

JUSTICE COMMITTEE

HATE CRIME AND PUBLIC ORDER (SCOTLAND) BILL

SUBMISSION FROM BOTHWELL EVANGELICAL CHURCH

I am responding, particularly in relation to the question noted below, based on the proposals within the Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Bill, on behalf of the members of Bothwell Evangelical Church.

Stirring up offences

6. *Do you have views on the merits of Part 2 of the Bill and the plans to introduce a new offence of stirring up of hatred?*

One thing our church members cherish is free speech. The ability to be able to speak to family, friends and neighbours and share our faith and talk about the Bible. The Bible contains many things which we believe are positive for an individual and society and we believe the good news of Jesus Christ really does change lives. Others may disagree and find the Bible offensive, but our current freedoms mean that we can debate these things and people have the ability to express their views. Obviously, this should at all times be carried out with courtesy and respect. Our church members would wish to see this freedom for all protected. We do not think that this legislation intends to silence people- but that may be the unintended consequence, as people fear being branded a criminal for simply voicing a deeply held belief and conviction.

We are sure that the Law already covers threatening or abusive behaviour which would cause people fear. Is there really a need to add to that existing legislation?

Consequently, we would have a concern with regards to free speech from a religious perspective. We would like to see this clause made as strong as possible. We believe it must protect more than mere discussion or criticism. Please allow vigorous, but respectful debate on religion to continue in our society. Otherwise, we believe that society will be worse off as a result.

Finally, should a church member be debating their Christian beliefs with an unknown person, who dislikes what our member is saying, what is to stop this person stating that rather than the debate being a disagreement over views, in fact it is stirring up hatred? Who would determine if this was disagreement or hatred? Are our police suitably resourced to deal with a potentially high number of complaints as a result of this Bill should it become law?

I do hope that the Committee will consider these views and assess the impact this Bill could have on lively but respectful debate between those who hold differing views, a freedom that we sincerely cherish.

Bothwell Evangelical Church
22 July 2020