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Church leaders: Public prayer more tradition than religion

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Pre-meeting prayer has more to do with tradition and an American "civil religion" than Christian theology, religious professors, pastors and Bible scholars say.

David Yamane, a Wake Forest University professor specializing in the sociology of religion, said the role of an invocation, Christian or general, was to provide institutional legitimacy.

"If there isn't some greater legitimation, then what's to control the state?" he said.

The Bible is filled with references to prayer as a way to ask for guidance, protection and favor among other things, expressing the theological concept that a true believer who asks for God's blessings receives them, several pastors said.

But none of several experts consulted on the subject of prayer could provide any example of a direct command or action by Jesus tackling public prayer in non-worship settings.

Jesus' instructions on prayer in the gospel of Matthew treat it as a private matter, telling his disciples to "go into a closet" to be alone with God, said Tom Ritchie, pastor of Young Memorial Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church.

Those comments are made in the context of a warning against the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, fanatically strict observers of Jewish law, whom he accused of praying publicly so they could display their religiosity rather than because they have a personal relationship with God, he said.

Pastors and elected officials acknowledged that private prayers would be as effective as a public prayer in calling on God's blessings, but insisted there was something special in the current practice they didn't want to change.

Few saw the replacement with a moment of silence or a more general invocation as a crisis of faith.

"I don't think it would be the end of the world," said council member Fred Tolly, a lifelong member of First Presbyterian Church.

Donald Owens, pastor of Belton's Hopewell Baptist Church, justified his support for pre-meeting prayer with Biblical references and theology that revolved around a Christian's duty to show and tell others about the power of Jesus Christ.

"One has to stand for what they believe in," he said.

Religious scholars said there was no explicit connection between religious practice and the custom of Biblical invocations that date back to the earliest colonial governments in America.

"It's carried on primarily because of tradition," said Furman University professor James L. Guth. "There's not any sophisticated theological justification other than the obvious one that a country of religious people would invoke the favor of a deity before making decisions."

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