

Houstunned: Pastors Vow to Fight Mayor's Sermon Grab

Houston is home to one of NASA's most sophisticated space centers—but even it would have trouble finding signs of intelligence in the local mayor's office. The city's highest official is blowing past the First Amendment at warp speed—and lighting a political powder keg in the process.

After four years of forcing her extreme agenda on the city, Mayor Annise Parker may have finally picked a fight she's bound to regret. Five months after bullying her way into a Houston-wide "bathroom bill," Parker is furious that the city's voters won't roll over and accept it. Instead, America's fourth-largest city fought back, gathering three times the number of signatures needed to put the issue on the ballot. Furious with local pastors for leading the push-back, Parker decided to get her revenge by ordering a Soviet-style crackdown on area churches.

In a story that's spreading like wildfire, the mayor had the nerve to subpoena pastors for their sermons, text messages, photographs, electronic files, calendars and emails—"all communications with members of your congregation" on topics like homosexuality and gender identity. If she thought her religious "inquisition" would scare pastors, she's got another thing coming. Local Christians are more outraged than ever, igniting a firestorm that could awaken a sleeping giant in churches from coast to coast. "We're not intimidated at all," said Rev. Dave Welch. "We're not going to yield our First Amendment rights," he warned—even if it ends in fines, confinement or both.

The mayor reportedly attempted to douse the flames a bit by saying the subpoena was the work of pro-bono lawyers and that she was not aware of it until yesterday. Then, she doubled

down with a tweet: "If the 5 pastors used pulpits for politics, their sermons are fair game."

In a conversation I had this afternoon with a handful of key pastors, it's obvious that this is a fight they're ready for. Pastor Steve Riggle, a friend of FRC's, sees right through the mayor's agenda. "This is an attempt to chill pastors from speaking to the cultural issues of the day," he told Fox News's Todd Starnes. And if she doesn't pull her attack dogs off the city's churches, the joke will be on her. It just might end up being the most ingenious way of getting liberals into the pews yet! "Political and social commentary is not a crime. It is protected by the First Amendment," Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) pointed out.

This is the "wall of separation" Jefferson talked about: protecting *churches* from the government (not the other way around). The Left is fond of misrepresenting the third president's famous letter, but Parker's intrusion is exactly what the Founders were concerned about. But what did we expect in a country where four little letters—LGBT—are trumping the letter of the law? "Even in Houston," Erick Erickson writes, "you will be made to care."

Unfortunately, Houston is learning a hard lesson about the importance of elections. As frustrating as it is, this is what happens in a city where only 16 percent turn out to vote in the mayor's race. For now, though, local churches have a message for the government: Go ahead and monitor our sermons. You obviously need the messages more than most.

You can stand with Houston's pastors by signing FRC's petition to Mayor Annise Parker, asking her to support free speech for *all* people.