

Contest held July 4th, 2005 in Louisville Kentucky

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." According to the Declaration of Independence this is the basis of the American Revolution. Today I would like to speak to you on separation of church and state. To understand this, we must first see the part that religion played in the American Revolution, second how separation of church and state began, and third how the courts have brought this separation to the point that it is now.

When the colonists decided to separate from England, religious freedom played an important part in the revolution. The king was seen as the direct representative of God on earth. When the Declaration of Independence was written, it was said that all men are "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights." The concept of God was deeply embedded in the foundations of the new country. The heads of this new government knew that a church could not rule the United States of America. They had seen what a church headed government had done in England and what it had the potential to do in America in terms of religious persecution. When the Bill of Rights was written, in the First Amendment it was stated that, "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

The separation of church and state began when Thomas Jefferson used the term "a wall of separation between church and state" in his letter to the Danbury Baptists. It is my opinion that this separation of church and state was not meant to be the strict separation that it is today. Jefferson was assuring these people that the state would not persecute or discriminate against the Danbury Baptists. It is clear that the forefathers did not want a separation so complete that children are not allowed to speak of God at their schools. They only wanted a country where all could practice religious freedom. Thomas Paine said that, "above all things the free exercise of religion" is essential to our freedom. The founding fathers wanted us to have a wall of separation between our religions and government, but they did not intend for us to completely block out all religion. When Thomas Jefferson was President of the school board, the Bible was used as a textbook in the first public schools.

Just looking at history as well as famous monuments and government buildings proves that religion, whatever religion that may be, was meant to be a part of the lives of the American people. The 83rd Congress designated a room in the Capitol that is always open for prayer and meditation for the members of Congress. The Washington monument has the words "Praise be to God" engraved in its cap as well as Bible verses written on its staircase. The Jefferson Memorial contains a reference to God. If we are trying to block out religion from our school system, should we stop public schools from visiting these monuments? Or should these historic sites, which are such an important part of our country, be destroyed because they mention a God that everyone may not believe exists? Or should we not teach the Declaration of Independence and other historical documents because of their reference to God?

The first amendment does not state that religion cannot be practiced in schools. It states that we cannot pass laws that prohibit the practice of religion. In the 1947 Supreme Court case *Everson v. Board of Education*, a case concerning the use of state funds to transport children to religious schools, Justice Hugo Black cited the wall of separation. The case of *Engel v. Vitale* in 1962 was the first ruling that separated Christianity and education. In this case the court defined "church" as "a religious activity in public". Prior to this there was no historical or legal precedent banning religious activities in public settings. Is not prohibiting religious activity in schools and other public circumstances passing laws prohibiting the practice of religion? Where is the freedom of expression in these laws and court cases?

I am in agreement with the Supreme Court Justice William Rehnquist when he stated, "the wall" diverted judges "from the actual intention of the drafters of the Bill of Rights." I am not the only one in disagreement with these laws completely separating the church and state. A senior class was told that God could not be used in their graduation ceremonies. In response to this when a speaker stood up to give his speech, he let out a large sneeze. On cue every senior stood and said, "God Bless You".

In conclusion, I would like to say that I agree that the churches should be separate from the state to a degree. This is what allows our country to be a place of freedom where all can worship according to their own beliefs. The government should not step in and stop people from worshiping, or choosing not to worship, their God. This was clearly the intent of the Declaration of Independence. Our forefathers fought and won the American Revolution so that we could have freedom. We should all have the freedom of religion that they believed in, a true freedom where everyone can practice his or her own religion at any time and in any place.