



PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

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Teaching First Amendment Values

Newton, Mississippi — November 14, 2016. The Center for Religious Expression (CRE) sent an informative letter to the Superintendent of Newton Municipal School District, encouraging them to resist the bullying of a prominent atheist group.

Newton High School football coach Ryan Smith is a committed Christian. A few months ago, one of Smith's players approached him and asked Smith to baptize him. Smith was happy to do so, and on September 21, 2016, after school hours, Smith baptized the student off-campus. A video posted on Facebook showing the baptism went viral, drawing the attention and ire of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), a powerful atheist group.

FFRF promptly sent a letter to the school district, demanding that the district launch an "investigation" and force its staff to remain silent about their religious beliefs. According to FFRF, the Establishment Clause prohibits school employees from sharing their beliefs with students at any time, and in any context. In effect, FFRF argues that employment with a public school requires a teacher or coach to surrender First Amendment rights – in and out of the classroom.

CRE's letter explains that while there are some parameters for religion in school, the First Amendment doesn't ban school employees from engaging in religious expression at all times and places.

"School employees like Coach Smith are not government property; they are American citizens," said CRE Chief Counsel Nate Kellum. "They do not automatically surrender their First Amendment rights by accepting a government paycheck."

The letter further highlights how the cases on which FFRF relies do not support its theory of enforced silence at all times.

"What the case law actually shows is that schools cannot use school-sponsored activities to indoctrinate" said Kellum. "There is no legal basis for banning Coach Smith from exercising his beliefs off-campus, after school hours, and outside of any school-sponsored event."

Center for Religious Expression is a servant-oriented, non-profit 501(c)(3) Christian legal organization dedicated to the glory of God and the religious freedom of His people. For more information, visit <http://www.crelaw.org>.