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Criminalizing Christianity: Sweden's Hate Speech Law

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Ake Green, pastor of a Pentecostal congregation in Kalmar, Sweden, was sentenced to one month in prison on a charge of inciting hatred against homosexuals. Pastor Green was prosecuted for his sermon in a January hearing, where he was found guilty of "hate speech against homosexuals" for a sermon preached in 2003.

According to press reports, Pastor Green condemned homosexuality as "abnormal, a horrible cancerous tumor in the body of society." His comments were delivered as part of a sermon, drawn from biblical texts, dealing with the sin of homosexuality. In Sweden, biblical preaching is now a crime.

The prosecution of a Christian pastor for the crime of preaching a biblical sermon sets a new low for the culture of political correctness. Evangelical Christians—and all those who cherish civil liberties—should observe this case with great interest and concern. Those who reject biblical truth are now set on silencing Christian pulpits—all in the name of tolerance, acceptance, and diversity.

The logic of this prosecution is driven by the ardent determination of homosexual activists to make all criticism of homosexuality illegal. The logic of many hate crimes statutes plays right into this ideological strategy. By silencing all opposition, advocates for the normalization of homosexuality have the public square entirely to themselves, with defenders of biblical sexuality and the traditional family left without a voice and risking prosecution for any language or argument deemed offensive by the guardians of political correctness.

In response to the protest by the Slovakian Interior Minister, Cecilia Julin, the Swedish ambassador to Slovakia, explained: "Swedish law states that public addresses cannot be used to instigate hatred towards a certain group." So much for free speech and religious liberty.

Sweden passed its hate speech statute in 2002, explicitly including "church sermons" as subject to the law's restrictions. As the Riksdag, Sweden's parliament, debated the legislation, the nation's chancellor of justice released a public note stating that a church sermon characterizing homosexual behaviors as sinful "might" be considered a criminal offense. That "might" must now be replaced with "will," proved by Pastor Green's conviction and jail term.

Swedish homosexual activists pledged to monitor church sermons for content in order to report any offensive preaching to the authorities. Soren Andersson, president of the Swedish Federation for Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Rights told Christianity Today that his group would "report hate speech regardless of where it occurs." He now argues that religious liberty must not be used as a rationale for offending homosexuals.

The Swedish church newspaper Kyrkans Tidning reported that the prosecutor in this case, Kjell Yngvesson, justified the arrest and prosecution of Pastor Green on these grounds: “One may have whatever religion one wishes, but this is an attack on all fronts against homosexuals. Collecting Bible citations on this topic as he does makes this hate speech.”

This is one of the most shocking and revealing statements uttered by any legal official in recent times. This prosecutor has the audacity to argue that one may hold to “whatever religion one wishes,” so long as one does not preach from the Bible and address the issue of homosexuality from a biblical perspective. The simple practice of reading biblical texts teaching the sinfulness of homosexuality is now against the law in Sweden.

What can explain this arrogance? Northern Europe has become one of the most secularized regions of the globe, with the Scandinavian nations leading the trend towards the utter abandonment and eradication of the Christian faith from modern society. Surveys and polls consistently report an alarmingly low percentage of Scandinavian citizens who hold to any religious faith at all, much less biblical Christianity. Sweden’s rejection of Christian morality and biblical teachings on sexuality is now obvious for all to see. Marriage is fast disappearing in the nation, as children are routinely born out of wedlock, couples commonly cohabit, and homosexuality has been normalized.

This is the inevitable consequence of Europe’s loss of faith. When vital Christianity disappears, commitment to biblical morality quickly evaporates. The Bible then becomes a text that must be silenced and biblical preaching becomes a crime. This massive reversal of moral logic defies the imagination, even as this prosecution of a Christian pastor raises the specter of a new wave of persecution against believers.

The recent expansion of hate crimes laws in Canada, intended to outlaw all criticism of homosexuality, is convincing proof that these trends are not limited to Europe. The logic of restrictions on free speech is clear. The issue of homosexuality has also become a test case for American civil liberties. Where homosexual behavior was once characterized as sodomy and thus criminalized, some now openly call for the criminalizing of all “hate speech” addressed to homosexuals. Earlier this year, the U.S. Senate passed a hate crimes provision attached to a defense appropriation bill. Sponsored by senators Ted Kennedy [D-MA] and Gordon Smith [R-OR], the law would have levied fines against anyone found to have committed a crime that is “motivated by prejudice based on the race, color, religion, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, or disability of the victim.” The provision passed the Senate, but died in the conference process with the House of Representatives. Nevertheless, the fact that the bill passed in the Senate sends the nation an urgent warning, and the logical jump from “hate crimes” legislation to codes against “hate speech” is small indeed.

Where this leads, of course, is to the eradication of all criticism of homosexuality itself. In part, the logic of hate crimes legislation is driven by the therapeutic culture, which translates every important issue into a matter of emotional response. Accordingly, assertions that homosexuality is sinful are now criticized as harmful to the emotional health and comfort of those engaged in the homosexual lifestyle.

Thus, in the name of sensitivity, tolerance, and political correctness, such offensive speech must be eliminated, the pulpit must be silenced, and faithful pastors are now fair targets for condemnation and, eventually, for criminal prosecution. Pastors in Sweden are now on notice—if you preach what the Bible teaches about homosexuality, you will go to jail. The watching world and the praying church must bear witness to this violation of conscience. We are now witnesses to the criminalizing of Christianity.

