

THE PRAYER THAT STOPPED A RIOT (at a high-school football game)

During the summer of 1970, the city of Longview, Texas was preparing to racially integrate its high schools under a federal court mandated integration plan. The City had one large all white high-school and one large all black high-school. It had always been that way. During that summer, there were bus bombings in apparent attempts to thwart the planned busing and integration. But, it proceeded forward. Tensions were running high in that small East Texas town by the end of the summer.

As the High-School opened its doors for the 1970/71 school year on that hot September day, and as thousands of new students poured in, the tension was palpable. It was in this atmosphere that Kelly Coghlan began his senior year at Longview High School. It was in this setting that he learned how powerfully a student's simple public prayer can stop a riot.

There was a fight at the High-School on the Friday before the first football game of the season. There were injuries, police, blood; and the rumors were that the racial unrest would be taken to the football game that evening and brutally settled there. An all out racial war was expected. But, shortly before the game (and the fighting) was to begin, a student stepped to the microphone and gave a short and simple prayer. The students' words were as follows:

Father, we come here tonight to watch a football game. But God, many of us come with other things on our minds that are making us spiritually sick inside. There are many here tonight that are disgusted, fed-up with life, and have hate in their hearts for persons that they don't even know. And God, we ask you, "What is the answer?" And you answer us and say, "Love God with all your heart, mind, and soul." But, then you go on further and you tell us, "Love your neighbor as yourself." So Father, please give us strength tonight, and the rest of our lives, to love one another as Jesus loved us. Forgive us God. Amen.

That prayer completely changed the mood and atmosphere as if a dark cloud had instantly been lifted from the stadium. You could have heard a pin drop. Everyone felt it. It just took the wind out of all the bad feelings. The tension was gone. There was no fight that night. Not only was there no fight that sultry summer night; there were no more fights for the rest of the year.

Have our schools become so much safer today than they were in 1970 that we no longer need prayer? When kids have a chance of a prayer, schools have a prayer of a chance.