



Kentucky Pastor's Legislative Prayer Hits Too Close to Home

A Kentucky seminary professor and pastor has drawn the ire of a few state politicians for a prayer he offered before the Governor delivered his annual budget address to a joint session of the state legislature.

According to Lexington, Kentucky's local NBC news affiliate, the Rev. Hershael York (left), who is senior pastor at Buck Run Baptist Church in Frankfort and a professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, called "gambling a terrible thing just minutes before Governor Steve Beshear proposed casino gambling in Kentucky during Tuesday's session."



Specifically, reported [Baptist Press News](#), York used part of his prayer time before the legislature to point out "the evils of gambling and how it entices the poor with a false hope to spend that which they cannot afford." While beginning his prayer by asking God to give the lawmakers guidance and wisdom in the decisions they would make for the state, the Christian leader then shifted his focus, praying: "Help us to admit that we cannot truly love our neighbor as ourselves and then scheme to get his money by enticing him with vain hope. May [the legislators] not lead this state to share profits from an industry that preys on greed or desperation."

He continued, asking God: "Help us to foster salaries and not slot machines, to build cars and enable jobs — not license casinos and seduce the simple into losing what they have. May our greatest concern not be that we get our share of the family's losses, but that we foster a sense of hope and justice that creates opportunity and leads to success."

Following the invocation — and with some degree of awkwardness — the Governor pitched his gambling proposal to the state legislators, insisting that the casino gaming he wants to add to the state's racetracks "isn't an end unto itself. It's a mechanism to keep our Kentucky money at home." The Governor pointed to an economic study estimating that in 2010 Kentucky residents spent some \$451 million on casino gaming in neighboring states.

York countered the notion that gambling comes with nothing but positive incentives for the state, telling BP News: "I've seen firsthand tragedy in my church and in my ministry from people who have been addicted to gambling. There are so many innocent people hurt by it." He recalled that one man in his congregation "embezzled over \$100,000 because of his gambling habit. I had to stand with him before a judge as he was sentenced, and our church had to help his family out. And now he and his family are outspoken opponents of gambling." He added: "A lot of people that I know personally have lost thousands of dollars. Gambling is a tax on the poor, it's a tax on the simple."

Some legislators complained that York's prayer was out of line. "There's lots of other avenues to make your opinion known on how you feel," said Senator Dennis Parrett. Another state lawmaker, Senator



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on January 27, 2012

Kathy Stein, insisted that a minister “should try to bring people together ... to unite them rather than to divide them. I think it was disrespectful to the governor and to other elected members of the general assembly.”

York responded to those criticisms, telling [OneNewsNow.com](#), “It strikes me that what they really want is a meaningless prayer,” he said. “If you pray a meaningless prayer, no one objects. But if you pray something meaningful, something that really is the desire of your heart, or if you even pray in the name of Jesus, there are some members who object.”

He warned that “if you bring casinos in the state, then you’re going to create new gamblers. It’s not like you’re just building it for the ones who are already gambling. You’re going to create new addicts.” He noted that the issue is one that unites both conservative and liberal clergy. “All of us in the trenches [are] caring for people ... we all know this is bad,” he told BP News. “I’m going to rally every pastor in the state that I can against this.”

York is not the first minister to get a backlash for his prayer before a state legislature. As reported by [The New American](#), in March 2011 the Rev. Dennis Campbell, a Baptist pastor from St. Cloud, Minnesota, was severely criticized after he offered an invocation for that state’s legislature which included mention of the name of Jesus three times, along with several positive references to the Christian faith.

But by far the most memorable prayer offered before a U.S. legislature in recent history was the [“Prayer Heard ‘Round the World”](#) given by the Rev. Joe Wright, then-pastor of Wichita’s Central Christian Church, when he opened a session of the Kansas House of Representatives on January 23, 1996.

As reported by *The New American*: “The prayer, which prompted a number of Kansas lawmakers to exit the building in anger, over the next few years became a rallying cry for pro-family and Christian activists around the nation.”

As he prayed Wright recalled the biblical admonition, “Woe to those who call evil good,” acknowledging: “... that’s exactly what we’ve done.” Noting that “we have lost our spiritual equilibrium and inverted our values,” Wright then offered this collective repentance for America’s transgressions:

We confess that we have ridiculed the absolute truth of your Word and called it moral pluralism.

We have worshipped other gods and called it multiculturalism.

We have endorsed perversion and called it an alternative lifestyle.

We have exploited the poor and called it the lottery.

We have neglected the needy and called it self-preservation.

We have rewarded laziness and called it welfare.

We have killed our unborn and called it choice.

We have shot abortionists and called it justifiable.

We have neglected to discipline our children and called it building esteem.

We have abused power and called it political savvy.

We have coveted our neighbors’ possessions and called it ambition.



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We have polluted the air with profanity and pornography and called it freedom of expression.

We have ridiculed the time-honored values of our forefathers and called it enlightenment.

Then, as the assembled Kansas legislators fidgeted and fumed in awkward silence, the Rev. Wright humbly concluded: "Search us O God and know our hearts today; try us and see if there be some wicked way in us; cleanse us from every sin and set us free. Guide and bless these men and women who have been sent here by the people of Kansas, and who have been ordained by you, to govern this great state. Grant them your wisdom to rule and may their decisions direct us to the center of your will. I ask it in the name of your Son, the living savior, Jesus Christ — Amen."

The New American reported that in the weeks following the prayer, Wright's church "logged more than 5,000 phone calls with less than 50 of them critical of the prayer. Since then the church has continued to receive requests for copies of the prayer from all over the nation and from as far away as India, Africa, and Korea. When the late radio commentator Paul Harvey aired the prayer on his *The Rest of the Story* program, he received a larger response to it than any other program he had ever aired."



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