



-- BAPTIST PRESS

News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

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May 6, 1982

82-70

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Dunn Challenges Reagan on
School Prayer Amendment

By Stan Hasteley

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WASHINGTON (BP)—Baptists' chief church-state spokesman has condemned President Reagan's call for a constitutional amendment on public school prayer as "despicable demagoguery."

James M. Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs in Washington, reacted to Reagan's May 6 announcement asking Congress to pass the amendment. The president's appeal for the measure came during a Rose Garden ceremony held on this year's National Day of Prayer.

In a statement released to the press, Dunn declared: "It is despicable demagoguery for the president to play petty politics with prayer. He knows that the Supreme Court has never banned prayer in schools. It can't. Real prayer is always free."

Dunn said in spite of public misunderstanding of what the high court decided in its landmark 1962 and 1963 rulings outlawing state-sponsored devotional exercises in public schools, Reagan knows better. "He knows that the court in those prayer rulings affirmed and encouraged studies about religion in public school classrooms," Dunn said. "What the court has done is protect religious liberty."

Noting that most religious bodies "have steadfastly supported" the rulings, Dunn said the Baptist Joint Committee, which works for 27 million U.S. Baptists; the National Council of Churches, encompassing 40 million mainline Christians; and every national Jewish organization have consistently opposed "compelled ritual."

Increasing religious pluralism all over the nation, Dunn added, argues against a constitutional amendment which would have the effect of placing decision-making power on prayer in schools in state legislatures and local school districts.

"Do we really want to turn the regulation of religious exercise over to state houses and school boards in diverse places such as Utah, Hawaii, Alabama and New York?" Dunn asked. "I say 'Never!'"

The president, Dunn said, "is being deliberately dishonest" by joining those who have misinterpreted the high court's position.

Although repeated efforts have been made for the past two decades to reverse the effect of the school prayer rulings through a constitutional amendment, all have thus far failed. The closest opponents of the decisions came was in 1971, when the Senate passed an amendment but the House of Representatives narrowly defeated it.

Since that close call, efforts to amend the constitution on the issue have been bottled up in committees on both sides of capitol hill.

Just the same, chances for passage of such a measure have never seemed better to Supreme Court opponents, particularly since the Senate is now controlled by Republicans. In the House, the amendment is likely to be delayed by Rep. Peter W. Rodino Jr.'s judiciary committee. But it's proponents could succeed in bringing it directly to the floor for an up-or-down vote if they convince 218 members to sign a petition discharging the measure from Rodino's panel.

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