



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on August 25, 2012

Atheists Target Football Coach for Letting Churches Feed H.S. Football Team

The Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) is at it again in its non-stop effort to purge America of faith in God. In its latest campaign it has targeted the football coach for Ridgeland High School in Walker County, Georgia, insisting that he is violating the First Amendment's supposed "separation of church and state" clause by, among other infractions, allowing local churches to feed his team before Friday night football games.



According to the [Atlanta Journal-Constitution](#), on August 21 the [FFRF sent a letter to the superintendent](#) of the Walker County school district complaining that coach Mark Mariakis had held pre-game meals at a local church, where a "preacher sermonizes to the players about the Christian religion."

Additionally, the atheist group charged, Mariakis is guilty of pressuring his players to attend a "Christian football camp that the players have to pay for," leading the team in pre- and post-game prayers, and using Bible verses on team gear and in motivational speeches.

"Taking public school football teams to church, even for a meal, is unconstitutional," warned FFRF attorney Andrew Seidel in the letter to the district. "This program is an egregious violation of the Establishment Clause and must cease immediately."

In his missive Seidel explained that a local individual had complained to the FFRF about the longstanding tradition of local churches providing meals to members of the football team on game days. The complainer noted that during the meal a minister from the host church often delivers remarks "about the Christian religion." Warned Seidel: "The fact that Mariakis visits several churches instead of one does not mitigate the violation."

Richie White, a minister at the [Chattanooga Valley Baptist Church](#), which is scheduled to provide a meal for the football team in October, told [Fox News](#) that he thought it was curious that the atheist group would have a problem with people voluntarily feeding young people. "It would be interesting to see what part of the Constitution we violated by simply offering a meal to fellow Americans," White quipped. "These are kids from our area that we do love and we do care about."

White noted that several members of his church's youth group are members of the team, and it has been a longtime tradition for the congregation to show its support for the kids. "We as Christians don't force our religion on anyone," he told Fox News, adding that "we're being persecuted because we believe there is a God who created us. I don't think there's an equal playing field because we base our lives and our views on the Scripture."

The FFRF's Seidel also warned against the football coach's supposedly unconstitutional practice of using Scripture to motivate his players both on and off the field, and for encouraging them to attend a Christian-themed football camp. "Even if Mariakis is simply suggesting attendance, his position as head coach in charge of playing time, impregnates any suggestion with force," wrote the FFRF lawyer.



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“Playing time leads to scholarships and college; it should be a question of merit only, not religion.”

Robert Jeffress, a Baptist pastor from Dallas who regularly speaks out on such issues, told Fox News that Christians must stand up to groups such as the FFRF, which are trying to destroy America’s spiritual fabric. “The Freedom From Religion Foundation has dedicated itself to perverting the very real First Amendment freedom of religious expression for an imaginary freedom from religious expression,” said Jeffress. “It is time for all Christians to push back against the attempts of atheistic groups and judicial activists to erase our constitutional right of freedom of religious expression.”

Ken Klukowski, an attorney with the [Family Research Council](#), argued that the FFRF’s campaign reaches beyond trying to keep church and state separate. “They believe all religious faith is inherently and irredeemably harmful to human society,” he told Fox News. “It’s not their mission to separate church and state. It’s their mission to eradicate religion from American culture altogether.”

[CharismaNews.com](#) noted that the FFRF has had some past success in forcing school districts to drop prayer and expressions of faith from school functions. “The group in recent years successfully shut down school prayers at Soddy Daisy football games and graduations, and other Tennessee schools,” the news site noted. “FFRF won a lawsuit in the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals in 2004 against Rhea County, which declared unconstitutional devotional religious instruction in the schools, including a program to ‘teach the Bible as literal truth.’ Most recently, FFRF contacted the University of Tennessee-Chattanooga over prayers at public school athletic events.”

However, Mariakis and the Walker County school district will not be without qualified legal assistance in their battle against the atheist legal team. [Liberty Counsel](#), a conservative, Christian legal advocacy group associated with Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, has stepped forward with an offer to defend the coach and district against any lawsuit the FFRF might file.

In a letter to the Walker County School District, Liberty Counsel attorney Richard Mast emphasized that the U.S. Constitution does not demand that faith in God be eradicated from America’s public square, nor does it prohibit churches from actively participating in the life of a local community. “A church has as much right as any other local civic organization to provide pregame meals to members and guests,” advised Mast, “even if they are a part of the local high school football team.”

Mast advised the district’s school board that Liberty Counsel stood ready “to discuss strategy for defending the District from a suit brought by this organization. Additionally, if your District adopts a strategy and practice consistent with Liberty Counsel’s advice and an agreement for representation is reached, Liberty Counsel would defend your District on a pro bono basis, at no cost to the school system in the event that suit was filed.”

Commenting on the case, Liberty Counsel founder and director Matt Staver said that the atheist FFRF “continues to lick stamps and send frivolous letters with militant zeal designed to hurt communities because of its anti-Christian fixation. Nothing in the Constitution requires communities to abandon common sense and create zones hostile to religion.”



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