"Under God"
Deuteronomy 10:12-13, 17-21
July 2, 2006 – 9 am (4th of July Weekend)

On June 15, 2006, a graduation ceremony near Las Vegas was charged with controversy when the valedictorian, Brittany McComb, gave her speech before the assembled crowd. The controversy stemmed from her use of the name of God, the crucifixion, and scripture references within the text. McComb was explaining how God had changed her life, and her personal experiences with her savior. The controversy isn't really the speech it's self; it was the school board's reaction, by pulling the plug on the address and forcing the high school senior to either sit down or not be heard.

In fairness to the Clark County Nevada School Board, the student was warned not to stray from the approved text – which had edited out the explicitly Christian references to God. In addition, Brittany was warned shortly before that if any of the students strayed from the APPROVED text – which was projected on huge screens with subtitles from the approved text – that she would have the microphone pulled on her. Here are a few excerpts from her speech that was banned: "God's love is something more than we all desire. It's unprejudiced, it's merciful, it's free, it's real, and it's everlasting. God's love is so great that He gave up His only son up to an excruciating death on a cross so His blood would cover all our shortcomings and provide for us a way to heaven in accepting His grace. That is why Christ died…. I now desire not my own will, but the will of God for my life." While out of context, those are the words that the school board deemed unacceptable. The speech was given back to Brittany with the understanding that if she left those words out (and a few others), she would be fine.

And so, Brittany did something she had never done in her high school career: she broke the rules. She memorized her speech, and gave the unedited version of her message. The school board declared that she was prosletyzing and turned off the microphone. The ACLU, predictably, said the school was correct. Preaching is not allowed during graduation – nor is a prayer, they reminded the media. It is ok to thank God, but not Jesus. It is ok to say that you believe or have faith, but not to say why. It is ok to even preach politics, but not salvation. Free speech is free as long as you stay away from faith.

And that really is the root of the problem: the dilemma over what is free speech. I think we might all agree that yelling, "Fire!" in a crowded movie theater is not acceptable. Nor is slander, lying, or malicious conversations fine. But what about opinions? What about religion? Why is a person speaking publicly about their faith proselytizing when a person preaching atheistic evolutionism is not?

We face this problem more and more as people of faith. We can no longer have Christmas trees in public – but it's ok if you call them Holiday trees. Cashiers no longer say "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Easter" because that is religious and you might offend someone. Conversations around the water cooler might be off color and filled with cursing, but you better stay away from Jesus or you will get called into the office. The sphere that we can talk about our Lord is

decreasing more and more until society finally places our spiritual lives into tiny discrete boxes that are insignificant and meaningless.

But our Lord demands far more than that. That is the meaning behind the words of Deuteronomy 10. What is required of you? Only to fear the Lord your God (and the word fear could be substituted with the word "respect"), to walk in all His ways, to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God. These words echo the shema in Deut. 6:5, that which Christ quoted as being the greatest commandment which was to love God with all your heart, soul, and might.

The words of both the Old and New Testament cry out that God is to be above everything else. Not just one nation under God, but everything under God: family, work, entertainment, pride, status, and possessions. All that we have, and all that we might know, falls below our Lord. You cannot serve Him with all your capacity if you are placing things above Him. God is number one, and will accept no substitute.

Yet, this is a challenge that we face in the 21st century, as our entire culture says that's ok, as long as you contain that love within your heart. What these people think is that religion is just something that gives us peace and makes us feel good. It is a pacifier to the ignorant masses, according to the enlightened ones. So, it is ok if you really need religion, but leave that stuff at home and at church, like a bad habit that no one wants to be bothered with.

But I'm pretty sure that is not serving God with all that you are. If we keep God contained, then how are we serving Him? It would seem that God is like a pet that we play around with when we have time, but put away when we go to work. How are we loving Him if we are keeping our faith a secret so as not to offend? How are we obeying His commandments when we fail to obey the words of Christ to share the Gospel with all the world?

Our nation has changed so much in the past 50 years. Prayers, conversations about church and religion, and sharing one's faith were not challenged under rules of free speech and separation of church and state. But we gather here together, first as Christians and secondly as Americans, and realize that our nation is slowly demanding us change that order. Freedom of religion is being eroded to mean "freedom from religion". Those things that our nation was founded upon are being uprooted, and to be honest, there is very little any one of us can do about it.

But that doesn't mean that we have to agree with it. And it doesn't mean that God has changed either. God still calls us to love and serve Him. He calls us to be obedient. He calls us to something far more than silence – He calls us to life of discipleship and disciple making.

The call of God is to cause the world to take notice of our lives – not as a spectacle but as a role model. Our words are nothing if they are just sounds with no example to back them up. If we aren't following God, then words in adoration of our Lord don't make much sense. It is moments like these that have brought our society to the point that it no longer wants to hear about our faith, that it no longer believes religion has anything to offer to the enlightened mind. God wants our lives to be what people are responding to. Not quiet workers who are very

diligent but never give anyone any reason to believe that we are Christians, but people of faith sharing what makes us different whenever we get a chance.

The fascinating part of the story of Brittany McCombs was that she was a straight A student who never broke the rules. She was a perfect role model. Yet, she did break the rules on her graduation night because she knew she wasn't being honest if she took credit for being valedictorian without giving true credit to her Lord who had given her life meaning and peace. And for that, the multicultural crowd at her school broke into a standing ovation. And it was for that her message was muted by the powers that be.

Of course, that wasn't the end of the story. The end of the story is still being written. This precocious 18 year old is giving interviews to the Today Show and many other media outlets as she shares why her faith led her to go against the wishes of the school. She is speaking eloquently about her belief that her freedom to speak about her Lord should be just as an unalienable right at school as it for a person to be able shout against the President about his policies at a rally. And the irony is that more people are hearing her story than would have ever heard about it had the school board never pressed the mute button that day a little over a week ago. Funny how God works, huh?

But it leaves us with a question: what are we doing that is making the world want to mute us? If we truly think that Satan is trying to quiet the voices that witness to the Lord, what is the evil one trying to keep us from saying? If our freedom of speech and freedom of religion truly is being limited, what are we doing that is being challenged by these new restrictions? Or are we simply allowing the world to have its way with us and our faith? Is God something that we do rather than the Almighty we worship?

In the end, who is trying to mute us? Because the rest of the story is simply that God will be heard. My hope is that it is through us. We have seen it in that of an 18 year old girl. How is the world seeing it in a 48 year old man … or a 62 year old widow … or you … or me? Is the world trying to turn off the volume on us, or does it even have to try?