

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

P.O. BOX 750 · MADISON, WI 53701 · (608) 256-8900 · WWW.FFRF.ORG

April 27, 2018

**SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL:
Joe.Miller@claibornecsd.org**

Claiborne County School Board
c/o Dr. Joseph A. Miller
Director of Schools
P.O. Box 770
Tazewell, TN 37879

Re: Unconstitutional "Billy Graham Day" resolution

Dear Dr. Miller and School Board members:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation to urge the Claiborne County School Board to rescind its "Billy Graham Day" proclamation. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 33,000 members across the country, including more than 300 members in Tennessee and a chapter in Knoxville. FFRF's purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

It is our understanding that the Claiborne School Board recently proclaimed that November 7 would be known as "Billy Graham Day" in the District, declaring that each school "would be free to celebrate the life of the famous evangelist, in any way it so chooses." Media reported that County Attorney James Estep III urged the Board to rescind this proclamation because it violates a 1988 court order prohibiting the District from proselytizing.¹

We urge the Board to take this advice and rescind the proclamation. Even absent a court order, the District's endorsement of a man who is famous only for evangelizing is inappropriate and unconstitutional.

It is dubious for public schools to revere a Christian minister who is known primarily for his religious views. By instructing District schools to celebrate such an individual, the District implicitly endorses that icon's religious message, which is inappropriate for a secular school district. It thereby turns Christian students, particularly evangelical or fundamentalist Christian students, into insiders, and non-Christian students into outsiders. It would be different were Graham known mainly for secular achievements, as was the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., for instance. Graham is principally known for his soul-winning crusades and his eponymous religious association, the Billy Graham Evangelical Association, a multi-million-dollar empire. The ministry's Statement of Faith includes: "We believe the

¹ Jan Runions, *BOE likely to rescind 'Billy Graham Day'*, Claiborne Progress (Apr. 3, 2018)

Bible to be the inspired, the only infallible, authoritative Word of God,” “We believe in the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ, in His virgin birth in His sinless life, in His miracles, in His vicarious and atoning death through His shed blood on the cross,” “We believe . . . that Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation,” etc.

Graham’s career was devoted to revivals, Christian conversions, hellfire preaching and the insertion of his brand of religion into what is supposed to be a secular government based on a godless Constitution that bars the establishment of religion or government preference for religion. There is no secular purpose in requiring schools to celebrate such a figure. Doing so violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Further, Graham has a checkered history including anti-Semitism and other alienating and divisive views. In 1994, Graham fiercely denied accusations that 20 years prior he had told President Nixon that the nation’s problems were rooted in the country’s “satanic Jews.” Ten years after Graham’s denial, a recording of the conversation revealed that he had indeed blamed the country’s problems on the Jewish people, even more offensively than originally suggested, telling Nixon that “they’re the ones putting out the pornographic stuff.” The recording captured Graham stating that the Jewish “stranglehold has got to be broken or the country’s going down the drain . . . a lot of the Jews are great friends of mine, they swarm around me and are friendly to me because they know that I’m friendly with Israel. But they don’t know how I really feel about what they are doing to this country. And I have no power, no way to handle them, but I would stand up if under proper circumstances.”²

Graham has also showed utter disdain toward nonreligious Americans, who make up 19% of adult Americans and fully one-third of those under 30.³ When a fan asked for Graham’s thoughts on an atheist who was “the kindest, most thoughtful person I know,” Graham dismissed the atheist’s kindness as merely a “sunny personality,” commenting that “a true atheist has no reason to believe in right and wrong, or to behave sacrificially toward others.”⁴ This is, of course, absurd. Rather than acknowledging that an atheist could be a good person, Graham smugly declared that morality requires a god belief. In doing so, Graham showed his intolerance for anyone who does not share his particular brand of theology.

In the last decade, Graham further cemented himself on the wrong side of history, taking out full-page anti-gay newspaper ads during the 2012 presidential election against marriage equality that read:

² See David Firestone, *Billy Graham Responds to Lingering Anger Over 1972 Remarks on Jews*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (Mar. 17, 2002), available at www.nytimes.com/2002/03/17/us/billy-graham-responds-to-lingering-anger-over-1972-remarks-on-jews.html.

³ Pew Research Center, *Nones on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation*, THE PEW FORUM ON RELIGION & PUBLIC LIFE (October 9, 2012), available at <http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx>.

⁴ Billy Graham, *Atheist May Be Sunny on the Outside, but Feel Empty Inside*, BRADENTON HERALD (Aug. 7, 2010), available at www.bradenton.com/2010/08/07/2489786_atheist-may-be-sunny-on-outside.html?rh=1#storylink=cpy.

On November 6, the day before my 94th birthday, our nation will hold one of the most critical elections in my lifetime. We are at a crossroads and there are profound moral issues at stake. I strongly urge you to vote for candidates who support the biblical definition of marriage between a man and woman, protect the sanctity of life and defend our religious freedoms. The Bible speaks clearly on these crucial issues. Please join me in praying for America, that we will turn our hearts back toward God.

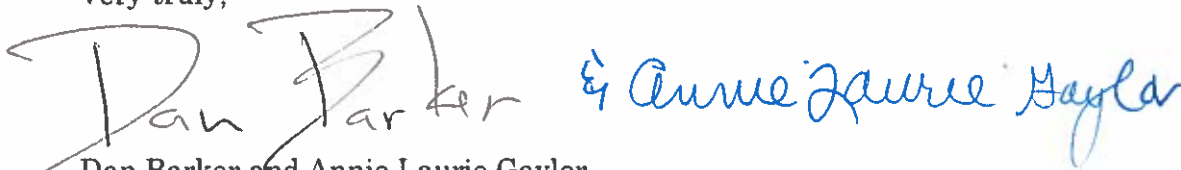
Our organization filed a complaint with the Internal Revenue Service, noting that the ads, paid for by Graham's ministry, crossed the line into political advocacy. In keeping with this, the ministry's Statement of Faith expresses this narrow perspective: "We believe God's plan for human sexuality is to be expressed only within the context of marriage . . . that God instituted monogamous marriage between male and female . . . exclusively . . ."⁵

Graham was a noted war hawk, known for blessing every U.S. war or act of aggression. Notoriously, Graham once urged President Nixon to "bomb the dikes" in North Vietnam during the height of the Vietnam protests.⁶

In short, your actions endorsing this Christian figure alienate, exclude and insult many local taxpayers, parents and students, including nonbelievers, the LGBTQ community, Jews and other non-Christians, as well as those who revere our First Amendment's principle of separation between church and state.

Aside from the serious legal concerns associated with instructing District schools to celebrate a religious leader with no positive secular accomplishments, Graham's disgraceful record makes him an entirely unsuitable role model for your students. Please rescind this wrong-headed proclamation immediately. May we hear from you at your earliest convenience?

Very truly,

The image shows two handwritten signatures in blue ink. The first signature is 'Dan Barker' and the second is 'Annie Laurie Gaylor'. They are written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor
Co-presidents

⁵ <http://billygraham.org/about/what-we-believe/>.

⁶ Cecil Bothwell, *The Prince of War*, 109–15 (2007).