

Court Finds Pastor Arrested for Reading Bible Publicly Not Guilty

Superior Court Judge Timothy Freer found two men not guilty Tuesday after they were charged and tried for reading the Bible aloud in front of a line of people waiting to enter the Department of Motor Vehicles in Hemet, Calif.

One of them is a pastor, Bret Coronado, of Reconciled Christian Fellowship in Hemet, and the other is an elder of the church.

The prosecution needed to prove the men were required to obtain a permit before engaging in their expressive activity of reading the Bible. After the prosecution rested, the defense team made a motion for directed verdict, and Judge Freer entered a verdict of "not guilty" before the defense was required to present its own witnesses and evidence.

Attorney Robert Tyler, one of the defense attorneys and general counsel for Advocates for Faith and Freedom, states, "The prosecution failed to meet its burden of proof that our clients committed a crime when they read the Bible aloud in front a line of people."

Nic Cocis, defense attorney and co-counsel, remarks, "These men were exercising their First Amendment right of free speech. They were simply sharing their faith on public property, and the criminal charges should never have been filed."

In order for the prosecution to prove a permit was required under Title 13, Section 1860 of the California Administrative

Code, it was required to prove the defendants were engaged in a "demonstration or gathering," as defined in Section 1851.

Judge Freer ruled there was insufficient evidence to prove the men conducted either a demonstration or gathering. Both definitions require the conduct of defendants be such that it had "the effect, intent or propensity to draw a crowd or onlookers," and the prosecution couldn't prove that to be the case.

Tyler states, "We were very pleased because Judge Freer also agreed that the law was unconstitutional because it gives too much unfettered discretion to law enforcement in determining whether someone's speech or other expressive activity has the effect, intent or propensity to draw a crowd or onlookers.

"Although Judge Freer's final verdict did not include a finding on constitutionality, his comments certainly vindicate our argument that the law is unconstitutional."

Advocates for Faith and Freedom previously filed a federal lawsuit for unlawful arrest before these criminal charges were filed against the men. That lawsuit was stayed, pending the outcome of this criminal case. The federal case will now proceed against the California Highway Patrol before Judge Dolly Gee in the United States District Court, Central District of California, in Los Angeles.

Cocis emigrated from Romania at the age of 13 when the country was still being controlled by a Communist regime.

"This case has particular importance to me because my family was persecuted for our Christian faith in Communist Romania, and I will fight to protect the freedom of speech and to ensure that the same persecution doesn't occur in the United States," he says.