

Voices: Signs of the times: The problem with ‘In God We Trust’

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Recently, the Tennessee state legislature [passed a bill](#) that would require all schools to display the phrase “In God We Trust” somewhere “where students are likely to see it.”

It isn’t clear if governor Bill Haslam will sign the bill into law, as he’s expressed ambivalence on the proposal.

Lawmakers in four other states are debating similar legislation, while Florida has already passed such a bill through the state House of Representatives.

Much of this movement, specifically in Florida, seems to be in response to the recent shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. Florida bill sponsor Kimberly Daniels was [explicit](#) in claiming that this measure was a possible solution to violence in schools: “[God] is the light. And our schools need light in them like never before.”

I don’t disagree that God is the light, or that schools need this kind of light. But is mandating that schools install plaques a helpful step toward this goal?

I see two problems.

A problematic witness

We should perish the thought that a plaque reading “In God We Trust” has any sort of evangelistic value. Simply seeing a sign—especially one so culturally saturated as “In God We Trust”—isn’t likely to convince someone

to confess faith in Christ. The Christian gospel is too complicated for that.

A person of faith isn't likely to be impacted by such a plaque. And, increasingly, American public schools *are not* attended only by professing Christians. According to Pew's [most recent](#) survey of the American religious landscape, one out of four people in the United States are either non-religious or participate in a religion other than Christianity.

In our "culture-war" climate, a plaque reading "In God We Trust" won't be read to mean "God is trustworthy and we hope you put trust in God." The message it sends is something closer to: "This institution is for Christians."

For students who don't confess to be Christians, this ends up translating into: "You don't belong here." It's a message of isolation that ends up undermining the witness we're trying to show.

If our goal is to make disciples for Christ, mandated plaques won't accomplish it. In fact, they'll harm that mission by isolating those we're claiming to love and doing it in God's name.

Symbols without meaning

For Christians specifically, there's another danger in being careless with religious signs and symbols.

To avoid charges of infringing on laws against the government promoting any particular religion, Tennessee lawmakers have emphasized that "In God We Trust" is being used as an *American* symbol rather than a *Christian* one.

That should immediately raise a red flag for Christians.

The 2010 case of [Salazar v. Buono](#) affirmed the right of a national park to display a large cross while forbidding the building of a similar Buddhist

monument, partially on the grounds that the cross [no longer has a uniquely Christian meaning](#).

I remember hearing Christian commentators celebrating the decision, as it meant that the cross standing at the park in question would not be removed. I felt that this decision signaled a greater loss for American Christianity than they realized.

The cross is a torture device; it was the waterboarding table of its day, an ominous, ugly symbol. Nobody would use it to mark their tombstone or decorate their house; Jesus' admonition to his followers to "take up their cross and follow him" was, most literally, an invitation to be tortured to death.

Similarly, to say "in God we trust" is also to say that we *do not* trust in our own might; we are declaring that our safety comes from God alone, and not from our powerful military, collection of firearms or our money.

[I don't think](#) we honestly can make that statement at this time.

Faith or superstition?

Putting a sign in schools that reads "In God we trust" isn't a sign of faith in God; it's a form of superstition at best.

In the book of Jeremiah, God warned the people living in Jerusalem against superstition. They thought that they were impervious to invasion from the Babylonians because the Temple was in the city.

Jeremiah chided the people for treating the Temple as a magic talisman to ward off evil. According to Jeremiah, religious words were being substituted for actual repentance, and this would ultimately [do nothing](#) for the people. Through Jeremiah, the Lord said, "Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the

temple of the Lord'" (Jeremiah 7:4).

Let's not repeat the mistakes of the Israelites living in Jerusalem.

At the very least, let's remember that "In God We Trust" plaques and cross statues aren't substitutes for repentance and action.

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