

Beware of Christian Herods

By Chris Ayers

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Why get so upset about having a prayer in U.S. District Court? Is it really necessary to sue Mecklenburg District Judge Bill Constangy for opening court each morning with a harmless prayer? Who in their right mind would be against prayer, especially a prayer such as the one the judge prays? The prayer does not seem to be offensive, unless of course you are an atheist or a member of some non-mainline religious group. Who cares about atheists or people who do not belong to popular brands of religion?

Years ago I would have argued that Judge Constangy should be allowed to pray publicly in the courtroom. I strongly supported public prayers offered in governmental settings as the type of thing all Christians should do, especially government leaders and officials.

Several factors have led me to change my way of thinking. First, reading Baptist history forced me to see that the shapers of the Baptist faith argued vehemently against government interference in religious matters. Many modern Baptists unfortunately have forgotten their roots, but Baptists historically have been at the forefront of fighting for freedom of conscience.

In 1791 John Leland, an outspoken Baptist in America, wrote his major treatise on religious liberty, "The Rights of Conscience Inalienable." In this treatise, Leland argued that the real motives for establishment of religion are not to benefit religion, but to buttress the power of civil clergy and augment the purposes of ambitious clergy. Leland concluded that: "Government has no more to do with the religious opinions of men than it has with the principles of mathematics. Let every man speak freely without fear, maintain the principles that he believes, worship according to his own faith, either one God, three Gods, no God, or twenty Gods, and let government protect him in so doing."

Baptists offended many people, particularly Christians, with their view that freedom from religion is a corollary of freedom of religion, but Baptists reasoned that it was imperative to defend the freedom of all people, including heretics, atheists and individuals who belonged to non-mainline religions.

Who cares that the atheists and other offended people not be forced to listen to Judge Constangy's prayers? Baptists do. For a true Baptist, freedom of religion means that no person should have to listen to a public prayer in a courtroom or in a public school.

Reading the Bible also led me to be against government interference in religion. Government officials are not exactly portrayed in a favorable light in the Bible. The Egyptian pharaoh made slaves out of the people of God. The prophet Samuel warned that a king would misuse his power. The New Testament tells how early followers of Christ came into conflict with government leaders.

Many other biblical examples could be cited, but I will focus on an example from Matthew's version of Jesus' birth. According to Matthew, the birth of Jesus Christ was good news, but it was also bad news, the worst kind of news, for Herod. Herod was threatened by the Bethlehem babe, and rightly so. It was not obvious to the wise men that Herod was threatened, because the king covered up his anxiety by dabbling in religion.

Finding himself in a pinch, Herod decided to use some God language. He told the wise men, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." Instead, he killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were 2 years old or younger in an attempt to murder the child he supposedly wanted to worship.

Christians today too easily believe that "Herod" is God's servant. We too quickly say of Herod, "Oh, isn't Herod such a good leader! He wants us to worship Jesus. That's so nice of him. He says he believes in God. He is for prayers. Isn't that just great!" We forget that in the Bible people of God are portrayed as suspicious of government leaders, especially those political leaders who dabble in religion for political purposes.

When we invite Herod into the realm of religion we are encouraging a gospel to be preached which is more in line with the needs of the state than with the teachings of our Lord and Savior.

If a Christian Herod wants to pray, it would be better for that individual to say a silent prayer. I am not suggesting that prayer be taken out of the courtroom; that would be impossible to do. An individual can say a silent prayer any time he or she desires to do so. What needs to be taken out is coercive prayer.

Christians should heed God's warning to the wise men. We need to take another route, another path, than that which leads to the throne of Herod, even if Herod is a praying Christian.

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