



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on September 27, 2012

N.O. Bourbon Street Ban on Sharing Christian Faith Prompts Lawsuits

Following the arrests of several individuals for sharing their Christian faith on New Orleans' notorious Bourbon Street, a 2011 ordinance that effectively bans religious speech in the city's "anything goes" party district has prompted a series of First Amendment lawsuits.

On September 21 the ACLU, normally working for those opposed to religious expression, filed a federal lawsuit on behalf of a member of [Raven Ministries](#), a New Orleans-based Christian outreach that found its members targeted by New Orleans police under the "Aggressive Solicitation" ordinance initiated for the city's French Quarter district, where Bourbon Street is located. Mayor Mitch Landrieu approved the measure, which prohibits congregating in the district "for the purpose of disseminating any social, political, or religious message between the hours of sunset and sunrise." Individuals and groups that pursue Christian street outreach in the area argue that the ordinance amounts to a ban on religious expression that is protected by the First Amendment. Those convicted of violating the ban may be fined and imprisoned for up to six months.

The ACLU is representing one of several members of the Raven outreach who were arrested along with the group's leader, the Rev. Troy Bohn, after New Orleans police stopped them while they were sharing their Christian message with passersby on the evening of September 14. "We had our cross set up, and one young man that works with us was sharing the gospel," Bohn explained to [ChristianNews.net](#). Bohn said that as he and others were preaching, a New Orleans police officer approached the group. "He said, 'There's an ordinance against aggressive solicitation and you are under arrest,'" Bohn told the news source. "They began to handcuff Logan [one of the street preachers] and they said, 'We're going to cuff you guys so you can't take off.'"

Bohn added that as the incident unfolded, one of the police officers ordered: "Be sure to find out what church they are with because we are going to start going after these churches." Bohn told [ChristianNews.net](#): "It kind of chilled me. Are we the threat preaching Jesus? No, I kind of like to think that we are holding back the darkness."

The ACLU noted that members of the ministry do not solicit donations from passersby, and, contrary to





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what has been reported in media, do not use abusive or offensive language. "They preach a message of love and salvation," the secular legal group said in a press release. "They typically display a large cross, and wear t-shirts saying things like 'I Love Jesus' and 'Ask Me How Jesus Changed My Life.' They ask people if they are familiar with the gospel, and invite conversation. However they do not harass, follow, or make physical contact with passersby."

Justin Harrison, a staff attorney for the ACLU of Louisiana, said in the complaint that the arrests are "nothing more than a heavy-handed attempt by the City of New Orleans to selectively regulate the cultural, political, and religious tone on Bourbon Street. Because only messages of a social, political, or religious perspective are restricted, the [ordinance] imposes a particularly egregious [First Amendment] restriction."

Meanwhile the Christian-based [Alliance Defending Freedom](#) (ADF) has also filed a lawsuit against the ordinance on behalf of a local pastor, the Rev. Paul Gros of Vieux Carre Assembly of God Church in the French Quarter. Last May Gros was warned by police to stop sharing his faith on Bourbon Street, something he has been doing for the past 30 years every Tuesday and Friday evening.

"City Officials in New Orleans have chosen to criminalize speech about faith while allowing just about every other conceivable topic to be discussed and exposed," said ADF legal counsel Joseph La Rue. "It's not up to the government to decide the topics we can and cannot discuss. The First Amendment protects an individual's freedom of speech. This law should be declared unconstitutional."

While the ordinance has attracted media attention after the [arrests of nine individuals](#) accused of slurs and harassment against homosexuals at the "gay"-themed Southern Decadence event in the French Quarter in early September, the action against Gros goes back several months, when New Orleans police threatened the pastor with arrest for his Bourbon Street outreach. La Rue said the threats were unwarranted. "Sometimes he had a sign that said, 'Jesus Loves You,'" La Rue recalled to the [Christian Post](#). "Sometimes he might have had a cross, but he would engage people as they walked by. He would just speak about his faith. He didn't grab anybody. He did not solicit any donations. He didn't try to stop anyone from passing him. He would only keep talking to them if they stopped and engaged in the conversation. He was always polite and never said anything that would be considered disrespectful or hateful."

La Rue said the police harassment is a clear violation of Gros' First Amendment guarantees. "The government simply cannot tell us the subjects that we can't discuss," La Rue told the *Post*. "The First Amendment doesn't allow that. The city has said, 'You can come on to Bourbon Street, you can discuss lots of different things, but not religion.' Government isn't allowed to do that to us. We get to decide what we will discuss, not the government."



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