



TESTIMONY IN OPPOSITION TO SUBSTITUTE SENATE BILL 34

Chair Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Education Committee:

My name is the Rev. Dr. Ben Huelskamp. I serve as Executive Director of LOVEboldly, an Ohio faith-based organization working to create spaces where LGBTQIA+ people can flourish in Christianity and beyond, and as Pastor of Blue Ocean Faith Columbus, a progressive Christian congregation. I submit this testimony in opposition to Substitute Senate Bill 34.

As a Christian pastor, I speak today not against faith in public life, but against the misuse of sacred texts for political purposes. SB34's inclusion of the Ten Commandments among a list of civic founding documents fundamentally misunderstands both the nature of religious scripture and the proper relationship between faith and government in a pluralistic democracy.

The Ten Commandments Are Not a Founding Document

The Ten Commandments are sacred scripture, a covenant between God and the people of Israel, and for Christians, part of our holy text. They are not, however, a founding document of the United States. Including them alongside the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Northwest Ordinance creates a false equivalence that distorts both our religious heritage and our civic history.

The Mayflower Compact, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights are civic documents that established and govern our nation. The Ten Commandments are religious law given to a specific people in a specific covenant relationship with God. To present these as the same category of document is to diminish the unique nature of both.

This conflation sends a dangerous message: that American citizenship and Christian faith are intertwined, that to be a good American is to adhere to this particular religious text. This is neither historically accurate nor constitutionally sound.

Impact on Students and Religious Freedom

As a pastor, I am also concerned about the impact of this bill on students from many different religious and secular traditions. Ohio's public schools serve Christian students, Jewish students, Muslim students, Hindu students, Buddhist students, atheist students, and students of many other faiths and philosophical traditions. Each of these students deserves to feel equally welcome in their public school classrooms.

When a public institutions, including public schools, display the Ten Commandments, it sends a clear message to non-Christian and non-religious students: this classroom privileges one religious tradition over others. For Jewish students, the Ten Commandments may be sacred, but they are

Creating and developing spaces where LGBTQIA+ people can flourish in Christianity.

30 E. College Ave., Westerville, OH 43081 | EIN: 81-1869501

www.loveboldly.net | admin@loveboldly.net | 614.918.8109



understood differently than in Christian tradition. For Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist students, they are part of another faith entirely. For atheist and agnostic students, they represent religious claims they do not accept.

These students do not forfeit their right to equal treatment when they enter a public school classroom. Yet SB34 would create an environment where some students' religious traditions are displayed as foundational to American democracy, while others are implicitly excluded.

An Unfunded Mandate That Burdens Districts

SB34 requires school districts to implement these displays only if they receive donated funds or materials. While this may seem to address fiscal concerns, it creates an inequitable system where outside groups can effectively purchase influence over classroom environments. Wealthy donors or organized advocacy groups could flood certain districts with Ten Commandments displays, while other districts remain unaffected, not because of educational merit, but because of donor interest. This approach also burdens districts with the administrative cost of evaluating donations, determining compliance, and managing potential conflicts over which documents to display and how to display them. These are resources better spent on actual education.

Religious Texts Deserve Better

As a Christian and as a pastor, I believe the Ten Commandments deserve to be treated as what they are: sacred scripture, worthy of study, reflection, and reverence within communities of faith. Reducing them to a "founding document" alongside civic texts trivializes their religious significance and misrepresents their purpose.

If we want students to learn about the Ten Commandments, that learning should happen in the context of religious studies: examining their meaning within Judaism and Christianity, their historical development, their theological significance, and their similarities and differences with other moral traditions. This is substantively different from posting them on a classroom wall as if they were equivalent to the Constitution.

Conclusion

I urge you to reject Substitute Senate Bill 34. This legislation does not serve our students, it does not respect our religious diversity, and it does not honor the proper boundaries between faith and government.

Thank you for your consideration of this testimony.

Creating and developing spaces where LGBTQIA+ people can flourish in Christianity.

30 E. College Ave., Westerville, OH 43081 | EIN: 81-1869501

www.loveboldly.net | admin@loveboldly.net | 614.918.8109