



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on May 25, 2011

## Graduates at Louisiana High School Defy Commencement Prayer Ban

Despite threats of an ACLU-driven lawsuit, seniors at Louisiana's Bastrop High School continued a tradition of prayer at the school's graduation ceremony. One of the graduates had demanded that the prayer be canceled, and the ACLU had followed up by contacting school officials to make sure the prayer was scratched from the commencement.



But during the ceremony May 20th at the school's football field, as graduating senior Laci Rae Mattice stood at the podium to lead a "moment of silence" that school officials had inserted to replace the prayer, she called an audible instead. "I respect the beliefs of other people," Mattice told the parents, family, and friends assembled for the graduation, "but I feel that I can't go on without giving glory to my Lord today. I want to ask for the Lord's blessings upon us." With the crowd cheering her on, Mattice then invited her fellow seniors to join her in reciting the Lord's Prayer "if they want to." (Click below for YouTube video.)

According to Louisiana's [NewsStar.com](#), graduating senior Damon Fowler had earlier objected to the prayer, a longtime tradition at the school, "and informed the Morehouse Parish School Board about his objection, saying it violated his right to a ceremony free of government-endorsed religion." After Damon warned that he would get the ACLU involved to put a stop to the prayer, school officials reportedly made the decision to pull the prayer from the ceremony.

At a graduation rehearsal the day before the commencement, another senior offered a prayer that had been listed on the program as part of the ceremony. That "glitch" required that the programs be pulled and reprinted — minus the prayer — at the expense of county taxpayers. Marjorie R. Esman, executive director of the ACLU's Louisiana office, complained that "taxpayers should not have to spend money fixing problems caused by violations of the law. Public school officials must remember that they have a duty to uphold the law, to protect the rights of all of their students, and that any failure to do so costs money that should be spent in the classroom. Religious freedom has flourished in this country because we do not allow the government to promote one faith over others."

Speaking for the offended student in the case, Esman argued that the Constitution's First Amendment prohibits government endorsement of religion and "exists to protect the minority from the majority."



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Freedom of religion belongs to everyone, not just those whose views may be more popular than others.”

But Matthew Staver of the conservative legal advocacy group [Liberty Counsel](#) explained that the Constitution “does not require that graduation be free of religious people or speech. Students have the right to express secular and religious viewpoints at graduation.” Staver said that to censor “only the religious viewpoints is intolerant and unconstitutional. Students should not be bullied by the ACLU to give up their constitutional rights.”

School officials said that no one had ever complained about the graduation prayer in the past, with [CBN.com](#) quoting one school staff member as saying that all students, regardless of the religious beliefs, “respected the majority of their classmates and didn’t say anything. We’ve never had this come up before. Never.”

As for the complaining student, the [Freedom From Religion Foundation](#) has generously offered him a \$1,000 award for his “courage to speak out” about the issue.

Not surprisingly, the ACLU has a track record of threats against Louisiana schools and individuals who have included prayers in official functions. According to NewsStar.com, in 2008 “former Monroe City School Board member Brenda Shelling refused to apologize for mandating a healing prayer at a back to school rally. Monroe Federation of Teachers president Sandie Lollie said at the time the federation could seek assistance from the ACLU to take legal action against Shelling.”

And in 2007 the ACLU threatened legal action against Monroe, Louisiana’s Ouachita Parish school system after the high school’s graduating class voted unanimously to continue the tradition of prayer at their commencement ceremony.



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