Texas City Stands up to Atheists Over Prayers at Government Meetings

The Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) appears to be losing its intimidating touch as it goes about its business of trying to stop people from praying and expressing their faith in public. The atheist group's latest attack has come against the city council of League City, Texas, which has included prayer by local clergy in its regular government meetings since the early 1960s.

In a July 15 letter to Mayor Tim Paulissen and the League City Council, the FFRF went through its customary paces in attempting to browbeat the city fathers into submission. Appealing to the First Amendment's supposed "separation of state and church," the godless group's staff attorney, Elizabeth Cavell, called the city's tradition of allowing both local residents and government officials to open the meetings in prayer of "dubious legality," insisting that such prayers are "unnecessary, inappropriate, and divisive."

Cavell advised that while government officials "are free to pray privately or to worship on their own time in their own way," they "do not need to worship on taxpayers' time." Cavell complained that inviting council members and locals to offer invocations at the government meetings "is coercive and beyond the authority of any government."

While citing a selection of court cases to buttress the FFRF's case against public prayer, Cavell conceded that there is no clear precedent for her group to demand that the city end its tradition, since courts have issued conflicting opinions that make the legal landscape on the issue "unstable." The only warning she could muster was that prayer at government meetings "continues to be litigated, divisive, and problematic for local governments across the nation precisely because of this instability."

She dubiously suggested that the "best course" for the city would be "to halt the prayers. If you wish to pray prior to the meeting, do so on your own time in your own way — do not make it part of the secular business of your local government."

As it happened, Mayor Paulissen and the city council appeared to be disinclined to follow the FFRF's self-serving advice. Paulissen told the *Houston Chronicle* that he and the other city fathers had no plans to drop the 52-year tradition of opening council meetings with an invocation.

"The city has been doing this since 1962, and nobody has ever complained, to my knowledge," Paulissen said. He added that "it's not just my stance. I have the full support of those on the city council, too."

The *Chronicle* noted that the city council "has a rotating list of pastors and laymen that pray each

meeting. Paulissen doesn't see this as a waste of taxpayers' money, as the FFRF alleges." Said Paulissen: "It's not a waste of taxpayers' money. Everybody supports the prayer. It's non-denominational in content." He added that "this is what our forefathers did, too," recalling that the first Continental Congress prayed before it began its historically important business.

Those who have followed the FFRF's ongoing attacks against communities and school districts might remember its unfruitful assault in 2012 on a group of high school cheerleaders in Kountze, Texas, who displayed inspirational Bible verses on huge banners during high-school football games. While the atheist group had intimidated the Kountze school district's superintendent, Kevin Weldon, into prohibiting the cheerleaders from displaying the banners, the students got some legal help of their own from the Dallas-based Liberty Institute, which secured an injunction allowing the cheerleaders to continue displaying the Bible verses while an FFRF-inspired lawsuit against them moved forward.

However, a month before the scheduled June 2013 trial for the lawsuit, a Texas judge ruled that the students were well within their constitutionally guaranteed rights to continue to make and display the Christian banners. In his written opinion, District Judge Steve Thomas found that no state or federal law "prohibits cheerleaders from using religious-themed banners at school sporting events."

Among those who cheered on the cheerleaders was Texas Governor Rick Perry, who said that he was "proud of the cheerleaders at Kountze ISD for standing firm in the knowledge of these endowed rights and their willingness to be an example in defending those rights, which a secular group has needlessly tried to take away."

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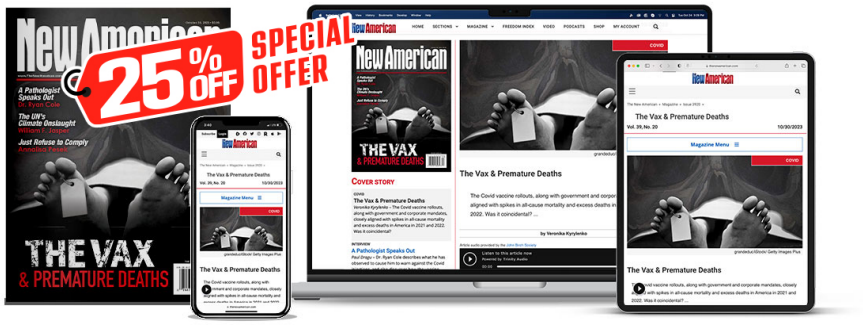

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