

Hate Crimes Vote May Come Thursday

✖ The Senate is expected to vote this week on a federal hate crimes bill that some Christian leaders fear will criminalize preaching against homosexuality.

Pro-family leaders said S. 909 may be introduced as an amendment to the defense authorization bill and voted on as early as Thursday. The bill adds sexual orientation to the list of federally protected classes, and gives states and local jurisdictions federal assistance to prosecute hate crimes.

Opponents say the measure could cause pastors who preach against homosexuality to face prosecution if their preaching is found to have “induced” a hate crime against a homosexual. They point to cases in Canada and Sweden, where Christians have faced criminal prosecution for preaching that homosexual practice is a sin.

“Gay activists have and will continue to use these kinds of laws to silence Christians who speak publicly about God’s design for human sexuality-and make them pay if they stand up for their beliefs,” said Ashley Horne, federal issues analyst for Focus on the Family Action.

Horne said there are probably enough votes in the Senate to pass the bill and asked Christians to pray that the measure would be blocked. In an e-mail appeal sent Wednesday, the America Family Association (AFA) urged its supporters to contact their senators and express their opposition to the bill.

Because the measure does not clarify the definitions of “gender identity” and “sexual orientation,” pro-family leaders say the 30 sexual orientations identified by the American

Psychiatric Association could be used to determine protected classes. Those orientations include necrophilia, pedophilia and zoophilia.

Although gay rights activists say the bill would crack down on violence against homosexuals, opponents of the measure say existing hate crime laws in 45 states can effectively prosecute such crimes.

“For years, AFA and other pro-family groups have issued warnings about federal hate crimes legislation,” the AFA wrote in its appeal. “The reality is that the purpose of this bill is to silence those who speak out against homosexuality.”

Some conservative Christian leaders support the hate crimes legislation, saying it is moral and necessary.

“I would think that the followers of Jesus would be first in line to protect any group from hate crimes,” Florida megachurch pastor Joel Hunter said in April when the bill was being considered by the House, which passed the measure in a 249-175 vote.

“This bill protects both the rights of conservative religious people to voice passionately their interpretations of their Scriptures and protects their fellow citizens from physical attack,” he added.

Hunter’s view was echoed by Christian leaders such as David P. Gushee, professor of Christian Ethics at Mercer University; the Rev. Derrick Harkins, pastor of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.; and Jim Wallis, president of Sojourners, a Christian social justice organization.