

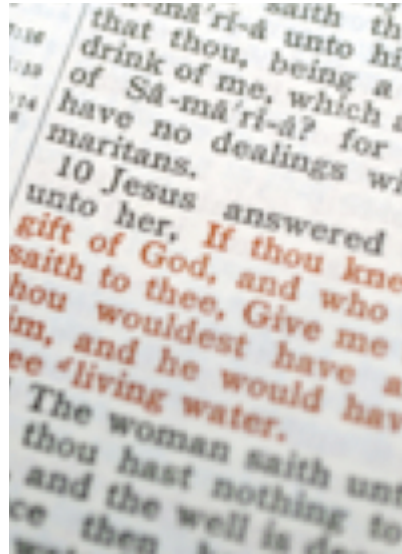


Written by [Steven J. DuBord](#) on October 6, 2009

Georgia School Sidelines Bible Verses

As of their Friday night game on October 2, the Lakeview-Fort Oglethorpe High School football team, the Warriors, have been forbidden from using Bible verses on the large banner they run through to make their entrance onto the playing field.

[AP reported](#) on October 3 that “instead, the football team ran through a banner that read ‘This is Big Red Country’ before each bent on a knee to pray on the field of Tommy Cash Stadium.” The team has red uniforms, so the slogan fits, but ever since 9/11 the team had been using verses from the Bible such as “In God I have put my trust. I shall not be afraid.”



The team responded to the devastating terror attacks of 9/11 by seeking to unite the community and express their faith through the Bible-verse-bearing banners. At the time, Principal Jerry Ransom wholeheartedly endorsed the effort. But Catoosa County schools Superintendent Denia Reese recently banned the banners when a parent complained.

AP noted that Reese was merely following the advice of the school board’s attorney, who told Reese that the Biblical banners violated federal law because they were being displayed by the school’s cheerleaders at an official school event.

“I regret that the cheerleaders cannot display their signs in the football stadium without violating the First Amendment,” Reese claimed in a statement. “I rely on reading the Bible daily, and I would never deny our students the opportunity to express their religious beliefs.”

[ABC on October 3 added](#) Reese’s statement of regret: “It broke my heart to have to tell those girls that they could not display that message on the football field. It was hard to be the bearer of bad news. This is the law, and we will follow the law.”

The originator of the complaint, Donna Jackson, said she didn’t complain about the signs but was merely concerned that the banners could leave the school vulnerable to lawsuits. ABC quoted her written statement: “I did call the superintendent to express concern that the cheerleaders’ sign be done in such a way that all involved were within the ever-changing and very confusing lines drawn by the federal courts about such things.”

Anti-religion groups were quick to voice their approval for the results of Jackson’s well-intentioned but ill-informed call about separation of church and state. Rob Boston, representing Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, averred: “These cheerleaders with their religious banners that quote from the Bible are definitely in violation of that longstanding rule. My advice to them would be if you want to promote religion, do that at your church, not in your public school.”

Bill Nigut, the Anti-Defamation League’s southeast regional director, sent a letter to Reese applauding the removal of the banners: “There are legal ways for students to have religious observation in a school



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context and there are illegal ways, and we believe Reese is correct that the football game crosses a line.”

The students, the community, and even the mayor of Fort Oglethorpe have all expressed dismay at the decision and banded together for support. Over a thousand people attended a rally supporting the Biblical banners, and during the game students on the sidelines held signs with messages like “You Can’t Silence Us” while some young men sported Bible verses in body paint.

On *Good Morning America Weekend*, Fort Oglethorpe Mayor Ronnie Cobb commended the students for continuing to show their spirit from the sidelines: “I applaud them, support them and the entire community and most of the nation now is behind them.”

The First Amendment itself is behind them also, in case Jackson, Reese, the school board’s lawyer, Boston, or Nigut hadn’t noticed. The amendment clearly states: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press....”

Displaying a banner adorned with Bible verses at a public school football game is in no way equivalent to Congress passing a law to establish religion, but it is exactly equivalent to the free exercise of religion and the freedom of speech to express religious beliefs in public. Significantly, it is the students, not the coaching staff, faculty, or school board who are displaying the signs.

Reese’s statement that the banners violate the First Amendment, and that removal of the banners is following the law are themselves signs of how far America has fallen from the Founding Fathers’ understanding of liberty. America has degenerated to the point that expressions of faith and community unity originating in response to 9/11 are now viewed as illegal violations of the very amendment that guarantees free speech.

If the students are not once again allowed to display the banners that they want to display, then freedom of religion and speech will have been sacked for a permanent loss that America will be hard pressed to recover from.



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