

Reading the Times-Standard last week I noticed that someone is suing Eureka for holding invocations prior to its City Council meetings. This person is so offended by prayer she has decided also to sue the mayor in an effort to keep him from sponsoring a National Prayer Breakfast. Yesterday's paper again quoted the plaintiff who is reportedly an avowed atheist. She responded to the charge that she could cost City Hall a lot of money with her law suit: "All they have to do is agree to stop having any prayer before government meetings or other government sponsored events." In other words, I want my way or the suit will go forward and to hell with how much it costs—but come to think of it, an atheist would no more believe in hell, than in heaven, I guess.

How dare the mayor invoke a prayer! Here we go again on that grand merry go 'round of the separation of church and state. Integral to the debate is the First Amendment of our Constitution. ^{called} ~~The current form of the First amendment is,~~ "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Several legislative committees shortened original statements from Thomas Jefferson and James Madison about the relationship between church and state in order to produce this amendment. We can be thankful for its brevity and clarity. Commenting on the First Amendment in 1802, Thomas Jefferson wrote concerning, "... a wall of separation between church and state. " Many today think the term "wall of separation" is in the Constitution. It is not. It's Jefferson's interpretation about the First Amendment in one of his personal letters to a bunch of Baptists.

In my view, 'No establishment of religion' means simply that there is no officially sponsored state religion. Our taxes do not support a specific church, ~~nor any church or religious organization.~~ Our government does ~~not~~ back the Baptists ~~or~~ the Presbyterians, neither Hindus nor Buddhists: it allows people to affiliate, or not, with neither interference nor assistance from government. Atheists seem to like the first part, the non-establishment clause. In a sense I do too, because I think state-sponsored religions usually become either anemic or tyrannical. But anti-religious folks tend to ignore the second part of the first Amendment: "or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Should our mayor be stripped of his right to exercise his religious beliefs because he holds elected office? If this lawsuit moves forward it would do plenty to hinder the free exercise of religion for the Mayor and for many Christians, Jews and Muslims who together make up about 90% of Americans. Atheists are 1.6%.

I think the suit is not only frivolous, but an attempt to bully civic leaders into a corner of quiet submission. If the lawsuit prevails will it lead to disaster for Christians and other theists like myself? Perhaps not. James Madison the author of our Constitution once wrote that The gem of the Christian religion had gleamed most brightly when the faithful suffered adversity rather than patronage. So, bring on the adversity. A little persecution has never snuffed out the faithful, it has only makes them stronger.

This has been Dan Price for Community comment