



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on December 12, 2011

Texas County Stands up to Atheist Group Over Nativity Scene

For the atheist group Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFR), Christmas is not the season to be jolly or liberal in a giving sort of way. Instead, it's the perfect time to ratchet up its well-worn intimidation strategy against Americans who are exercising their constitutionally protected right to free speech and religious expression by displaying traditional nativity scenes in the public square.



The latest target of the FFR's campaign against faith is Henderson County, Texas, where a [nativity scene](#), erected annually on the lawn of the county court house in the city of Athens (pictured left), has drawn the ire of the godless grinch.

After an unnamed individual in the community supposedly called the group's Madison, Wisconsin, headquarters to complain about the harmless display, the FFR's legal team quickly moved into action, sending a [threatening letter](#) to the county commissioners demanding that the display be removed immediately.

"It is unlawful for the County to maintain, erect, or host this nativity scene, thus singling out, showing preference for, and endorsing one religion," FFR staff attorney Stephanie Schmitt exhorted the county commissioners. "The Supreme Court has ruled it is impermissible to place a nativity scene as the sole focus of a display on government property...."

The group "requested" the Henderson County Commissioners to take "immediate action to ensure that no religious displays are on city or county property," and to "inform us in writing of the steps you are taking to remedy this First Amendment violation so that we may notify our complainant."

In a press release the FFR's loquacious founder, Annie Laurie Gaylor, put the requisite atheist spin on its manufactured grievance, complaining that the county's supposed promotion and endorsement of Christianity had made the mysterious complainant feel "unwelcomed" in town. The nativity display "sends a message of intimidation and exclusion to non-Christians and non-believers this time of year," declared Gaylor. "Anybody walking by that is going to say, 'Hmmm. This is a Christian government building. I'm not welcome here if I'm not Christian.'"

The response by county officials to the atheist group's demands was quick and unanimous: the nativity scene will stay. According to the local [Malakoff News](#), county officials "had no intention of moving the nativity scene based on the letter." In fact, County Judge Richard Sanders put the county's intentions in no uncertain terms. "They are going to have to make us move it," he told the paper.

The response of Henderson County Commissioner Joe Hall was stronger still. "I'll tell you this — I'm going to fight this until hell freezes over," Hall told [Fox News](#), adding, "It's been up there for decades



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without any complaints.”

Nathan Lorick, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Malakoff, told Fox News that he and a group of fellow pastors in the area would make it their personal campaign to fight the intimidation of the FRF. “It’s time that Americans stand up and take America back for the faith that we were founded upon,” said Lorick. “We’re going to stand up and fight for this.”

He noted that “Christianity is under attack in America. Our country is quickly heading down a direction which the Christian faith is taking a hit — it’s quickly becoming suppressed.” In a challenge to other Christians he declared: “We cannot sit by. It’s a hill to die on. It’s a fight worth having. I’m here to be a voice in that movement. We are a people of the Christian faith.”

In the predominantly Christian county, residents found it puzzling that an outside group would make such an issue over their simple display of faith. Joan King, an Athens resident noted that the display has always given comfort and inspiration during the holiday season. “I love when I go by a nativity scene,” she told Fox. “It’s a constant reminder during a season where we get so busy what we’re really celebrating.”

Another Athens resident, Tracie Lynda, told Fox that she is helping to collect petition signatures to keep the nativity scene. “So now they’re trying to take Baby Jesus?” an incredulous Lynda echoed the attitude of most residents. “What is so offensive about a baby in a manger? If it does not mean anything to you, why does it offend you?”

The Rev. Eric Graham, pastor of Sand Springs Baptist Church in Athens, told [Baptist Press News](#) that while it is easy for people to react with anger and outrage at the atheist attack, he and the other area pastors “are making a concerted effort to lead our people to act differently. In a time where Christians are known for what we are against, we want to show that we are for some things too. We are going to act with love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, and self-control instead of anger and bitterness.”

Nonetheless, Graham added, they had no intention of surrendering their God-given right of worship. “Our nation was founded upon Christian principles and with the expressed purpose of Christian liberty,” he said. “We have been giving up those liberties with very little resistance, but it is now time for Christians to come together in unity and begin pushing back the powers of darkness with the light of Jesus Christ.”



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