

Public Prayer

By Preston Woodruff

I was pleased - no, relieved - to read recently that Senator Robert Morgan has spoken out clearly and unequivocally against an alarming movement in North Carolina politics - namely, the attempt by Christian fundamentalists to create christian voting blocs and to impose the forms of fundamentalist religion upon the forms of civil government.

Jesse Helms, however, is at it again. North Carolina's White Knight, aspiring now also to the title of Defender of the Faith, has sought legislation which would urge something he calls "voluntary" prayer upon the public schools.

The logic of such a proposal would be baffling (are small children now being dragged from their desks as they finger their rosaries?) were it not so obvious what is going on with this latest renaissance of this recurrent obnoxious idea. It stems from the same acculturated religiosity which seeks to invoke God's blessing on high school football games, Chamber of Commerce meetings and supermarket openings.

This constant identification of Southern American Protestant culture with the kingdom of God would be a lot funnier to me if I felt that its grip on the Christian faith were weakening, but that is not the case. The institutions of Christianity in America are becoming more and more the property of those who share with Senator Helms the conviction that Christian virtues are American virtues. The result of this tunnel vision is that ever-increasing numbers of reasonable people, preferring not to place their souls in the care of such proprietary shepherds, regard the church with benign neglect at best, and open hostility at worst.

But I wander from the matter at hand. Such logic, I say, would be baffling if we did not in fact know what is taking place. These "voluntarists" know full well that the pressures to conform in such rigidly defined sub-cultures as public school student bodies are enormous. The rare child who, for whatever reasons, refuses to participate in "voluntary" prayer sessions in home rooms, cafeteria tables, playground cabals and the like, would find his or her status in the school community drastically changed; for many, the steady peer pressure would gradually prove too much.

In other words, it is not only the occasional Jew, Moslem or Hari Krishna who is going to be adversely affected by such nonsense; the backsliding Baptist or malingering Methodist is also going to find his or her freedom of (or from) religion curtailed. Reprobates though they may be, they are legally entitled to remain outside the fellowship of prayer if they so desire.

I am reminded of two events from my public school past. Every morning in Mrs. Grove's third grade classroom, all thirty of us (including Lorrie Schrage, who had to go fifty miles each Saturday to get to the nearest synagogue) sat quietly with our hands folded on our desks while one of our number, Barbara her name was, sang "The Lord's Prayer." Every day. Five days a week. All year long. Mrs. Groves thoroughly radicalized me about prayer in the schools that year. If I never hear "The Lord's Prayer" sung again, it will be too soon.

Finally, during my Senior year in high school, some zealot, with the principal's permission, organized a "voluntary" prayer meeting each morning in the cafeteria at 7:45 a.m. As susceptible to the instincts of the herd as any other seventeen-year-old, I dragged my bleary-eyed soul along with a bunch of other reluctant pilgrims for thirty minutes of earnest prayer and moral chastisement every day. Not all year long, however; most of us just couldn't take such heavy doses of religion that early in the day. The group gradually faded away, but the point I wish to make is that if you believe that participation in that group was truly voluntary, then you probably believe that Joan of Arc lit the match herself.

Now please understand that such things as prayer meetings are fine by me, but not in public schools where they inevitably have coercive effects, however subtle, on others who have paid the same public school taxes and who are under the same mandatory attendance laws as the faithful. If you wish to pray alone, quietly, without reference to participation (or lack of same) by others, fine - you have my blessing, whether the act takes place in study hall, cafeteria or wherever. But when I have to get up and leave my desk in order to avoid this "voluntary" act, then it really isn't voluntary at all. And I think Senator Helms knows this.

Preston Woodruff is an Assistant Professor of Religion at Brevard College. He holds degree from Georgia State University and Emory University, and has been on the Brevard faculty for about seven years. Professor Woodruff is a Methodist layman who has occasionally been observed praying in public - strictly voluntary, of course.



Print by John Warren

Trust

By Gene McDowell

Wittgenstein has told us that getting clear on the meaning of words is like getting clear on what it means to be a human being. Yet, in our society we are told that talk is "cheap." From years and years of rhetoric we have been led to believe that actions speak louder than words. Now we find that action, too, seems cheap.

It is my concern that as this trend continues, many of the words which are the threads of our civilization are becoming meaningless. The word "trust" is a victim of this trend. The word continues to be uttered by us, but no longer is it a catalyst for our actions. Tremendous time and energy has been spent in the sciences and the humanities, including theology, to observe and define the "outside" and the "uncontrollable" forces which keep us from trusting. But we need to know where we stand with trust - to develop awareness about the extent of our familiarity with the entire concept of trust, a historical study and a classical survey of tangible objective criteria for the building of a trust statement.

However, such a study cannot stop here. It must focus on the utterer of a first-person-singular trust statement. It is my opinion that it is a great personal achievement to be able to honestly say "I trust" - whether that trust be in a rope on a mountain climb, a spouse in a marriage, or a ultimate reality in a faith. If we could "prove" the strong tensile strength of a particular rope or the love and devotion of a particular spouse or even "see" the "face of God," the capacity to trust would still need to be developed.

Eugene McDowell graduated from Wafford College in 1971 with a major in religion and philosophy. He received his M. Div. degree from Yale University Divinity School in 1976. He has worked at Camp Mondain N.C. as the Head of Mountaineering, started a school for young people who had been found undesirable for public or traditional schools, and been a minister at Saluda United Methodist Church. At Brevard he teaches philosophy and religion.