



One Heartbeat Away

Do Christian Nationalists
Have an Agenda for Indiana?

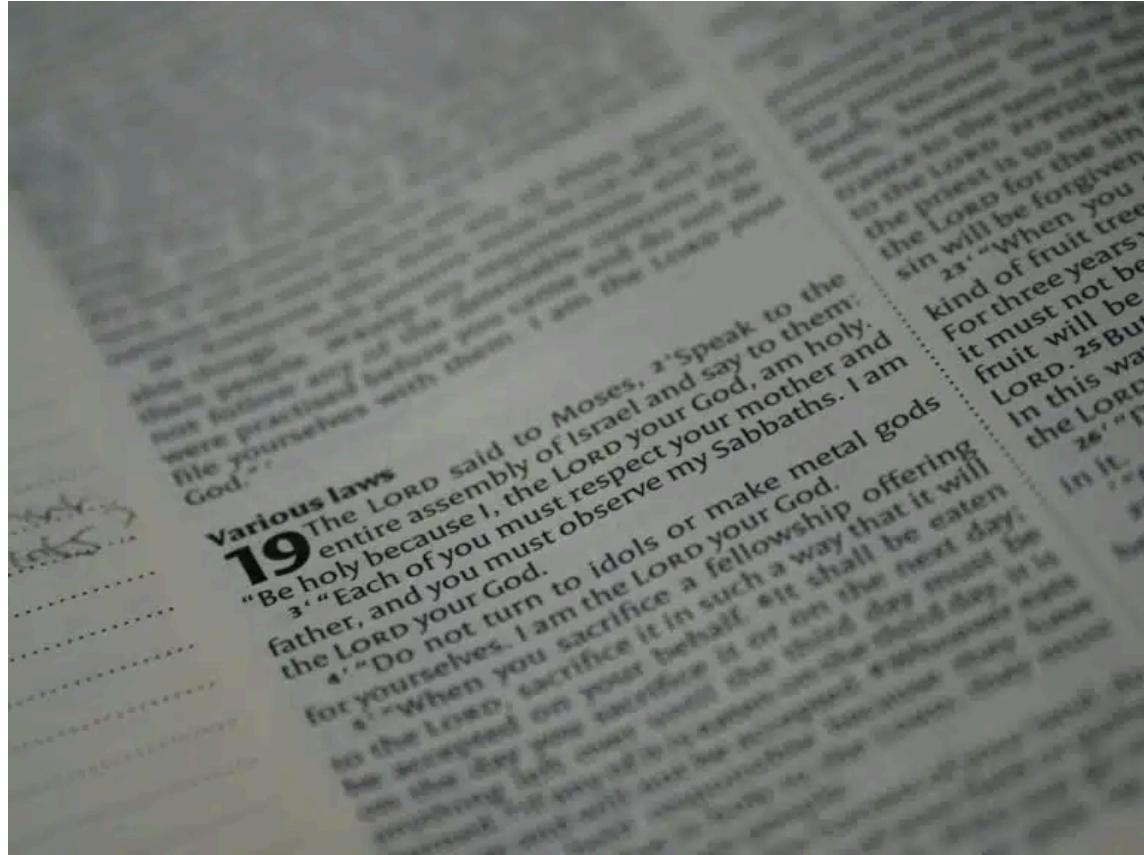
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Indiana's Failed 10 Commandments Bill Was Part Of An Ongoing
National Debate





A bill calling for the display of the Ten Commandments in Indiana classrooms has failed to get legislative support this session. (Photo/Pexels.com)

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By Savannah Shotwell
TheStatehouseFile.com
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In 1978, the Kentucky legislature introduced the controversial law [KRS 158.178](#), which required a permanent copy of the Ten Commandments to be framed on a wall in each public elementary and secondary school in the state.

Several parents fought against this law, resulting in a court case against the Kentucky superintendent of public instruction, James Graham. The case, [Stone v. Graham](#), made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court, where it was struck down due to the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, or the separation of church and state.

Nevertheless, in the years since, over a dozen states have followed suit, creating similar [laws](#). These include Alabama, Georgia, Montana, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Mississippi, South Dakota, West Virginia and South Carolina.

Each state differs in its specific requirements. For example, Arkansas' bill, [Act 573](#), requires a durable poster or a framed copy in schools and public buildings, including colleges.

Texas' bill, on the other hand, only requires the posting of the Ten Commandments in public school classrooms.

This session, Indiana joined in on this type of legislation with [House Bill 1086](#), authored by Rep. Michelle Davis, R-Indianapolis. As originally written, it would have allowed posters of the Ten Commandments to be hung in classrooms and added them to a list of protected writings to be maintained in schools. [The bill](#) passed its second reading in the House last month but failed to clear the chamber by the third-read deadline, effectively killing it.

Laura Merrifield Wilson, associate professor of political science at the University of Indianapolis, said the displaying of the Ten Commandments is not uniquely focused on education in Indiana's history. Monuments have commonly been placed outside courthouses and other government facilities or public venues.

For example, the [Indiana Statehouse lawn](#) had a Ten Commandments monument until 1991, when it was relocated to Bedford, Indiana, where it remains today.

The Indiana State Fairgrounds & Event Center also had a large monument of the Ten Commandments; it too was later removed.

"The U.S. District Court banned its placement in 2000 by applying the Lemon Test, a Supreme Court threshold that helps determine whether something violates the Establishment Clause in the First Amendment," Wilson said in an email.

The "Lemon Test," from the U.S. Supreme Court case [Lemon v. Kurtzman](#), says that, for example, a monument must have a secular purpose, cannot show preference to a certain religion and cannot align the government with a particular religion to avoid violating the Establishment Clause.

By 2022, the Lemon Test was no longer in use, and just last month, Indiana Gov. Mike Braun and Attorney General Todd Rokita filed a motion to have the Statehouse's 10



Rep. Michelle Davis, R-Whiteland
(Photo/Courtesy of the Indiana House Republican Caucus)



Commandments [monument](#) restored to the capitol grounds as a symbol of history and heritage—similar to [HB 1086](#), which supporters claimed would provide moral instruction and historical value to classrooms.

"Proponents argue to provide a moral guideline for what is right and wrong, but these supporters are usually of Christian faith and naturally utilize their own religion as the base for this," said Wilson.

"Opponents argue that such mandatory displays, especially in public schools, violates the Establishment Clause specifically because it appears as an endorsement of a state-established religion, particularly as no other religious doctrines from alternative religious faiths are likewise required to be posted."

During HB 1086's public testimony in committee, Zachary Parish, the co-founder of the [Secular Education Association](#), said the intent of the bill was to enforce religion in classrooms.

"The debate around the Ten Commandments and public schools had been long settled," Parrish said. "The intent of the bill is very clear."

Executive director of the [Indiana Family Institute](#), Ryan McCann, said the Ten Commandments is the foundation of Western law as well as moral instruction.

"We really think this is a no-brainer to encourage this kind of morality within Western civilization," McCann said. "They're really the basis of morality and understanding that we have in our country ... and how to live together as citizens."

Republicans testified to the Ten Commandments' ability to cultivate moral standards in children. They also claimed its foundation paved the way for the other protected documents. Meanwhile, Democrats pleaded the case that it violated the Establishment Clause and could create a lack of inclusivity for students of various faith backgrounds.

Breaking with his party, Sen. Vernon Smith, D-Indianapolis, a devout Baptist, was a supporter of the bill. He said the document has the ability to increase humanitarian concerns and let people know what they should be doing as human beings. He highlighted its ability to fundamentally change society.

"[Kids] can inquire in the mind, and why these things are important, and some research when you change some of the antisocial behavior that is going on in society," said Smith.

"This world is not what we want it to be or what it should be. Some of us are trying to ↑ back to the basics."

Savannah Shotwell is a reporter for TheStatehouseFile.com, a news site powered by Franklin College journalism students.

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