

# RIGHT or WRONG? Government-sponsored prayer

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**Why do some people cite Jesus' words about not praying or offering alms on the street corner but still say we need prayer in schools and especially at football games? Can we find any consistent perspective on this?**

Perhaps the best way to begin would be to place this biblical teaching within the wider context of Jesus' teachings. Jesus saw clear differences between the kingdom of God and the earthly kingdom, and he taught us that we owe different responsibilities to each (Matthew 22:21). And, as you note, Jesus taught us not to make a spectacle of ourselves when we pray.

When we urge public schools to sponsor prayers, however, we are seeking to use state power to promote faith. Schools sponsor prayers when school officials lead them or turn their microphones over to others to do so. Of course, students may pray at school without school sponsorship, either individually or in groups, as long as they are not disruptive. For example, groups of football players may choose to huddle in the locker room for prayer, and groups of student fans may organize pre-game prayers in homes, churches or in the stands.

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Consider the insights offered in an essay by Gary Christenot. He is an evangelical Christian who served with the United States military in Hawaii in an area where Christians are a small minority and Buddhists and members of the Shinto faith are the majority.

Christenot tells about an epiphany he had while attending his first football game at a local public high school. When a voice came over the public address system asking everyone to stand for the invocation, he did so, remembering the Christian prayers he often heard in this setting growing up. But, in this case, a Buddhist priest offered the prayer. Christenot says this caused a real dilemma for him: By continuing to stand, he felt he would betray his faith. But sitting down in the middle of the prayer would be extremely disrespectful to his Japanese friends.

Christenot then makes the point that Christians often advocate government-sponsored prayers in public schools “by hiding behind the excuse that they are voluntary and any student who doesn’t wish to participate can simply remain seated and silent.” But he says that if he, as an adult, were made so uncomfortable in this situation, it would be infinitely more difficult for a teenager. As a result of this experience, Christenot is “adamantly opposed to teachers and other (public) school officials leading students in prayer or the conduct of prayer rituals, even by students, at officially sanctioned events.”

Christenot concludes by saying to his fellow Christians: “Unless you’re ready to endure (this kind of) unwilling exposure of yourself and your children to those beliefs and practices that your own faith foreswears, you have no right to insist that others sit in silence and complicity while you do the same to them.”

Ah, yes, the golden rule. To that I say, amen.

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*Right or Wrong? is sponsored by the T.B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology. Send your questions about how to apply your faith to [btillman@hsutx.edu](mailto:btillman@hsutx.edu).*

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