

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

April 9, 2021

**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: [jramsey@bland.org](mailto:jramsey@bland.org)**

Sheriff Jason Ramsey  
Bland County Sheriff's Office  
P.O. Box 449  
612 Main Street Suite 203  
Bland, VA 24315

Re: Divisive religious promotion on social media

Dear Sheriff Ramsey:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to alert you to citizen concerns over religious promotion on the Bland County Sheriff's Office's official Facebook page. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 35,000 members across the country, including more than 800 members in Virginia. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

A concerned local resident has reported that the Bland County Sheriff's Office, and yourself in particular, regularly posts bible verses, prayer requests, and other religious messages on the official Bland County Sheriff's Office Facebook page. These posts range from regularly asking for thoughts and prayers to ending messages with "God bless" to direct Christian proselytizing.

On October 18, 2020, the Sheriff's Office posted a photo of a Latin cross along with the caption, "Thank you, Bastian Union Church for honoring Bland County First Responders today. Thank you for the wonderful worship service, sermon, gifts and the terrific meal that followed. It was a wonderful blessing. God Bless - you all!"

On December 24, 2020, the Sheriff's Office posted a photo of the nativity scene and praying hands along with the caption:

During dark times we find our hope and strength in Jesus Christ, for we know he is our rock & salvation. This Christmas let us celebrate the birth of our savior. Thank him for his grace and mercy! Let your family and friends know how much you love them this Christmas! We pray that everyone has a safe and blessed Christmas! Our entire department wants to wish everyone a Merry Christmas! We love you all!!  
Sheriff Ramsey

On December 31, 2020, the Sheriff's Office posted a photo with the words, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. - Proverbs 3:5-6." along with the caption:

Happy New Year!! We pray that everyone has a blessed 2021. We also want to thank everyone for all their support this past year. We are blessed to be part of such a great county. God Bless!!

On April 2, 2021, the Sheriff's Office posted a photo depicting three Latin crosses and the words, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. 1 Peter 2:24." along with the caption:

Jesus loved us so much that he died for us. He took our place and all the punishment we deserved. By his wounds we are healed!! Today we remember and honor the death of our savior Jesus Christ!

On April 3, 2021, the Sheriff's Office posted a photo of a Latin cross with the message "he is risen - celebrate the resurrection" along with the caption:

The tomb was empty! Hallelujah!! We thank God that we serve a risen savior! Christ concurred [sic] death ! We thank you Jesus for giving us eternal life. We praise you Lord!! Our savior lives!! We pray that everyone has a blessed and safe Easter Sunday worshipping a risen savior!  
God Bless,  
Sheriff Jason Ramsey.

Please see the enclosed screenshots.

The Supreme Court has long held that the Establishment Clause "mandates government neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion." *McCreary Cty., Ky. v. Am. Civil Liberties Union of Ky.*, 545 U.S. 844, 860 (2005); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38, 53 (1985); *Epperson v. Ark.*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15-16 (1947). The Bland County Sheriff's Office's Facebook posts convey a message to non-Christians that they are not "favored members of the community." *Cty. of Allegheny v. Am. Civil Liberties Union Greater Pittsburgh Ch.*, 492 U.S. 573, 595 (1989) (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688) (1984) (O'Connor, J., concurring).

As you are aware, citizens interact with and rely on law enforcement officers during some of the most urgent and vulnerable times of their lives. As a sheriff, you serve a diverse population that consists of not only Christians, but also minority religious and nonreligious citizens. We hope you will agree that the Sheriff's Office must be even-handed and avoid any appearance of bias toward some citizens, or hostility toward others. Religious endorsements made by your department send a message that excludes the 24 percent of American adults who identify as nonreligious, including 38 percent of millennials and younger Americans.<sup>1</sup> Religious endorsements coming from your office needlessly alienate the non-Christian and nonreligious citizens in Bland County, turning them into political outsiders in their own community.

It would be entirely possible, of course, for you to send uplifting and motivational messages to the community without ostracizing a significant portion of them. By expressing your sentiments in exclusively religious terms, and by quoting exclusively from one religion's holy book, you unnecessarily exclude a significant portion of the community. Regardless of your intent, these social media posts send

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<sup>1</sup> Robert P. Jones & Daniel Cox, *America's Changing Religious Identity*, PUBLIC RELIGION RESEARCH INSTITUTE (Sept. 6, 2017), available at [www.ppri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf](http://www.ppri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf).

the message that minority religious and nonreligious community members are less valued than that of their Christian counterparts.

Sticking to secular messages is inclusive of everyone and honors our Constitution. It should be a matter of pride that the United States was first among nations to adopt an entirely secular constitution, in which the only references to religion are exclusionary, such as barring religious tests for public office and separating religion from government.

The Supreme Court recently described the power of social media sites as “the principal sources for knowing current events, checking ads for employment, speaking and listening in the modern public square, and otherwise exploring the vast realms of human thought and knowledge.” *Packingham v. North Carolina*, 137 S. Ct. 1730, 1737 (2017) (internal citations omitted). Government entities must be particularly diligent not to entangle religious messages with official government pronouncements made in this “modern public square.”

Government employees can worship, pray, or quote any religious text they wish when acting in their personal capacities. But they are not permitted to provide prestige to their personal religion through the machinery of a government office. The Sheriff’s Office belongs to “We the people,” not the office’s temporary occupants. As a sheriff, you are charged with great responsibility and have been given significant trust by citizens in your community, including those citizens who do not share your religious viewpoint.

Finally, the Sheriff’s Office’s promotion of Christianity needlessly jeopardizes taxpayer dollars by exposing the county to legal liability. Not long ago the sheriff’s office in Bradley County, Tennessee agreed to pay more than \$40,000 in damages and attorneys’ fees after promoting religion on social media and ignoring objections to the practice. *American Atheists v. Watson*, No. 1:2016cv00118 (E.D. Tenn. filed May 6, 2016). There is no need to expose the Sheriff’s Office and Bland County to similar liability by continuing to promote Christianity on a government account.

To avoid further Establishment Clause concerns, the Bland County Sheriff’s Office must refrain from promoting religion on social media. Please inform us in writing of the steps taken to respect the rights of conscience of all Bland County residents, regardless of their personal religious or nonreligious beliefs. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Chris Line", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Christopher Line  
Staff Attorney  
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosures



## Bland County Sheriff's Office

October 18, 2020 · 🌐

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Thank you, Bastian Union Church for honoring Bland County First Responders today. Thank you for the wonderful worship service, sermon, gifts and the terrific meal that followed. It was a wonderful blessing. God Bless -you all!!



**Bland County Sheriff's Office**

December 24, 2020 · 🌐

During dark times we find our hope and strength in Jesus Christ, for we know he is our rock & salvation. This Christmas let us celebrate the birth of our savior. Thank him for his grace and mercy! Let your family and friends know how much you love them this Christmas! We pray that everyone has a safe and blessed Christmas! Our entire department wants to wish everyone a Merry Christmas!

We love you all!!

Sheriff Ramsey

**Bland County Sheriff's Office**

December 31, 2020 · 🌐

Happy New Year!! We pray that everyone has a blessed 2021. We also want to thank everyone for all their support this past year. We are blessed to be part of such a great county. God Bless!!

## **Trust in the Lord with all your heart**

and lean not on  
your own understanding;  
in all your ways submit to him,  
and he will make  
your paths straight.

-Proverbs 3:5-6



BibleVerseImages.com





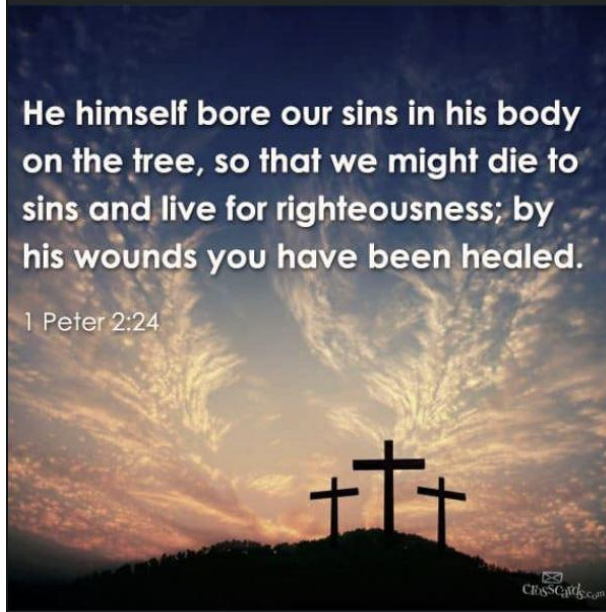
Bland County Sheriff's Office

April 2 at 7:33 AM · 🌐

Jesus loved us so much, that he died for us. He took our place and all the punishment we deserved. By his wounds we are healed!! Today we remember and honor the death of our savior Jesus Christ!

**He himself bore our sins in his body  
on the tree, so that we might die to  
sins and live for righteousness; by  
his wounds you have been healed.**

1 Peter 2:24



Bland County Sheriff's Office

April 3 at 11:44 PM · 🌐

The tomb was empty! Hallelujah!! We thank God that we serve a risen savior! Christ conquered death! We thank you Jesus for giving us eternal life. We praise you Lord!! Our savior lives!! We pray that everyone has a blessed and safe Easter Sunday worshipping a risen savior!

God Bless,  
Sheriff Jason Ramsey

