

HOFW NEWSLETTER



March 22, 2009

Message from the chair:

We will do our semi-annual trash pickup April 4th at 9:00 a.m. We meet at the corner of University Drive and Granbury Road in the pediatrician's parking lot. The club provides free breakfast to those who participate. Plus, you get to hear Ray's wisecracks. In our next meeting on April 8th, we will watch the second half of *Religulous*. In our May meeting, we will nominate and elect new officers. Also, Dr. Russell Elleven will talk to us about the S.M.A.R.T. program.

Minutes from the secretary:

Michael Little, president, called the meeting to order. Dolores Ruhs gave the financial report. She suggested we have Russell talk to us about the SMART program.

Dick Trice said it was about time to give the church a donation for the use of the building. He made the motion to give the church \$200.00. Motion passed.

Ray Weil moved we donate \$200.00 to Russell for the SMART program. Motion passed.

Michael suggested we do the trash pick up on Old Granbury Road the first Saturday in April at 9A.M. if the weather permitted. If not, we would do it the following Saturday.

We then watched the first half of *Religulous*. Discussion followed.

The meeting was then adjourned.

from <http://ffrf.org/nontracts/schoolprayer.php>:

The Case Against School Prayer

The original pre-1955 Pledge, without "under God."

"I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

-- The "godless" Pledge of Allegiance, as it was recited by generations of school children, before Congress inserted a religious phrase, "under God," in 1954.

Keep the Church and State Forever Separate

Should Students Pray in Public Schools?

Public schools exist to educate, not to proselytize. Children in public schools are a captive audience. Making prayer an official part of the school day is coercive and invasive. What 5, 8, or 10-year-old could view prayers recited as part of class routine as "voluntary"? Religion is private, and schools are public, so it is appropriate that the two should not mix. To introduce religion in our public schools builds walls between children who may not have been aware of religious differences before.

Why Should Schools Be Neutral?

Our public schools are for all children, whether Catholic, Baptist, Quaker, atheist, Buddhist, Jewish, agnostic. The schools are supported by all taxpayers, and therefore should be free of religious observances and coercion. It is the sacred duty of parents and churches to instill religious beliefs, free from government dictation. Institutionalizing prayers in public schools usurps the rights of parents.

School prayer proponents mistake government neutrality toward religion as hostility. The record shows that religious beliefs have flourished in this country not in spite of but because of the constitutional separation of church and state.

What Happens When Worship Enters Public Schools?

When religion has invaded our public school system, it has singled out the lone Jewish student, the class Unitarian or agnostic, the children in the minority. Families who protest state/ church violations in our public schools invariably experience persecution. It was commonplace prior to the court decision against school prayer to put non-religious or nonorthodox children in places of detention during bible-reading or prayer recitation. The children of Supreme Court plaintiffs against religion in schools, such as Vashti McCollum, Ed Schempp and Ishmael Jaffree, were beaten up on the way to and from school, their families subjected to community harassment and death threats for speaking out in defense of a constitutional principle. We know from history how harmful and destructive religion is in our public schools. In those school districts that do not abide by the law, school children continue to be persecuted today.

Can't Students Pray in Public Schools Now?

Individual, silent, personal prayer never has and never could be outlawed in public schools. The courts have declared government-fostered prayers unconstitutional - those led, required, sanctioned, scheduled or suggested by officials.

It is dishonest to call any prayer "voluntary" that is encouraged or required by a public official or legislature. By definition, if the government suggests that students pray, whether by penning the prayer, asking them to vote whether to pray or setting aside time to pray, it is endorsing and promoting that prayer. It is coercive for schools to schedule worship as an official part of the school day, school sports or activities, or to use prayer to formalize graduation ceremonies. Such prayers are more "mandatory" than "voluntary."

What's Wrong With A "Voluntary" Prayer Amendment?

Proponents of so-called "voluntary" school prayer amendment (such as the one proposed in 1995) are admitting that our secular Constitution prohibits organized prayers in public schools. Otherwise, why would an amendment to our U.S. Constitution be required? The nation must ask whether politically-motivated Newt Gingrich & Co. are wiser than James Madison, principal author of the Constitution, and the other founders who engineered the world's oldest and most successful constitution!

The radical school prayer amendment would negate the First Amendment's guarantee against government establishment of religion. Most distressing, it would be at the expense of the civil rights of children, America's most vulnerable class. It would attack the heart of the Bill of Rights, which safeguards the rights of the individual from the tyranny of the majority.

What Would the Prayer Amendment Permit?

The text of the proposed federal amendment (as of January, 1995) reads:

"Nothing in this Constitution shall be construed to prohibit individual or group prayer in public schools or other public institutions. No person shall be required by the United States or by any State to participate in prayer. Neither the United States or any State shall compose the words of any prayer to be said in public schools."

Since the right to "individual prayer" already exists, the real motive is to instill "group prayer."

No wording in this amendment would prevent the government from selecting the prayer, or the particular version of the bible it should be taken from. Nothing restricts prayers to "nondenominational" or "nonsectarian" (not that such a

restriction would make it acceptable). Nothing would prevent a school from selecting the Lord's Prayer or other prayers to Jesus, and blasting it over the intercom. For that matter, nothing would prevent the school from sponsoring prayers to Allah or Zoroaster. Nothing would prevent principals, teachers or clergy from leading the students. Nothing would prevent nonparticipating students from being singled out. The proposal also seeks to institutionalize group prayer in other public settings, presumably public-supported senior centers, courthouses, etc.

School prayer supporters envision organized, vocal, group recitations of prayer, daily classroom displays of belief in a deity or religion, dictated by the majority. Those in the minority would be compelled to conform to a religion or ritual in which they disbelieve, to suffer the humiliation and imposition of submitting to a daily religious exercise against their will, or be singled out by orthodox classmates and teachers as "heretics" or "sinners" for not participating.

Haven't Public Schools Always Had Prayer?

At the time the U.S. Supreme Court issued its 1962 and 1963 decrees against school-sponsored prayers and bible-reading, it is estimated religious observances were unknown in about half of the nation's public schools.

Horace Mann, the father of our public school system, championed the elimination of sectarianism from American schools, largely accomplished by the 1840's. Bible reading, prayers or hymns in public schools were absent from most public schools by the end of the 19th century, after Catholic or minority-religion immigrants objected to Protestant bias in public schools.

Until the 20th century, only Massachusetts required bible-reading in the schools, in a statute passed by the virulently anti-Catholic Know Nothing Party in the 1850's. Only after 1913 did eleven other states make prayers or bible reading compulsory. A number of other states outlawed such practices by judicial or administrative decree, and half a dozen state supreme courts overruled

devotionals in public schools.

As early as the 1850's, the Superintendent of Schools of New York State ordered that prayers could no longer be required as part of public school activities. The Cincinnati Board of Education resolved in 1869 that "religious instruction and the reading of religious books, including the Holy Bible, was prohibited in the common schools of Cincinnati."

Presidents Ulysses S. Grant and Theodore Roosevelt spoke up for what Roosevelt called "absolutely nonsectarian public schools." Roosevelt added that it is "not our business to have the Protestant Bible or the Catholic Vulgate or the Talmud read in these schools."

For nearly half a century, the United States Supreme Court, consistent with this nation's history of secular schools, has ruled against religious indoctrination through schools (*McCullum v. Board of Education*, 1948), prayers and devotionals in public schools (*Engel v. Vitale*, 1962) and prayers and bible-reading (*Abington School District v. Schempp*, 1963), right up through the 1992 *Weisman* decision against prayers at public school commencements and *Santa Fe v. Doe* (2000) barring student-led prayers at public school events .

How Can Prayer Be Harmful?

Contrary to right-wing claims, piety is not synonymous with virtue. People should be judged by their actions, not by what religion they believe in or how publicly or loudly they pray.

Some Americans believe in the power of prayer; others believe nothing fails like prayer. Some citizens say prayer makes them feel better, but others contend that prayer is counterproductive to personal responsibility. Such a diversity of views is constitutionally protected; our secular government simply is not permitted to pick a side in religious debates.

"The hands that help are better far than lips that pray," wrote Robert G. Ingersoll. Who could disagree?

Should Government Become "Prayer Police"?

How ironic that those campaigning on an anti-Big Government theme, who contend that government should get out of our private lives, would seek to tell our children who to pray to in our public schools! As many editorials across the country have pointed out, the school prayer debate seems calculated to deflect attention away from the more pressing economic questions facing our nation. As one conservative governor put it: "If we don't deal with the economic issues, we'll need more than prayer to solve our problems."

Can't Moral Decline Be Traced to the Prayer Decisions?

Some politicians like to blame everything bad in America upon the absence of school prayer. Get real! Entire generations of Americans have grown up to be law-abiding citizens without ever once reciting a prayer in school! If prayer is the answer, why are our jails and prisons bulging with born-againists! Japan, where no one prays at school, has the lowest crime rate of any developed nation.

Institutionalizing school prayer can not raise the SAT scores (only more studying and less praying can do that). It is irrational to charge that the complicated sociological problems facing our everchanging population stem from a lack of prayer in schools.

One might just as well credit the lack of prayer with the great advances that have taken place since the 1962 and 1963 decisions on prayer. Look at the leap in civil liberties, equality, environmental awareness, women's rights, science, technology and medicine! The polio scare is over. Fountains, buses, schools are no longer segregated by law. We've made great strides in medical treatment. We have VCRs and the computer chip. The Cold War has ended! Who would turn the

clock back?

What About the Rights of the Majority?

Our political system is a democratic republic in which we use majority vote to elect certain officials or pass referenda. But we do not use majority vote to decide what religion, if any, our neighbors must observe! The "majority" is free to worship at home, at tax-exempt churches, on the way to and from school, or privately in school. There are 16 school-less hours a day when children can pray, not to mention weekends.

Many in the "majority" do not support school prayers. And if the majority religion gets to choose which prayers are said in schools, that would mean a lot of Protestant kids will be reciting Catholic prayers! The Roman Catholic Church is the single largest denomination in our country. Should Protestant minorities be excused so the classroom can pray in unison to the Virgin Mary? In a few school districts, Muslims outnumber other religions. Should Christian minorities march into the hall with their ears covered while the principal prays to Allah over the intercom?

What's Wrong with a Moment of Silence?

Given the regimentation of school children, it would make more sense to have a "moment of bedlam" than a "moment of silence"! Obviously, the impetus for "moments of silence or meditation" is to circumvent the rulings against religion in schools. The legislative history of such state laws reveals the religious motives behind the legislation, as in the Alabama law struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1985 calling for a "moment of silence for meditation or prayer."

When a "moment of silence" law was enacted in Arkansas at the suggestion of then-Gov. Bill Clinton, the law mandating this meaningless ritual was later repealed following popular indifference. We know from experience that many teachers and principals would regard a "moment of silence" mandate as a green light to introduce prayers, causing more legal challenges at the expense of

taxpayers.

Should Commencements Start with Prayers?

In 1992, the Court ruled in *Lee v. Weisman* that prayers at public school commencements are an impermissible establishment of religion: "The lessons of the First Amendment are as urgent in the modern world as the 18th Century when it was written. One timeless lesson is that if citizens are subjected to state-sponsored religious exercises, the State disavows its own duty to guard and respect that sphere of inviolable conscience and belief which is the mark of a free people," wrote Justice Kennedy for the majority. He dismissed as unacceptable the cruel idea that a student should forfeit her own graduation in order to be free from such an establishment of religion.

What About "Student-Initiated" Prayer?

This is a ruse proposed by extremist Christian legal groups such as the Rutherford Institute, and the American Center for Law and Justice run by televangelist Pat Robertson. Religious coercion is even worse at the hands of another student, subjecting students to peer pressure, pitting students in the majority against students in the minority, treating them as outsiders with school complicity.

Imposing prayer-by-majority-vote is flagrant and insensitive abuse of school authority. Such schools should be teaching students about the purpose of the Bill of Rights, instead of teaching them to be religious bullies. Some principals or school boards have even made seniors hold open class votes on whether to pray at graduation, leading to hostility and reprisal against those students brave enough to stand up for the First Amendment.

"The notion that a person's constitutional rights may be subject to a majority vote is itself anathema," wrote Judge Albert V. Bryan, Jr. in a 1993 ruling in Virginia, one of several similar district court rulings around the nation banning any prayer, whether student- or clergy-led.

We cannot put liberties protected by our Bill of Rights up to a vote of school children! Should kindergartners be forced to vote about whether to pray before their milk and cookies? Under such reasoning, what would make it wrong for students to vote to segregate schools or otherwise violate the civil liberties of minorities?

Keep the State and Church Forever Separate

Our founders wisely adopted a secular, godless constitution, the first to derive its powers from "We, the People" and the consent of the governed, rather than claiming divine authority. They knew from the experience of religious persecution, witchhunts and religious discrimination in the Thirteen Colonies, and from the bloody history left behind in Europe, that the surest path to tyranny was to entangle church and state. That is why they adopted a secular constitution whose only references to religion are exclusionary, such as that there shall be no religious test for public office (Art. VI). There were no prayers offered at the Constitutional Convention, which shows their intent to separate religion from secular affairs.

Prayers in schools and religion in government are no panacea for social ills - they are an invitation to divisiveness. More people have been killed in the name of religion than for any other cause. As Thomas Paine pointed out, "Persecution is not an original feature in any religion; but it is always the strongly marked feature of all religions established by law."

Even Jesus Was Against School Prayer

"Thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men..."

"But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret." - Matt. 6:5-6

"There is no such source and cause of strife, quarrel, fights, malignant opposition, persecution, and war, and all evil in the state, as religion. Let it once enter our civil affairs, our government would soon be destroyed. Let it once enter our common schools, they would be destroyed."

- Supreme Court of Wisconsin, *Weiss v. District Board*, March 18, 1890

"Leave the matter of religion to the family altar, the church, and the private school, supported entirely by private contributions. Keep the church and state forever separate."

- Ulysses S. Grant, "The President's Speech at Des Moines" (1875)

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

- First Amendment, Bill of Rights, U.S. Constitution

Thomas Jefferson, author of the sweeping Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom, stating that no citizen "shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever..." and that to "compell a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of [religious] opinions which he disbelieves is sinful and tyrannical."

"I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should make no law 'respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' thus building a wall of separation between church and state."

- President Thomas Jefferson, 1802 letter to the Baptists of Danbury, Connecticut

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