

What US Pastors Can Expect Soon: It's Going to Get Ugly

On May 18, 2014 Belfast Pastor James McConnell could not have known that the sermon he preached, "There is but One God," would lead to his prosecution on two counts for violating Northern Ireland's Communications Act of 2003.

A guilty verdict carries a punishment of six months in prison and a hefty fine.

In his sermon he called Islam "satanic" and "a doctrine spawned in hell." He preached that the one true God is not Allah and that Christians are being persecuted for rejecting Islam.

McConnell led Whitewell Metropolitan Tabernacle Belfast for 57 years. It is now one of the largest evangelical congregations in the U.K.

McConnell was served papers nearly 18 months after he preached this sermon. The trial did not take place until December 2015.

Prior to court proceedings, McConnell was given the option to sign an admission of guilt, otherwise called an "informed warning," to avoid prison. McConnell refused and was prosecuted instead. Of his refusal, he told the *Belfast Telegraph*, "I am 78 years of age and in ill health but jail knows no fear for me. They can lock me up with sex offenders, hoodlums and paramilitaries and I will do my time. I have no regrets about what I said. I do not hate Muslims but I denounce Islam as a doctrine and I make no apologies for that. I will be pleading 'not guilty'."

The prosecution argued that McConnell violated the Act which prohibits: "sending, or causing to be sent, by means of a public electronic communications network, a message or other

matter that was grossly offensive.”

At issue is roughly 30 seconds of his sermon (the entire sermon can be watched [here](#)), in which he warns, “this nation is going to enter a great tribulation and a great trial. To judge by some of what I have heard in the past few months you would think that Islam was a little more than a variation of Christianity and Judaism, not so. Islam’s ideas about God about humanity, about salvation are vastly different from the teaching of the Holy Scriptures. *Islam is heathen, Islam is satanic, Islam is a doctrine spawned in hell.*”

The case is considered a landmark trial at a time when radical Islamic Imams are not being investigated, let alone prosecuted, for inciting violence as Belfast’s own Islamic leader has done.

What could not be more ironic– is the prosecution’s primary witness against McConnell is an Iraqi Islamist living in Northern Ireland who publicly praised ISIS. Nearly one year prior to McConnell’s trial, Raied Al-Wazzan of the Belfast Islamic Centre told the BBC that ISIS was a positive force in Mosul, his home city in his home country of Iraq. *He claimed: “Since the Islamic State took over, it has become the most peaceful city in the world.”*

McConnell told the *Belfast Telegraph* that the PPS’s [Public Prosecution Service] case against him was, “summed up by the fact that the chief witness the prosecution is calling is a man who made highly controversial comments about ISIS. A man who praised the rule in Iraq of Isis murderers will be giving evidence against me – it’s like a pantomime.”

“I don’t know how he will have the nerve to stand in a court and testify against me,” he continued, “and I don’t know how the PPS has the nerve to think he is in a position morally to do that.”

Pastor McConnell’s solicitor Joe Rice said, “There are many

bizarre features to this prosecution.” Not to mention the serious concern that “The logic of the decision to prosecute Pastor McConnell means that many clerics – including Catholic priests and other evangelical pastors – could now find themselves under investigation for preaching with passion.”

At the trial in December 2015, McConnell explained why he refused the lesser punishment of an informed warning. He also expressed that he has “no hatred in my heart for Muslims,” and pointed out that Whitewell Tabernacle funds medical care for 1,200 Muslim children in Kenya and Ethiopia. Despite this, he emphasized, he “won’t be stopped from preaching against Islam.”

While McConnell’s trial was widely covered, the outcome was not. On January 5, 2016, the court found McConnell “not guilty.”

Judge Liam McNally told the court that, “the words upon which the charges were based, while offensive, do not reach the high threshold of being ‘grossly offensive.’

“The courts need to be very careful not to criminalise speech which, however contemptible, is no more than offensive. It is not the task of the criminal law to censor offensive utterances.”

One of McConnell’s character witnesses, Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) Member of Parliament (MP) Sammy Wilson said McConnell “should never have been in court in the first place.”

He’s right—but he and other MPs should demand investigations into the Belfast Islamic Centre—and not just for Al-Wazzan violating the Communications Act of 2003—for using the radio to express his support for ISIS.

Belfast is not far from Dublin. And Dublin is now sadly home base for ISIS when recruiting new followers in Ireland and

Northern Ireland—the very people Al-Wazzan praised. These recruits are primarily “naturalized” Irish citizens from Nigeria and other Islamic countries. According to a former head of M16, roughly 500 young men left the U.K. to fight with ISIS and 300 have returned.

The U.K.’s national security is at risk, and like Houston’s former mayor Annise Parker, taxpayer dollars are wasted on pastors’ sermons and public bathrooms, instead of addressing immediate threats of terrorists living in plain sight.