

STATE & NATIONAL NEWS

PRAYER

from page 1

sored prayers in public schools.

"Worship is a responsibility and a choice committed to the private sphere," Stevens said.

When the Texas case was argued in March, an ABC News poll said two-thirds of Americans thought students should be permitted to lead such prayers.

And in Texas' Republican primary election that same month, 94 percent of voters approved a nonbinding resolution backing student-initiated prayer at sporting events.

Texas Gov. George W. Bush, who had filed a brief urging the Supreme Court to uphold student-led prayer, said he was disappointed.

"I support the constitutionally guaranteed right of all students to express their faith freely and participate in voluntary student-led prayer," said the Republican presidential candidate.

Vice President Al Gore, the presumed Democratic presidential nominee, thought the court got it right.

"He feels ... in this case that the prayer was found to be government-sponsored and participation was not truly voluntary," said Gore spokesman Douglas Hat-taway. "He does support private prayer in school and at school-related events as

long as participation is truly voluntary and ... is suitable within the school environment."

Gary Bauer, a former candidate for the GOP presidential nomination, noted that Republican presidents appointed four of the court's six-justice majority. "This underscores that my party has got to be more serious about the men and women we put on the high bench," said Bauer, who now leads the Campaign for Working Families.

Stevens said the court recognizes "the important role that public worship plays in many communities, as well as the sincere desire to include public prayer as a part of various occasions so as to mark those occasions' significance."

But he added: "Such religious activity in public schools, as elsewhere, must comport with the First Amendment." That amendment prohibits an "establishment of religion."

Joining Stevens were Justices Sandra Day O'Connor, Anthony M. Kennedy, David H. Souter, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Stephen G. Breyer.

Dissenting were Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist and Justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas.

Writing for the three, Rehnquist said he found the tone of the court's opinion more disturbing than its substance. "It bristles with hostility to all things religious in public life," he said.

Stevens' opinion relied heavily on the court's last major ruling on school

prayer, when in 1992 the justices barred clergy-led prayers — invocations and benedictions — at public school graduation ceremonies.

Monday's decision is sure to be cited in challenges to student-led prayers at such ceremonies, and could be powerful ammunition in attacks against laws or school policies calling for daily moments of silence for prayer or meditation.

In the Texas case, four high school students and their parents sued the Santa Fe Independent School District in Galveston County in 1995 over its policy of letting students elect a "chaplain" to lead "prayers" at graduation ceremonies and home football games.

Two families — one Catholic and one Mormon — challenged the policy. Their identities were sealed by the courts.

After their lawsuit was filed, the pol-

icy was changed to let student-elected representatives — no longer called chaplains — give a "message or invocation." Speakers were free to choose what they say so long as it promotes good sportsmanship.

The Supreme Court agreed only to focus on the football games, passing up the graduation-ceremony dispute.

Still to be decided before the 1999-2000 court term ends next week is a Louisiana dispute over the constitutionality of using taxpayer money to buy computers and other instructional materials for religious schools.

That ruling will affect federal efforts to connect every American classroom with the Internet and also could carry significance for the politically charged legal fights over tuition vouchers — help for families who send their children to religious schools.

BAPTISTS

from page 1

In 1995, the convention began a boycott of Disney World because of the park's annual "Gay Day," when thousands of homosexuals meet at the park, and a boycott of the Disney company in general, including the ABC television network, because of supposed sexual connotations in Disney films.

Three years later, the convention

passed a resolution that "Wives graciously submit to their husbands," and courted media attention by arguing the point with feminists on ABC's *Nightline*.

Sylvia Risch, media director for First Baptist and a member of the Southern Baptist denomination for more than 50 years, believes public proclamations of such debatable resolutions do more harm than good to the Christian faith. With a cornerstone of Christianity being to draw people into the faith, Risch said the public airing of controversial resolutions often repels non-believers.

For Risch, such resolutions are noth-

ing more than identifiable differences between the many Protestant denominations.

"It bothers me when people talk about the differences to the point where it turns people off," Risch said. "I hate the way they try to get in so much controversy."

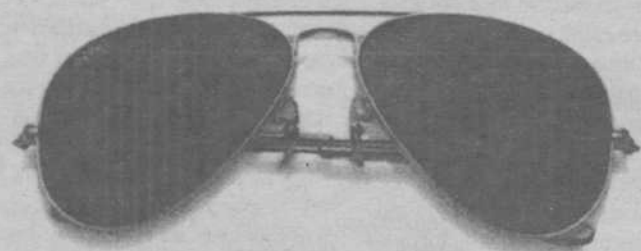
She added that the basic Christian belief in Jesus Christ is what matters most, with the arguable resolutions being little more than details.

"I don't think denominational differences are going to make a hill of beans when we go to heaven," Risch said.

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