



FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

P.O. Box 750 • Madison WI 53701 • (608) 256-8900 • www.ffrf.org

April 8, 2010

**SENT VIA FAX & U.S. MAIL
(205) 254-2603**

COPY

Roderick V. Royal and Members of the Council
Birmingham City Council
Office of the City Council- Third Floor
710 N 20th St
Birmingham AL 35203

Re: City Council Invocations

Dear Members of the City Council:

I am writing on behalf of concerned Birmingham residents and taxpayers and other Alabama members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), who object to the practice of scheduling prayers at City Council meetings. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization, which works to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church. We represent over 14,600 members across the country and have a large chapter, the Alabama Freethought Association.

It is our information and understanding that the Birmingham City Council schedules invocations as part of its meetings. Our complainant informs us that typically a clergy member from a local church is invited to give the invocation. We understand that the prayers given are almost always sectarian, and in this case Christian, often invoking Jesus Christ (ending "in Jesus' name") or referencing Christianity. The prayer given at the January 5th meeting included reciting the Lord's Prayer, which is an exclusively Christian prayer both versions of which stem from the New Testament and can be found in the Gospel of Matthew 6:9-13 and the Gospel of Luke 11:2-4.

Government prayer is unnecessary, inappropriate, and divisive. Calling upon Council members and citizens to rise and pray (even silently) is coercive, embarrassing and beyond the scope of secular city government. Council members are free to pray privately or to worship on their own time in their own way. They do not need to worship on taxpayers' time. The city ought not to lend its power and prestige to religion, amounting to a governmental endorsement that excludes the 15% of your population that is nonreligious (Religious Identification Survey 2008).

The Council compounds the violation when a majority of prayers are to Jesus or a majority of the officiants are Christian or Christian clergy, as is happening in Birmingham. Such prayer creates acrimony, makes religious minorities feel like political

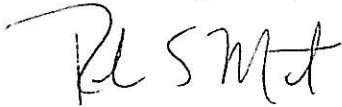
outsiders in their own community, and shows unconstitutional governmental preference not just for religion over nonreligion, but Christianity over other faiths.

Citizens of all religions or no religion are compelled to come before you on civic, secular matters: variances, sewers, building permits, restaurant licenses, sidewalk repair, etc. They should not be subjected to a religious show or test, or be expected to demonstrate religious obeisance at a city function. We fail to see why divine guidance is needed over such earthly matters anyway.

Christians who know their bible are familiar with the biblical injunction of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, condemning as hypocrisy public prayer. "Enter into thy closet and when thou hast shut the door, pray to thy Father which is in secret." (Matthew 6:5-13). Observing a strict separation of church and state offends nobody, and honors not only the First Amendment, but also the very tenets being professed during City prayers.

On behalf of our Birmingham membership and our secular constitution, we urge the City Council to concentrate on city matters. The tone that should be set is one that respects and reveres the secular and entirely godless U.S. constitution, which City officials take an oath to uphold, and whose only references to religion are exclusionary.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "R S Markert". The signature is written in a cursive, somewhat stylized font.

Rebecca S. Markert
Staff Attorney