

Religious Freedom Is a Sacred Right

Religious freedom is one of the founding principles of our great nation. Cemented in the First Amendment, the freedom to express our faith forms the very bedrock of our constitutional rights.

Though the Supreme Court has affirmed that legislative **prayer** is constitutional under the Establishment Clause, lower courts have for years been at odds over the proper standard by which state and municipal policies governing legislative prayer should be measured. This fall, the Supreme Court has the chance to set the record straight.

In 1983, the **Supreme Court** unequivocally upheld the practice of opening legislative sessions with prayer, citing an “unambiguous and unbroken history” of this tradition. For years, the town of Greece, N.Y., opened its board meetings with a prayer. That storied tradition is now in jeopardy.

Despite the fact that the town permitted anyone of any religious background to offer a prayer, including a Jewish man, a Baha’i leader, and a Wiccan priestess, the lower court ruled that the town’s method of offering prayers violated the Constitution. The Supreme Court will issue a decision in this case early next year. As members of Congress, we will not look the other way in the face of this challenge to such an important and historic tradition.

Washington lawmakers have a unique interest in the outcome of the case. For more than two centuries, Congress has opened its legislative sessions with prayer. It is a rich tradition that began with the First Continental Congress, even before the Revolution or the drafting of the Constitution.

If the Supreme Court upholds the lower court’s ruling, it will

overrule the way in which Congress has opened its legislative sessions with prayer for centuries. That is why we led 85 members of Congress in an amicus brief urging the court to uphold the constitutional prerogative of elected bodies to pray before meetings.

Prayer provides a way for members of Congress to solemnize our proceedings and find unity in an environment often polarized by division and controversy. The importance of prayer transcends politics. This truth is reflected in the 26 amicus briefs that were filed in support of the town of Greece, including a bipartisan amicus brief filed by 34 members of the U.S. Senate and an amicus brief filed by the **Obama administration**.

People from all over the world seek the religious protections guaranteed by our Constitution. All Americans should be free to practice their religion, and the United States should remain a nation that is respectful and tolerant of those wishing to profess their faith in a public manner. It is vital that deliberative bodies from Congress to local municipal boards remain free to invite the rich tradition of prayer into their meetings without the constant threat of lawsuits.

Religious freedom is one of the pillars this great nation was founded upon. On our watch, we will not let that pillar collapse.

*Congressman **Randy Forbes** represents Virginia's Fourth Congressional District and is the co-chairman of the Congressional Prayer Caucus. Congressman **Steve Scalise** represents Louisiana's First Congressional District and is the chairman of the Republican Study Committee, a group of conservative lawmakers in the U.S. House.*

For more about Randy Forbes, read our article in Charisma titled "God Is Moving on Capitol Hill" and [click here](#) to watch a video where Forbes talks about a weekly prayer meeting that

convenes before each session in Room 219 of the Capitol building.