

What If Michael Newdow Lived in Your Neighborhood?

By Donald S. Whitney

After hearing of the June 26, 2002, ruling by 9th Circuit Court in San Francisco that the Pledge of Allegiance is unconstitutional due to the words "under God," anger knotted my stomach. How could one atheist—Michael Newdow—and two liberal judges in the city notorious for homosexuality, remove the name of God from our nation's pledge? I nearly sheared my tongue off while thinking, "This is another reason why that whole city should fall into the Pacific."

Then I realized how much I sounded like Jesus' disciples, James and John, when they wanted to call down fire from Heaven to consume a city that wouldn't receive God's truth. I knew I deserved the same response they got from Jesus who "turned and rebuked them, and said, 'You do not know what kind of spirit you are of; for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them'" (Luke 9:55-56).

That caused me to think how I should—and not just how I should not—respond to this event. To put it in terms of the 2,000-year-old question, what would Jesus do? And that turned into this sobering self-confrontation: "What would Jesus have me do if godless Michael Newdow (or someone who became similarly disreputable) lived in my neighborhood?"

At less than 24 hours since the ruling was announced, I've not yet heard reports of harassment of Mr. Newdow, but I can easily imagine it happening. People driving by screaming at him about where he'll spend eternity, dumping rancid garbage on his lawn, spraying graffiti on his garage door, or getting a smug sense of satisfaction when someone else does.

When I think of this I remember the words of a man I've known for years who became an abortionist. Although he's no longer killing babies in the womb, he told me of experiencing the same kinds of behavior from professing Christians. He was the target of a hate campaign that ranged from threatening personal confrontations to telephoned death threats on his family. His clinic was picketed and set on fire. But he said that no Christians ever came to him in love and explained their opposition to what he was doing. Would that have changed his mind?

From a human perspective I'm doubtful, for I know he heard the message of God's love in the Gospel many times before, during, and after his years as an abortionist.

What keeps haunting me, though, is how he justifies his position as more compassionate than that of Christians. In his mind, relieving desperate women of their unwanted pregnancies (albeit by abortion) demonstrated more compassion than Christians who showed him nothing but fists, clenched teeth, and rage.

So, how should a Christian living in Mr. Newdow's neighborhood respond to all this? On the public level he should denounce the decision by the court, just as Jesus publicly opposed the beliefs and actions of the Pharisees. And Newdow's Christian neighbor should have no hesitation to tell the atheist his viewpoint privately as the occasion arises.

But while I appreciate the need to raise our voices publicly and privately in the national conversation on this matter, the personal response of a Christian to a neighbor like Mr. Newdow should include more than verbal opposition. The Christian must also act in obedience to Jesus' command to "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" (Luke 6:27), and the directives of Romans 12:19-21, "Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord. But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Jesus calls the Christian to love and do good to neighbors like Newdow, even if they are atheists. While I would never want Mr. Newdow to think I have any sympathy for his position, a Christian would help a neighbor like this to paint his garage door, or remove the garbage thrown by those who consider themselves defending God.

Above all, a Christian neighbor would look for every opportunity to share the Gospel. And if Mr. Newdow could not appreciate the value of the pearls of the Gospel, I wouldn't try to force them down his atheistic throat, just as Jesus instructed in Matthew 7:6. Newdow will likely suffer a great deal of hatred and abuse in the days ahead. He shouldn't be surprised at this, for he's brought it on himself. But I would patiently wait for and pray for any evangelistic openings the pressure upon him may produce.

Michael Newdow probably has a distorted view of true Christianity, and it's likely to get worse. But if I were his neighbor, by the grace of God I would make sure it wasn't because of me.

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