



## Focus on Religious Freedom

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### In the News: Defending Religious Freedom

**"I never imagined I would be fired for being a Christian,"** said Student Senate President, Jack Denton, after winning a federal lawsuit against Florida State University (FSU).<sup>(1)</sup> His First Amendment freedoms of religion and speech were denied after his private message conversation among Catholic students was screenshot, shared on social media and went viral, leading to dismissal from his paid leadership role. The conversation had involved a member of the group asking them to financially support organizations that advocated "for things that are explicitly anti-Catholic."<sup>(2)</sup>

In the settlement agreement, FSU agreed to issue a statement regarding its commitment to protecting students' First Amendment rights and will restore Denton's lost wages and legal fees. "If I stay silent while my brothers and sisters may be supporting an organization that promotes grave evils, I have sinned through my silence. I love you all, and I want us to all be aware of the truth," said Denton.<sup>(3)</sup>

**"To me, faith is the most integral part of who I am.** I can't separate it, and I wanted to talk about the hope that I personally have found in Christ and the freedom He's given me in hopes that maybe I could share that with my peers before we diverge our paths," said Elizabeth Turner, a Michigan HS valedictorian.<sup>(4)</sup> However, the principal demanded she remove references to faith from her graduation address. Elizabeth had written, "For me, my future hope is found in my relationship with Christ. By trusting in him and choosing to live a life dedicated to bringing his kingdom glory, I can be confident I am living a life with purpose and meaning."<sup>(4)</sup> First Liberty Institute attorneys sent a letter to the principal demanding Elizabeth be allowed to reference her faith in her speech. "Graduation is a time for celebration, not censorship... All public schools should protect the private religious expression of their students."<sup>(5)</sup>

The school then revised their decision. "We are grateful to school officials for acting swiftly to ensure that religious students can freely exercise their right to express their faith in a graduation speech," said First Liberty.<sup>(6)</sup>

**"Public schools have no business compelling teachers to express ideological beliefs** that they don't hold, nor do they have the right to suspend someone simply for respectfully providing their opinion at a public meeting," said an Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) attorney representing a Virginia teacher suspended for voicing his objections to two proposed school policies during the public comment period of a school board meeting.<sup>(7)</sup>

ADF explained the school board's actions violated the Virginia Constitution when it punished the teacher by retaliating against him for expressing his conscientious beliefs in a public forum, and also violated his free exercise of religion by discriminating against his religious beliefs.

(church militant.com, 5/28/21(1); christianpost.com, 5/28/21(2)(3); toddstarnes.com, 5/27/21(4); globenewswire.com, 5/26/21(5); 1cbn.com, 5/27/21(6); lifesitenews.com, 6/2/21(7))

**Shortened version follows below:**



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