

"BIBLE, THE BATTLE IS ON"

By Dr. Hoyt W. Allen, Jr.

A Battle Over a Bible for a Teacher (and a Nation)

Bob Burney Wednesday, May 21, 2008

Drive into Mt. Vernon, Ohio and it's like a step back into history. The city, founded in 1805, is anchored by a city square straight out of an old post card or possibly a Norman Rockwell painting. There's the requisite gazebo, statues and park benches. All of this belies a true American battle brewing that could shatter the idyllic setting of what has been called "Ohio's most livable city."

The battle is centered on a mild-mannered, self-effacing middle school science teacher and his Bible. John Freshwater has been a **teacher in the Mt. Vernon public schools for over 20 years**. Twice he has been designated as "Teacher of the Year" by the School Board—most recently just last year. That was then. A few months ago it seems that a student in one of his classes made accusations that Mr. Freshwater was being too Christian in his class. The extent of the allegations are not known as the School Board is not commenting—with the exception of an occasional "leak" to the press about how "serious" the matter is in light of the "separation of Church and State." As a result, the **School Board demanded that Mr. Freshwater remove a Bible that**

has been sitting on the corner of his desk for 21 years. You read that correctly, "sitting" on the corner of his desk. The teacher is not accused of reading it, proclaiming it, preaching from it. Nope—it just sits there. Evidently, that has offended at least one student, so the Bible has to go.

There's just one problem: Mr. Freshwater and his convictions. At the request of the School Board, the teacher has removed a copy of the Ten Commandments from the wall of his classroom and some other "objectionable" materials that might have been somehow construed as "Christian"—but the Bible was the last straw. In direct defiance of his employer, **Freshwater has refused to remove the Bible from the desk**. He was offered a compromise—put it in a drawer when students were present and take it out when they left. No deal, the humble but courageous man has replied. He has drawn the proverbial line in the sand. The Bible stays and the controversy has exploded.

The ACLU rode into town with the fictional "separation of church and state" penciled in the margins of their Constitution. They threatened the School Board to force the teacher to remove the Bible from his desk or they would sue. At this point in similar stories, the School Board usually covers before the mighty ACLU and cowardly compliance is the rule. The ACLU did not bargain for John Freshwater or Mt. Vernon, Ohio. **This brave man has stood his ground**. The Bible remains on his desk. Shortly after the initial confrontation over the Bible, **approximately 75 percent of the students in the middle school brought Bibles to school (yes, a public school) and wore homemade T-shirts supporting their beloved teacher**.

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Reports surfaced of 8th graders moving from class to class lugging huge family Bibles under their arms. On a recent **Sunday afternoon the city square swelled with hundreds of supporters for a public rally in support of their "Teacher of the Year" and his Bible**.

No one can predict the end result of the controversy. John Freshwater continues to teach with a "monitor" present in every class to make sure no one is injured by the Book on the corner of the desk. The School Board has launched a full scale investigation into the "allegations." The Columbus Dispatch has launched a vicious campaign to malign the Christian teacher and the ACLU is standing in the wings like a bunch of hungry jackals waiting to devour this good man, his reputation, his family and the well-being of his students. Sadly, the large Christian civil liberty organizations that often help in cases such as this have been strangely silent. Sadly, it would seem that this battle is not a "slam dunk" and is not worthy of their attention.

In many respects, Mt. Vernon, Ohio is America—a microcosm of everything that makes up the USA. The battle unfolding there should interest every one of us. **The city was named after George Washington's home and is nicknamed "Colonial City"**. Think of that for just a moment—a city with historic ties to George Washington just might declare it illegal to have a Bible on the corner of a teacher's desk.

How does this mesh with history? It doesn't. **The McGuffey Readers used for generations in America's public schools were filled with Bible references and Bible stories**. The school day began with prayer. In his famous farewell address, George Washington wrote eloquently about the role of religion in our form of government: "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens? And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle." If the School Board of Mt. Vernon bans the Bible from even the corner of a teacher's desk—it would seem they were defying the wisdom of their namesake.

You probably have never heard of John Freshwater. He is comfortable with that. This is a battle he did not choose, but one he has chosen to fight. **If John Freshwater's Bible is taken off of his desk, will yours be next? Pray for this man and his family. They will have enormous legal bills and unbelievable stress placed upon them. John Freshwater deserves the support of every American who loves liberty.**

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