

I'm not quite sure why NASA is getting all worked up over a group of scientists and engineers who want to worship Jesus.

If they can worship the Almighty in outer space, they ought to be able to worship Him back on Earth.

After all, He *is* the Maker of heaven and Earth.