

CONFRONTING CULTURAL CONTROVERSIES 6

“Prayer in Public Schools”

I know I don't know everything there is to know about this subject, but this much I do know for sure. As long as there continue to be Algebra tests in public schools, there will continue to be prayers in public schools! A cute introduction to a not so simple issue that relates to almost all of us; either as students, parents of students, concerned tax payers, and equally, if not more so, concerned Citizens, Christian and otherwise.

There is a widely held perception that since a 1962 Supreme Court ruling that forbade the involuntary conduct of daily devotions led by public school teachers, prayer has been removed from public school. Think about that statement for just a moment as we begin...Can you really 'remove' prayer from any public or private institution? Yes, you can govern how that prayer is conducted publicly, but certainly not privately. The Apostle Paul's admonition to: *“Pray without ceasing.”* (I Thessalonians 5:17) would seem to put all self-respecting Christians who try to 'pray without ceasing' in direct opposition to this public perception that one cannot pray in school, or courtrooms or any public setting. Nothing could be further from the truth...but I'm getting ahead of myself.

I have placed this sermon at this point in the series because this issue “Prayer in Public School” rests so heavily on the discussion of the Separation of Church and State from last week. Neither the Constitution or Bill of Rights or any amendments thereof discuss this issue directly, but the prohibitions regarding this issue, and the proclamations in favor of this issue flow largely from the First Amendment.

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.

As I learned in researching this issue, it is not simple, largely because it takes on so many different forms. Let me give you a few examples.

This is not a recent phenomenon. Religious groups have been fighting with representative of the government (and each other) for over 100 years about this issue. It took its ugliest turn in the late 1800's as Protestant Christians fought (literally) with Catholic Christians over which version of the Bible would be required reading in public schools. After a court ruling in the state of Pennsylvania, the uproar boiled until a dozen people were killed, and at least 2 Catholic Churches were burned to the ground over this debate. During the 20th century, there were conflicts over the precise text of school prayers. *"In New York, a committee of the State Regents actually tried to invent a 'nondenominational, nonsectarian' prayer that would presumably offend no one (save Atheist or nonreligious families) and still have the effect of appealing to an unspecified deity."* Does that make any sense? What's the purpose of prayer if it's addressed to no one in particular, and deals with nothing but general niceties?

But to be fair, in more recent days, we have seen more dramatic examples of this debate over this important issue. Part of the reason this is controversial, is because the debate continues to evolve legally. In certain parts of the country, certain legal entities have ruled some aspects of the "prayer in school" issue unconstitutional, while in other parts other standards apply. The Supreme Court has been largely silent, often kicking these issues back to the lower courts to figure them out. That may change, but for now, it leaves us literally in somewhat a state of flux.

In a general sense, let me share with you both what the current law prohibits, and what the current law allows as far as this issue is concerned:

First, current law prohibits public schools, from requiring students to recite prayers in class.

Secondly, current law prohibits public prayers at high school games. Various courts have ruled that an individual student or group of students is free to pray at a game.

To prevent this would violate the student's free speech rights, but teachers, coaches or outside persons invited officially by the school are prohibited from praying at a game.

Third, the law prohibits the promotion of any one denomination or religion at the expense of another faith group or secular philosophy.

Fourth, the law prohibits banning the wearing of religious clothing and symbols as long as they are not disruptive or obscene.

Fifth, the law prohibits prayers before board of Education meetings and

Sixth, the law prohibits the Clergy in Schools project which was a program in Texas that allowed various clergy in the Beaumont School District to lead counseling discussions in the school about morality and civic virtues. I find this prohibition most interesting. Twice during my ministry I have been called by a public school administrator to come to the school following a tragedy involving a student, where counseling was needed.

Now here is what the constitution allows, generally:

First, some invocations, benedictions and prayers are allowed at graduation by students, though not by outside invited persons or school representatives or employees. This is very much a gray area and subject to many different local interpretations. Not the least of which happened just a couple years ago in Minnesota where a girl was invited to sing at her High School graduation, and chose a Celine Dion song that mentioned God 5 times, and she was not allowed to sing it.

Secondly, the law allows the teaching of religion in public schools. Both the positive and negative effects of religion on society may be studied in history, literature, comparative religions, art and humanities courses; as long as one religion is not presented as being superior to any other, or as absolute truth.

Thirdly, the constitution allows student religious clubs. If the school receives federal funds, then it must obey the federal Equal Access Act of 1984 which allows students to organize Bible Study or other religious special interest clubs if any other clubs are allowed. These religious clubs must be given the same access to school facilities as do other clubs. This law is the one that allows the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and Young Life, and Campus Crusade to exist in public schools.

Fourth, the law allows for students to engage in a moment of silence during which they can pray, meditate, plan their day or engage in any other silent mental activity. In 2000 a federal court affirmed the constitutionality of the moment of silence law, though that Virginia decision is currently under appeal by the ACLU.

Fifth, the law allows prayer outside of the school building, such as the See you at the Pole effort.

Sixth, students can carry a Bible or other religious text to and in school, they can pray before eating, and on the school bus, in the classroom before and after class, in the corridor, in the washroom etc.

Seventh, if a school rents its facilities to any secular groups, then they are required to also rent them to a religious organization, though this issue is seeing split decisions in recent court rulings.

Eighth, schools may require their teachers to explain evolution as a scientific theory as supported by 95% of scientists. With the recent 'intelligent design' debate, much in this area is up in the air. I'll visit more about this next week!

Lastly, teachers and school administrators may be prohibited from displaying a Bible on their desk or from placing religious posters on the walls. This would imply state support for a specific religion.

In summary, the law guarantees students' fundamental religious freedoms while requiring the school to maintain a religiously neutral environment.

For me, this issue really boils down to two basic questions: What is the purpose of Public School Education, and what is the purpose of Prayer? Do the public schools exist to teach our children how to pray? Can authentic prayer really be 'removed' from any sincere praying individual? I know that many sincere Christian people believe that the erosion of our culture, the increase of violence, the increase in teenage sexual activity, the undermining of parental authority and a hundred other digressive social evils can be laid on the decision to "remove" prayer from public school...but I do not! There is no one thing that is causing any of those consequences, it is a combination of social evolution that was likely taking place already, and will continue until Jesus comes. So the reinstatement of prayer in school won't necessarily insure our kids becoming the angels we were back in the 50's (ha!) nor would posting the 10 commandments on the Columbine hallway likely have prevented that national and local tragedy!

I wish the public schools, and even our watchdog government agencies were more open to honest debate about religious life and experiences, but there is hardly anyway to ensure that can happen nonpartisanly, in this day and age. I wish the majority didn't always have to bow to the seemingly overzealous minority, but I might think differently if I were more often in the minority. I wish every kid in school could be led in prayer everyday by a sincere committed Christian teacher, but is that realistic? And how would you feel if your child was led in prayer every day by a teacher who was a member of (pick your favorite cult) or an admitted atheist? I hope you see the problem.

Now, to my final concern. What did Jesus teach us about prayer and does that relate at all to the discussion at hand? In each of the synoptic gospels Jesus answered a question from the disciples about how to pray. His response is the classic and beloved Lord's Prayer. In Matthew's gospel Jesus included a preamble to the classic and it contains some vital truths regarding prayer; listen:

“When you pray, don’t be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get. But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you. When you pray, don’t babble on and on as people of other religions do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. Don’t be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask Him!” Matthew 6: 5-8

There is more here than I can possibly understand, but this much I know, prayer was never intended to be a public spectacle, but a private communion between an individual or a group of like minded believers, and their heavenly Father. I’m afraid the debate over Prayer in Public School has become just another political/religious tennis ball being swatted back and forth over the net of common sense. I’m afraid that part of the reason so many Christians are so up in arms about ‘reinstating’ prayer in our public schools is not so much concern over the state of our young people today, as an attempt to make up for their own lack of Christian and compassionate parenting! I’m afraid we have missed the boat Jesus captains; that teaches prayer is an intimate, private thing, not to be done for show, not to be done routinely and repetitively and irresponsibly, and offensively, but to be done personally and privately.

As long as I’ve got my neck stuck out here, I’m going to say a couple more things before we go. I believe in Private Christian education and home schooling as alternatives for some families who wish that for their children, but those systems (like the public school system) also have issues of their own. I attended and worked for a Private Church related institution for 12 years, and this much I know, you cannot regulate or legislate morality or spirituality. Prayer is an obviously good thing, but in the wrong hands, done in the wrong way; can do more harm than good...isn’t that part of what Jesus just said? I would love to see Public and Private Schools, at all levels, do more together in the education of all our children, but I’m not sure how these laws, variously interpreted, would allow that.

I'm not sure why, but I want to say a word to public and private school teachers and employees, here this morning, or listening this afternoon. Thanks for what you do in educating our children. I know that without you my kids would have never learned math beyond my ability that ended just before long division. But, thank you very much; it's my primary responsibility to teach them about God. I will forever be in your debt for teaching our children, and if I really wanted to see prayer have a greater impact, in public school, I'd pray for you more intentionally.

Parents; do your kids a favor and don't make them work until they finish high school. I know that some circumstances dictate they work, and I know that can be educational, but I believe the greatest gift you might give your kids, and your church, would be allowing your child to participate fully in all the religious options available in our churches, in our schools, and in our community.

Church, let us never forget that the public school is our partner in educating our children and our youth. Let us more intentionally pray for our teachers, our administrators, our schools, our students. But let us also continue to commit our time, talent, and treasures to the 'education' of our children's spirits through ministry efforts near and far. If you are an advocate for Prayer in Public School, then how about praying for the schools in your neighborhood, how about praying for the schools you pass on Century Ave, 19th Ave, 7th Ave, and Blvd and 3rd Ave? Education is no picnic, we need each other. AMEN

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