



## News Release

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### **Georgia State University Forced Conversation with Student About Faith to Cease**

*University's attempt to regulate speech and suppress religious expression on campus is unconstitutional and an arbitrary overreach, law firm says.*

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**Atlanta, GA**—First Liberty Institute sent a letter to Georgia State University President Dr. M. Brian Blake and Dean Dr. Barbara Johnson on behalf of Stephen Atkerson after a university representative and three armed police officers forced him to end a conversation with a GSU student outside the school dining area because of the religious content of the conversation. The letter demands written assurance from the university that Mr. Atkerson will not be prohibited from approaching or talking to students about their faith.

You can read the letter [here](#).

“No one needs the government’s permission to carry on a consensual conversation in public,” said First Liberty Senior Counsel Nate Kellum. “The First Amendment ensures the free exchange of ideas, even if those ideas happen to be religious. The university’s action was threatening, overbearing, and infringed on Stephen’s constitutional rights.”

Atkerson visits the Clarkston Campus of GSU’s Perimeter College to share his Christian faith with interested students in the free speech area on campus. His goal is to have friendly, one-on-one conversations with willing participants. On several occasions, Atkerson met with one particular GSU student to discuss the Bible and various aspects of Christianity. They agreed to continue their conversation on April 9, 2024, and because it was raining that day, the student invited Atkerson to sit at a table with him just outside the dining area where they could talk. But several minutes later, the student engagement coordinator and three armed police officers abruptly ended their conversation, demanding Atkerson leave the table and go back to the free speech area immediately. Fearing arrest, Atkerson complied with these GSU restrictions.

In its letter to university officials, First Liberty argues that “Religious speech is constitutionally protected” and “[c]onversational speech is also safeguarded.” Attorneys add, “In a face-to-face encounter there is a greater opportunity for the exchange of ideas and propagation of views.” *City of Dallas v. Stanglin*, 490 U.S. 19, 25 (1989). Consequently, oral dissemination of religious views falls under the Free Speech clause. *Heffron v. Int’l Soc’y for Krishna Consciousness, Inc.*, 452 U.S. 640, 647 (1981). See *Good News Club v. Milford Central School*, 533 U.S. 98, 111 (2001) (finding religious instruction, prayer, and discussion and recitation of the Bible are protected speech); *id.* at 121 (Scalia, J., concurring) (“A priest has as much liberty to proselytize as a patriot.”);

*Widmar v. Vincent*, 454 U.S. 263, 269 (1981) (religious worship and discussion are forms of speech and association protected by the First Amendment).

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**About First Liberty Institute**

First Liberty Institute is a non-profit public interest law firm and the largest legal organization in the nation dedicated exclusively to defending religious freedom for all Americans.

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