

Editorial: Cheerleaders win, but what about the cause of Christ?

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Kountze's Scripture-quoting cheerleaders won the latest round in their battle to paint Bible verses on run-through signs at football games.

But this game might not be over until nine black-robed referees in Washington, D.C., proclaim, "Thus saith the court."



Editor Marv KnoxHere's the latest: Judge Steve Thomas of the 356th District Court in Hardin County ruled in favor of cheerleaders' right to hold up run-through banners emblazoned with Scripture verses at the start of football games.

The banners—which typically cite verses such as “I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me” and “If God is for us, who can be against us?”—have been contested since the 2012 football season.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation received a complaint and contacted the Kountze Independent School District. The district banned the banners. Then the cheerleaders sued the district. Thomas issued a temporary injunction, which allowed the cheerleaders to make and display the banners through the football season. Eventually, the school district changed its policy to support the cheerleaders. And Thomas issued his ruling May 8, negating a trial scheduled for summer.

Thomas' summary judgment states: "The evidence in this case confirms that religious messages expressed on run-through banners have not created, and will not create, an establishment of religion in the Kountze community."

"Neither the Establishment Clause (of the First Amendment) nor any other law prohibits the cheerleaders from using religious-themed banners at school sporting events," the Beaumont Enterprise reported Thomas as ruling. "Neither the Establishment Clause nor any other law requires Kountze I.S.D. to prohibit the inclusion of religious-theme banners at school sporting events."

Up the legal ladder

The *Los Angeles Times* reported Dallas attorney Thomas Brandt indicated school district officials would study the ruling and ask the judge for further clarification before deciding whether to appeal. District officials wanted to allow the banners because of strong community support, but the district should not be required to allow them, he said.

So, the contest may not be over. The school district could appeal. And even if the district defers, others may press the issue in federal court.

"We did not expect justice in a Texas state court," Annie Laurie Gaylor, the Freedom From Religion Foundation's co-president, told the *Times*. "It's impossible to imagine a judge approving cheerleader messages saying, 'Atheists rule—God is dead' or 'Allah is supreme—pray to him for victory.'"

The foundation hopes students, teachers and parents who oppose the banners will keep up the legal challenge.

Constitutional questions

Ultimately, the issue could be decided based upon whether Scripture-citing

banners violate the [Establishment Clause](#), which maintains government cannot “establish” religion.

Students enjoy free-speech rights to pray and quote Scripture and share their faith on campus and at school events. But if the school—as an agency of the government—sponsors or supports that activity, a higher court may rule it unconstitutional.

So, questions will arise: Do the school or the students themselves purchase supplies used to make the banners? Do the students create the banners on their own time or during school? Are sponsors who are school employees involved in constructing the banners? Those are simple questions with straightforward answers.

Harder questions would dig deeper: Is the act of holding up and running through the banners intrinsically part of a school-sponsored event, such as an athletic contest? Do banners held by cheerleaders wearing school uniforms and crashed by athletes wearing school uniforms imply the sanction and endorsement of the school? And if Christian cheerleaders can hold banners with Bible verses, can students of other faiths paint huge signs quoting the Quran or a Wiccan text?

If the question of prayer before ballgames could climb much higher up the judicial ladder—which it did—then this case could, too.

Higher issues

Meanwhile, grownups who provide guidance to these girls and other students ought to ask an important question. “Is this really what’s best for God’s kingdom?”

It’s hard to imagine any Christian who would dispute “I can do all things through Christ” But here are a couple of non-legal issues to consider:

- **Signs that imply divine endorsement of one high school football team over another promote bad theology.** God doesn't care who wins a football game.

In Texas, for example, practically every public school team will include some faithful Christians, some hypocritical Christians, some out-and-out scoundrels, some pagans and, most likely these days, folks of other faiths.

Don't expect God to choose one over the other.

While we want our students to believe the truth of the Scriptures on those banners, raising them up as talismans for their teams imparts an air of superiority and divine entitlement. Spiritual triumphalism is not becoming.

And that leads to the other point ...

- **Scripture run-through signs aren't very evangelistic.**

They imply God loves one team more than the other. Not true.

They exclude and unnecessarily taunt people who do not share the faith.

They're far from personal and relational.

They're unloving.

So, while their advocates claim the Kountze cheerleaders' legal victories are wins for freedom of speech and religion, it's much harder to maintain they advance the cause of Christ.