

Three Christian Evangelists Standing Trial on Ridiculous Accusations

Three Christian evangelists were to appear at Bristol Magistrates' Court Feb. 23, charged with public order offenses.

They are being supported by the Christian Legal Centre and will be represented in court by allied solicitor Michael Phillips.

Michael Overd, Adrian Clark, Michael Stockwell and another friend were preaching in a Bristol shopping area last July. They took it in turns to speak and to respond to questions, objections and abuse from the crowd that gathered.

The men explained the difference between Islam and Christianity, using the Bible and references to the Quran. They spoke of God's love and the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

After about an hour, however, Overd's preaching was interrupted by a police officer. He was then forcibly removed from the scene by the officer.

Video evidence from Overd's bodycam shows him falling to the floor and crying out in pain.

'Challenging Muslims'

The video also records the police officer saying that Overd was "challenging homophobia" (sic) and "challenging Muslims," to which Overd responded that he and his friends were "just saying what the Bible says."

The recording goes on to show the police officer asking for advice on whether Overd can be charged with any offenses, but

only after Overd had been forcibly removed from the scene.

Overd had previously been arrested and stood trial for his street preaching but successfully contested the charges, citing the importance of freedom of speech.

He and his friends have been charged with offenses under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and the Public Order Act 1986.

‘Over the top’

Overd and his three friends were preaching in Bristol’s Broadmead Shopping Centre on July 6 last year.

They took it in turns to preach, and as they did so, a crowd gathered. At points, the crowd was loud and aggressive, with some swearing and being abusive toward the men. There was also, however, debate between the preachers and members of the crowd, especially on the differences between Islam and Christian belief. Several hecklers appeared to be supportive of Islam.

Police did not arrive on the scene until about an hour into the preaching. A police officer approached Clark, asking him to turn off his amplification, which he did.

Shortly afterwards a mounted police officer asked Clark to stop preaching so that she could speak to him. While Clark spoke with the officer, Overd took over the preaching.

Soon afterwards, another police officer approached Overd and told him he was “causing a disturbance” and was “not welcome.”

The officer told Overd that he was going to give him a dispersal notice. But instead of doing so, he forcibly removed Overd from the scene, despite Overd (who suffers from chronic back pain) crying out in pain.

The officer is later heard asking for advice on whether the men could be charged with offenses, saying that Overd

has “gone over the top” and “he’s just wound up people.”

Public order offenses

Overd and his friends were eventually taken to Patchway Custody Centre, Bristol, held for several hours, and released on police bail to return for questioning.

They were charged under Section 31 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 for using “threatening or abusive words or behavior or disorderly behavior within the hearing or sight of a person likely to be caused harassment, alarm or distress, thereby, and the offense was religiously aggravated.”

The charge against one of the men was subsequently dropped, however.

But the remaining three were additionally charged with offenses under the Public Order Act 1986.

Overd, Clark and Stockwell will argue that the case raises crucial issues of freedom of speech and freedom of religion. They highlight that they simply explained the Bible’s teaching and sought to respond to questions, comments and objections raised by those in the crowd.

The men say that they cannot and should not distort the plain teaching of the Bible that Jesus is God’s Son and the only way to God.

Given that much of the debate centered on objections to their teaching about key differences between Islam and Christianity, the men have submitted a report from an expert witness, highlighting that their explanation reflects what the Bible and Quran say.

‘Shut out of public debate’

Commenting on the importance of the case, Andrea Williams, chief executive of the Christian Legal Centre said:

“Mr. Overd and his friends are motivated by love. They want to share the good news of Jesus with people who might not otherwise hear it. Sometimes that means addressing the false claims of other religions or ideologies.

“Robust debate is sometimes necessary, especially when objections are being raised or abuse hurled. We shouldn’t be afraid of it.

“The aggressive treatment of Mr. Overd and his friends by the police and prosecution is shocking. The police should be defending freedom of speech, not clamping down on it.

“‘Offense is a very subjective thing and is easily manipulated to shut down viewpoints that people simply don’t like. Any suggestion that there is a right not to be offended must be strongly resisted. In today’s democracy, we need the freedom to debate, challenge and disagree.

“But this was not just an attack on freedom of speech but an abuse of power. We will not only be seeking the acquittal of these Christian men but seeking an apology from the Chief Constable of Avon and Somerset police, compensation and assurances that officers are better trained to protect freedom of expression.”

“We cannot allow the Gospel to be shut out of public debate. Please pray for a successful outcome to this important case.”
{eoa}

This article originally appeared on Christian Concern.