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Jesus prayer ban lifted

January 31st, 2008

It's okay to say the name of Jesus in a prayer at city council meetings thanks to the overturning of an unconstitutional policy promoted by the Oklahoma Conference for Community and Justice.

The council voted 7-2 to reverse a policy that goes back to ex-mayor Susan Savage. Literature from the OCCJ, a liberal, globalist group that embraces all religions except Evangelical Christianity, was the basis for an unwritten policy that banned pastors who said the name Jesus in their prayers.

The councilors had received numerous complaints from Christians who believe in the freedom of speech guaranteed in the Constitution.

Under the new policy, which council Rick Westcott said is consistent with the U.S. Constitution, any clergy member invited to pray at the council meeting can invoke his deity without penalty.

Westcott sponsored the change along with Councilors John Eagleton, Bill Christiansen and Cason Carter.

Councilor Jack Henderson voted against the change, asking the council to postpone the decision for further study. Henderson said the new policy would open “a Pandora’s Box” and force the council to listen to prayers from offbeat religions.

Dennis Troyer, who teaches Sunday School at a Baptist church, supported the former policy that prohibited using the name of Jesus.

Troyer said a story in the Tulsa World created the controversy. “The article in the paper was very poorly written,” Troyer said. “People were offended by some of the things in the article.”

He said God created man for His fellowship but the council should leave the policy alone.

“I don’t have to pray in the name of Jesus every time I pray,” Troyer said. “You don’t have to say the name of Jesus.”

The new policy allows the speaking of the name of any deity as long as the person praying doesn’t criticize other religions or “proselytize.”

Councilor Bill Martinson said he would prefer elimination of the prayers and have them replaced by a moment of silence.

Nancy Day of the OCCJ their her group published their rules “decades and decades” ago.

“Giving prayer in a public setting is not to be taken lightly,” she said. She urged the councilors to postpone a vote until her group could come up with a new policy that would exclude the name of Jesus.

Karl Sniderman argued that the Establishment Clause of the Constitution prohibits saying the name of Jesus in a public meeting. Westcott said that would only apply if a

councilor were praying in the name of Jesus.

Tulsa Metropolitan Ministry Executive Director James Mishler, who opposes the new policy, said it would obligate the council to have prayers from witches.

Chaplain Gordon James Klingenschmitt, who was dismissed from the U.S. Navy for disobeying an order and praying in the name of Jesus, was in Tulsa Thursday and watched the council meeting.

His career was threatened when his commanding officer punished him in writing three times, for quoting “exclusive” Bible verses that claim Jesus is the way to heaven (John 3:36) during one optionally-attended “Christian memorial service” inside a Navy base chapel. Investigators confirmed the skipper downgraded his evaluations for praying “in Jesus name” on the ship’s microphone, but ruled commanders have authority to punish sermons and prayers.

Shortly after he was dismissed, Congress passed a law that forced the military to let chaplains pray in the name of Jesus.

“This was a great victory for religious liberty,” Klingenschmitt said in an interview with the Tulsa Beacon. “They overturned a bad policy. It was a great victory for everybody.”

His website is www.prayinjesusname.org.

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