

Stop Bullying Christians, Texas AG Tells Houston City Hall

Stop bullying people of faith.

That's the bottom line of a harshly-worded letter written by Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott to Houston City Attorney David Feldman.

Feldman's office sent subpoenas to five Houston pastors last month demanding that they turn over any sermons dealing with homosexuality and gender identity issues. They also wanted sermons or correspondence that referenced Annise Parker, the city's first openly lesbian mayor.

The subpoenas were issued in a response to a lawsuit related to Houston Equal Rights Ordinance (HERO), also known as the "Bathroom Bill."

Abbott called the subpoenas "aggressive and invasive" and said they show "no regard for the very serious First Amendment considerations at stake."

"Whether you intend it to be so or not, your action is a direct assault on the religious liberty guaranteed by the First Amendment," Abbott wrote, demanding that the subpoenas be rescinded.

"You should immediately instruct your lawyers to withdraw the city's subpoenas," he added. Late Wednesday, the city issued a statement to the Wall Street Journal:

"Mayor Parker agrees with those who are concerned about the city legal department's subpoenas for pastor's sermons. The subpoenas were issued by pro bono attorneys helping the city prepare for the trial regarding the petition to repeal the new

Houston Equal Rights Ordinance (HERO) in January.

Neither the mayor nor City Attorney David Feldman were aware the subpoenas had been issued until yesterday. Both agree the original documents were overly broad. The city will move to narrow the scope during an upcoming court hearing. Feldman says the focus should be only on communications related to the HERO petition process.”

However, as of the writing of this column, the subpoenas have not been rescinded.

Alliance Defending Freedom attorney Christina Holcomb said there is no evidence to suggest the city is “backing off” or “narrowing” its subpoena request.

“The shame that the city of Houston has brought upon itself is real, but the claim that it has changed course is not,” she said. “The city has so far taken no concrete action to withdraw the subpoenas.

Furthermore, the subpoenas themselves are the problem – not just their request for pastors’ sermons. The city is not off the hook from its illegitimate request for e-mails, text messages, and other communications in which these pastors, who are not even party to this lawsuit, may have disagreed with the mayor. The way to fix this is to withdraw the subpoenas entirely. Otherwise, the city’s and the mayor’s overtures are simply more window-dressing intended to shield them from public scrutiny.”

Abbott accused lawyers representing the city of being “inappropriately aggressive.”

“In good faith, I hope you merely failed to anticipate how inappropriately aggressive your lawyers would be,” he said. “Many, however, believe your actions reflect the city government’s hostility to religious beliefs that do not align with city policies.”

To call Houston's Equal Rights Ordinance "controversial" is an understatement. The ordinance was approved by the City Council but never submitted to voters for approval.

The sticking point for many churches was a provision in the ordinance that would (among other things) allow men who identify as women to use the restrooms of their choice – and vice versa.

Dave Welch, the executive director of the Texas Pastor Council, is one of the five ministers who received a subpoena. He said he will not be intimidated by the mayor.

"My answer to that is – bring it on," he told me on Tuesday. "We are dealing with bullies used to getting away with abuse of power."

Rev. Welch and Attorney General Abbott support something I explore in my new book, "God Less America." This is a situation where those who preach tolerance and diversity are the least tolerant and diverse of all.

Abbott called on City Hall to act immediately to "reassure the people of Houston that their government respects their freedom of religion and does not punish those who oppose city policies on religious grounds."

I'm not buying the mayor's so-called change of heart – not one bit.

On Wednesday, she took to Twitter to express what I believe are her true feelings.

"If the 5 pastors used pulpits for politics, their sermons are fair game," Parker tweeted.

And during a Wednesday afternoon press conference she was less than contrite when a reporter asked why it was necessary to subpoena sermons.

“One word in a very long legal document which I knew nothing about and would never have read – and I’m vilified coast to coast, it’s a normal day at the office for me,” she said with a chuckle.

Mayor Parker got her hand caught in the religious liberty cookie jar.

“The people of Houston and their religious leaders must be absolutely secure in the knowledge that their religious affairs are beyond the reach of the government,” Abbott wrote. ‘Nothing short of an immediate reversal by your office will provide that security.”

If nothing else, this shameful episode has exposed the fact that Houston City Hall is infested with anti-Christian bigots who bully preachers in the name of equality.

Todd Starnes is host of Fox News & Commentary, heard on hundreds of radio stations. Sign up for his American Dispatch newsletter, be sure to join his Facebook page, and follow him on Twitter. His latest book is “God Less America.”