

A theological response to *Greece v. Galloway*

By Charles Watson Jr.

The theological implications of the U.S. Supreme Court's recent decision in *Town of Greece v. Galloway* are as important to clergy, and all people of faith, as the legal ramifications. Now that the Court has upheld prayer at local government meetings, what do we, as people of faith, do now? What are the theological implications of prayer at government meetings? We still believe religious liberty is a gift from God and that faith should never be coerced by the government; the ruling did not affect that. We know that faith means you believe and have confidence in what you know to be true. This decision does not change our faith, nor does it change the fact that our faith calls us as believers to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. What we must do now is put that faith into action in light of the legal ruling.

Based on the Court's decision, communities around the nation may adopt new policies about prayer at their official meetings. Prayer might become a part of meetings in communities where it once was not. Clergy members who do not agree with prayer at government meetings have been or will be called to pray at a council meeting in their cities. What will be our answer when asked? Will we say "no" because we are so against the ruling? That is an option, but we also have another. The Court's decision gives us an opportunity to show the communities we live in what loving our neighbor looks like. If we accept an invitation to pray, we need to set the example of how legislative prayer should be given if it is going to be allowed at local government meetings.

As a Baptist minister, I would never tell you the words to say during your prayer, but here are two things to consider about this opportunity:

What is the purpose of my prayer in this setting?

In upholding the Town of Greece's practice against the constitutional challenge, Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote that legislative prayer "reminds lawmakers to transcend petty differences in pursuit of a higher purpose, and expresses a common aspiration to a just and peaceful society." The prayer is for the council members as they make tough decisions. To that end, we are there to pray that the members of the council make sound judgments based on what is best for the entire community. Shouldn't we set that tone with our prayer? Consider this passage from Matthew 6:5, "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. ..." Although the passage goes on to advise us to pray in a private place, it reminds us that our prayers are to God and our purpose is more important than being seen. This is not a time to convert others or tout our

faith tradition as the best or only truth. Our words must be guided by humility and wisdom. There is no need for a sermon. This prayer is not about us as individuals; it's about the legislative body and the community.

What do we want the result of our prayer to be?

We must ask ourselves if we have an agenda. If our desire is to divide rather than provide a loving, inclusive presence, we must reconsider our agenda. In the Court's dissent, Justice Elena Kagan wrote, "When citizens of all faiths come to speak to each other and their elected representatives in a legislative session, the government must take especial care to ensure that the prayers they hear will seek to include, rather than serve to divide." Let us keep Galatians 5:13-14 in our mind as we consider our words, "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves [servants] to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" We want our religious beliefs respected, so we should show the same respect to those of different faiths. We should also be mindful that attendance at these meetings is not always voluntary; many must be there to conduct business that cannot be done elsewhere.

The Court's decision has caused some confusion over its direct application. Communities are still trying to decide what is acceptable now that the Court has ruled in favor of prayer at local government meetings. Many of us may even believe that the ruling is a step back from what is best for religious freedom in our country. There should be no confusion, however, about the need for clergy in our communities to set the example. Let us take this opportunity to be prophetic in our quest to defend religious liberty for all. We can use our voice to shape how legislative prayer is given if we accept the invitations that will be extended to us. Let your voice be heard; in fact, you might even do that without speaking. There is nothing wrong with asking those in attendance to join you in a moment of silence.



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The Hollman Report will return in next month's magazine.