

Got Your Permit To Study the Bible?

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Recently a California pastor and his wife were required by San Diego County officials to obtain a permit to hold a Bible study in their home.

"What?! Is this a joke?" I wondered as I heard the news for the first time. It was no joke. Rather, it's a First Amendment nightmare and possibly a foreshadowing of what's to come.

Are you prepared for a future in which you hear, "Got your permit to study the Bible?"

On April 10 (Good Friday), a county code enforcement officer visited the home of David and Mary Jones after receiving a complaint about their Christian gatherings. The Jones' attorney, Dean Broyles, president of The Western Center for Law & Policy, conveyed in disbelief, "The county asked (Mrs. Jones), 'Do you have a regular meeting in your home?' She said, 'Yes.' 'Do you say "amen"?' 'Yes.' 'Do you pray?' 'Yes.' 'Do you say "praise the Lord"?' 'Yes.'"

The officer then warned the family to "cease and desist" the "religious gathering" or they would face weekly fines. A few days later, the county delivered a citation claiming that the Joneses were guilty of "unlawful use of land" and mandating them to "stop religious assembly or apply for a major use permit."

At first, I thought, "They must have a large congregation meeting in their home to warrant this type of citation and prompt this type of commotion, right?" Actually, according to their lawyer, the Joneses have been hosting weekly [Bible studies](#) in their home for about five years, with an average attendance of only about 15 people.

Broyles appropriately responded, "If the county thinks they can shut down groups of 10 or 15 Christians meeting in a home, what about people who meet regularly at home for poker night? What about people who meet for Tupperware parties? What about people who are meeting to watch baseball games on a regular basis and support the Chargers?"

Well, this past weekend, barraged by hundreds of complaints after WorldNetDaily broke the news to the international community, San Diego County officials informed the world that they'd backed down from requiring the Joneses to obtain a permit. Despite their retraction (based solely upon public pressure, I might add), however, I am appalled at how far the county's enforcement and encroachment crossed the constitutional line and became a flagrant disregard for Americans' right to exercise their religious faiths. And I'm concerned that we will see far more of these overreaching governmental actions in years to come.

As Mary Jones shared with Fox News: "The implications are great because it's not only us that's involved. There are thousands and thousands of Bible studies that are held all across the country. What we're interested in is setting a precedent here -- before it goes any further -- and that we have it settled for the future."

I'm not expecting county officials to be constitutional lawyers, but they should be aware of these basic precepts of America's makeup. For example, prior to the San Diego officials' recanting their position regarding the Joneses' Bible study, Chandra Waller, the general manager of the county's Land Use and Environment Group, declared, "The Bible studies are one that's probably in a very gray area."

"Very gray area"? Is there anything "very gray" about the First Amendment?

I agree again with Broyles, who explained further to Fox News: "The government may not prohibit the free exercise of religion. I believe that our Founding Fathers would roll over in their grave if they saw that here in the year 2009, a pastor and his wife are being told that they cannot hold a simple Bible study in their own home."

Part of the genius of America's Founding Fathers was to provide and secure a foundation for our freedom of religious belief. The First Amendment simply reads, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the 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."

Could it be any clearer that government may not prohibit "the free exercise thereof"?

Now more than ever, we need to be like the Joneses! Fight for the First Amendment and your freedom to exercise your religion.

