

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO GRAND FORKS

The Protestants and Catholics of Grand Forks were at each other's throats. A North Dakota law required the Ten Commandments to be posted in the public schools. But the Protestant and Catholic versions of the First Commandment are different. Which version was to be posted?

The school district of Grand Forks solved the problem by simply writing *its own* version of the First Commandment, and posted that! If anyone wants to know why the Jewish community continues to oppose prayers in the public schools, we might start by quoting the gospel according to Grand Forks.

About twenty years ago, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that school prayers were illegal. But as many as ten per cent of the school districts still have morning prayers. And almost every year, there is some Congressional proposal for a Constitutional Amendment which would move us back towards school prayers.

Right now there is a Constitutional Amendment proposed by Senator Jesse Helms -- already passed by the Senate, now in the House -- which says that the U.S. Supreme Court has no jurisdiction over school prayers, and leaves such decisions to the state courts. That would be akin to saying that voting rights or matters of free speech should be left to the individual states. Our *basic* constitutional principles are either national, or they are nothing. (The North Dakota law on the Ten Commandments was finally ruled illegal by the courts.)

The basic Constitutional principle which seems most constantly under attack is that of church-state separation. Nineteen years ago, for example, this Constitutional Amendment was proposed in the House of Representatives: "This Nation devoutly recognizes the authority and law of Jesus Christ, Saviour and Ruler of nations, through whom are bestowed the blessings of Almighty God."

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The author of that proposal was Congressman John Anderson of Illinois. He may well have changed his mind since. . . Indeed, public officials often introduce such measures knowing that they are going to fail, in order to satisfy some constituency. But even so, the constant number of such proposals reflects a strong impulse among many Americans.

There is now a national organization called The Leadership Foundation whose main purpose is to "restore our children's right to pray in school." Its President is TV producer Martha Rountree, who co-founded the "Meet the Press" program. The Leadership Foundation is now busy gathering support for the Helms Amendment.

The motivation for most of these proposals is not malevolent. America is the "most religious" nation in the world, in the proportion of people who attend church, or say they believe in God. Many of them genuinely feel that there should be a more religious impulse in our society and in our government. They feel that the schools are derelict in not allowing prayer. They see some peculiarity in the fact that the Jews, who started the whole thing, are not with them on this matter.

But Grand Forks demonstrates one of the main reasons for the First Amendment's separation of church and state. Even if government does not establish a religion, it will at best become an *arbiter* among religions, if it gets into the business seriously.

One can see a National Commission to rewrite the Ten Commandments . How about: "Thou shalt make every good-faith effort not to inter-face with any gods other than those in whom you have finalized some belief, with the proviso that nothing herein shall be deemed to interfere with any citizen's personal mantra."

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More immediately, which government body is going to decide which prayer is kosher? Then, which government agency is going to decide which religious holidays are "legitimate"? The concern is not so much that some given church is going to take over the state -- but that the state is going to start making regulations for religion.

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