

Lesson Twenty-Nine

The Bill of Rights

LESSON IDEA

To understand the rights and privileges we enjoy as Americans and how the Bill of Rights was designed to protect them from government interference. PREPARATION

Be sure that copies of the Bill of Rights used for last week's lesson are still available. Have one for each family member.

LET US BEGIN our lesson with a simple one-sentence prayer:

Almighty God, we make our earnest prayer that Thou wilt keep the United States in Thy holy protection . . .

Those were the sentiments of George Washington in 1789 just after becoming President of the United States. Many Presidents and other federal officials have given similar supplications since, but in 1962 the Supreme Court ruled that such prayers could no longer be uttered in government schools because they violate the First Amendment of the Constitution. Does that make sense? Before answering, let us read the first provision of that amendment. [Be sure that everyone has a copy of the Bill of Rights from last week's lesson.]

Bill of Rights.

Article I — Religion and Free Speech. Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. . .

Does Washington's prayer establish a religion? Does it prohibit anyone from worshiping as he chooses? [Encourage discussion. Explain the differences between believing in God, publicly expressing that belief, and establishing a religion.]

To further clarify the issue, let us look at additional history. In the 1700s, most colonial governments followed the Old World or European tradition of establishing an official church that the people were expected to support and attend. In

Virginia, for instance, it was the Anglican Church or Church of England. The legislature of the colony passed laws to punish parents who did not have their children baptized into that church. A law passed in 1705 sought to punish those who did not attend church services. It read:

Be it enacted . . . that if any person, being of the age of twenty-one years, or upwards, shall wilfully absent him or her self from divine service at his or her parish church, the space of one month . . . shall forfeit and pay fifty pounds of tobacco. . . If any person offending shall refuse to make payment. . . by order of Justice, shall receive on his or her bare back, ten lashes, well laid on.

In 1748, Virginia's General Assembly even passed a law setting the salary of ministers! Then, in 1786, "an act for establishing religious freedom" repealed the dogmatic decrees. And five years later the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified to prohibit Congress from establishing a national religion.

With that background in mind, does the Supreme Court's 1962 decision forbidding prayer in government schools seem Constitutional or far-fetched? Had Congress made any law establishing a religion? Did prayer in a classroom or during a school assembly establish a religion? [Discuss the issue. For those interested in further information about recent Supreme Court decisions, see "For Serious Students."]

The First Amendment also prohibits Congress from passing laws abridging, "freedom of speech or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." What does "abridging" mean? "Redress of grievances"?

HOW DOES FREE SPEECH, holding meetings, and circulating and signing petitions help us correct flaws in government? [Encourage everyone express an opinion.]

