

## Regarding Prayer before Football Games: *An Honest, Biblical Response*

This past year, the Supreme Court banned prayer before High School football games. Many Christians have spoken in very pious terms about this action, calling it an evidence of persecution of Christians and advocating that Christians stand up for their rights by praying the Lord's Prayer immediately after the National Anthem. Christian radio stations tout such an approach as a way to "obey God rather than obeying man. Such approaches are wrong theologically and historically. However, the issue is emotionally charged. Every time I mention this, I am accused of not being willing to stand for my Lord and of not being an evangelical Christian who cares about the gospel. Nevertheless, we must be biblical in our responses, not cultural. Some of the greatest mistakes made by the evangelical church historically have been when we have confused cultural values with biblical commands. Please consider the following:

1. The Bible never mentions praying before football games (or any other sporting event). When we stand for Christ (obeying God rather than obey men), we must make sure that we are doing something that God has indeed commanded. To pray before a football game is never commanded (though it may be permitted).
2. We need to be logical rather than emotional. While prayer at football games has been traditional, prayer at basketball games, baseball games, track meets, etc. has not. Why is football so important to merit public prayer before games and other sports not? What upsets many here is not the violation of a biblical principle (that God tells us to pray before sporting events), but the violation of a tradition that has little to nothing to do with true spirituality. Most of the prayers prayed at football games are not spiritual but ceremonial, and often led by ministers who have nothing to do with the gospel. This should concern us more than the Supreme Court's decision to ban such prayers.
3. To call this ban "persecution" is to minimize the sufferings of those who are truly persecuted for the preaching of the gospel. It is to make prayer before football games as important as the preaching of the gospel. First century Christians would be shocked to hear us call this persecution. They were not permitted to meet together for services or to tell neighbors about the gospel—they would have thought it laughable if the Roman government had decided to rule against prayer before the games in the coliseum. Don't praise God for those who "stand up for the Lord in the face of persecution" by chanting a rote prayer before a football game. It's not even in the same league, so to speak.
4. Furthermore, we should question the praying of a prayer that Jesus never told us to pray (The Lord's Prayer). He told His disciples to "pray after this manner." In the history of the Christian Church, those who used the Lord's Prayer in such a rote fashion were the ones who most frequently persecuted the evangelical church. Even today, the most liberal of churches pray the Lord's Prayer every Sunday and we would not consider their ritual action to have anything to do with true prayer. We must be careful about joining in such actions that have no biblical basis.
5. Finally, we are commanded to honor our government and obey its laws unless those laws clearly contradict a command of God. If the issue were preventing the gospel from being shared (as it was in Acts 4), then we should be willing, not only to go to jail for sharing the gospel, but even be willing to go to our death. In this case, however, we do not have such an issue. Instead, we are demonstrating to the world a rebellious spirit that does not witness for the Lord at all. Consider the opposite. What if the government had ruled that no Moslem prayers could be prayed, and following the national anthem, groups of Moslems stood up and defiantly chanted their prayers to "demonstrate their freedom" to obey God—would we praise such actions? Not at all. Christians everywhere would be offended and would call such actions rebellious (and probably demand that school authorities remove the Moslems from our games). This is why we must be certain that our actions really do "obey" God rather than satisfy our cultural or traditional desires.

I normally do not respond to such issues but this is a serious one that is emotionally charged (I think because in many cities, football is almost as sacred as Christianity). As believers, we need to make certain that we do stand for the Lord—where He has required—and not waste our energy and destroy our witness on issues that have nothing to do with the gospel.

I hope you will read this with understanding and search the Scriptures to see if these things are true.