

Pastor Convicted for Preaching John 3:16 Refuses to Back Down, Files Appeal

A retired pastor in Northern Ireland is refusing to back down after being convicted and fined for preaching a gospel message near a hospital where abortions are performed.

Clive Johnston, 78, announced this week that he has filed an appeal after a judge found he violated Northern Ireland's Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Act while preaching a sermon based on John 3:16 near Causeway Hospital in July 2024.

The conviction has become a flashpoint in the growing debate over religious liberty, public evangelism and free speech throughout the United Kingdom.

According to Fox News, Johnston was found guilty of being "reckless" regarding whether his actions of preaching and standing near a large cross might "'influence' someone accessing the hospital's abortion services."

The court imposed a fine of 450 pounds, approximately \$614.

Johnston maintains his message had nothing to do with abortion.

According to Fox News, he said he did not mention abortion during the sermon and was simply pointing people "to the hope found in Jesus Christ."



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Rather than retreating from public ministry, Johnston has chosen to challenge the ruling.

"If this conviction is allowed to stand, it will signal that basic Christian witness and public expressions of faith can be criminalized simply because they take place in the wrong location," Johnston said. "That should concern every person who values freedom of religion and freedom of expression, regardless of their views on abortion."

His legal team at The Christian Institute said the appeal will challenge the conviction as a "disproportionate interference with fundamental rights protected under the European Convention on Human Rights and codified into UK law under the Human Rights Act, including freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom of peaceful assembly."

The Christian Institute said Johnston is the first person prosecuted under the law for preaching a sermon unrelated to abortion within a protected zone.

Simon Calvert, deputy director of The Christian Institute, said the case centers on a much larger question than one pastor or one sermon.

"This case was never about harassment or intimidation," Calvert said. It is about "whether the state can criminalize the peaceful expression of Christian faith in a public place."

Calvert warned that the consequences extend far beyond Northern Ireland.

"The implications of this dangerous ruling reach far beyond one individual pastor in Northern Ireland," he said. "If public authorities can prosecute someone for reading the Bible and preaching on God's love, then fundamental freedoms are at risk."

Johnston previously warned that government officials were claiming authority over what forms of Christian expression may be permitted in public spaces.

“Once the state claims the authority to decide that peaceful biblical preaching is an unacceptable ‘influence,’ in some places, the space for Christians to live out and share their faith in public life risks becoming increasingly narrow,” Johnston told Fox News Digital.

He also raised concerns about where such restrictions could ultimately lead.

“And we can go further than faith-related concerns – if an act that doesn’t mention abortion is criminalized, what other acts could fall within the reach of this law?” he said.

Johnston made clear that his decision to preach near the hospital was intentional.

“The whole point of preaching within the buffer zone was to stand against the chilling effect that these zones have on gospel preaching,” he said.

As Christians around the world watch this event unfold, Johnston’s appeal serves as a reminder that opposition to the Gospel is not new. Scripture repeatedly calls believers to remain faithful under pressure, stand firm in their convictions and continue proclaiming the truth of Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul urged believers to persevere until the end, declaring in 2 Timothy 4:7, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

Johnston’s appeal now moves forward as a test case with implications for the future of Christian expression in the United Kingdom.

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