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How long before they ban private Bible reading?

By Mark Tapscott

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Americans' First Amendment freedoms of speech and religion have never been more threatened than they are today, particularly for people who believe the Bible is sacred and its teachings worthy of study.

This fact would astound the Founders, many of whom fought and bled to establish freedom of speech and religion as fundamental rights of all citizens. But then John Adams and James Madison never imagined what has our public schools have become, either.

What they've become in too many ways is rabidly anti-First Amendment. Consider the recent ruling of administrators at the University of Wisconsin-Eu Claire banning resident assistants in the school's dorms from leading Bible studies in their own rooms on their own time.

Deborah Newman, UWEC's Associate Director for Housing and Residence Life, banned such studies because some students might think the resident assistants were "unapproachable." Newman told one of the resident assistants that he must "be available to your residents both in reality and from their perspective."

Newman made it clear that resident assistants who insisted on exercising their First Amendment right to free exercise of religion would face "disciplinary action." But resident assistant Lance Steiger refused to be intimidated.

He contacted the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, which quickly fired off a letter to UWEC's Interim Chancellor Vicki Lord reminding her that "every university student at a public university such as UWEC enjoys the full panoply of First Amendment rights, including freedom of religion and freedom of expression."

David French, FIRE's President, also pointed out that just last year the same university administration office now trying to ban Bible studies was full of praise for another resident assistant who staged "The Vagina Monologues" play as an official residence hall activity, even though she admitted that activity cut her time to be available to her dorm's residents.

Then there is the case of the Montgomery County Public Schools' refusal to distribute take-home flyers to parents announcing after-school meetings of Child Evangelism Fellowship "because the group is evangelical and its predominate objective is proselytization." When challenged in federal court by Christian Legal Society attorneys, the Maryland school system admitted it routinely distributed flyers for other student groups, including those with religious purposes.

"Religious speech is not second class speech under the Constitution," said CLS Litigation Counsel Timothy J. Tracey. "This is just one more example of school officials misunderstanding the law, thinking they must censor private religious speech simply because they don't like CEF's point of view."

Tracey filed an appeal to the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals on behalf of CEF after the school system "changed" its policy in response to a court ruling, but continued to refuse to distribute the flyers. The appeal is being assisted by the Alliance Defense Fund, an organization of attorneys devoted to defending the First Amendment, especially on issues of freedom of religion.

From Maryland we go to Montana where a Billings school system tried to silence a speaker invited to help students cope with a string of teen deaths by suicide and auto crashes. The speaker, Jarod Carpenter, was invited by the school board to address secular topics even though he was suggested the Dawson McAllister Association a Christian group that conducts youth rallies across the country.

The school board rescinded its invitation after a board member and a school system attorney expressed concern about McAllister's religious purposes. At that point, the Rutherford Institute came to Carpenter's defense, asking a federal court to affirm his right to speak at the school.

"Religious persons, like all others, have the right not to be discriminated against because of their beliefs or affiliations," stated John W. Whitehead, Rutherford's President. "School officials charged with educating our young people about our nation's history and Constitution should be among the first to jealously guard the rights embodied in the Constitution."

These three cases are typical of hundreds across the country in recent years in which the rights of individuals to practice the faith of their choice has been attacked by people in positions of power, often at taxpayers expense.

Question: If it damages the nation when citizens express or practice a particular faith in public, how long before the anti-First Amendment crowd decrees religion can't be allowed in private, either? Don't think it can't happen here.

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