

October 16, 2014

The Honorable Annise D. Parker
Mayor of Houston, Texas
P. O. Box 1562
Houston, Texas 77251

Dear Mayor Parker:

The last several days have brought about intense controversy, as you know, about subpoenas issued to pastors opposed to the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance (HERO), requiring that these pastors submit “all speeches, presentations, or sermons related to HERO, the Petition, Mayor Annise Parker, homosexuality, or gender identity prepared by, delivered by, revised by, or approved by you or in your possession.”

As of this writing, you have indicated that you did not know about the subpoenas when they were issued, and that you will seek to narrow the scope of the inquiry. At the same time, however, you posted on Twitter the following: “If the 5 pastors used pulpits for politics, their sermons are fair game. Were instructions given on filling out anti-HERO petition?”

Your Honor, we represent a broad coalition of Baptists from across the political and theological spectrum. We disagree on many things, but, as Baptists, we have a long history of support for religious liberty and separation of church and state. On that, we stand united. Our ancestors stood in the colonial and revolutionary eras demanding the disestablishment of state churches, the end to state licensing of preachers, and the cessation of penalties for religious dissenters. Our forebears—some of whom were imprisoned—petitioned for a First Amendment guarantee of religious liberty, for everyone, because we believe as Baptists that God alone is Lord of the conscience.

We ask you, and the City of Houston, to acknowledge that the issuing of these subpoenas is improper and unwarranted, in order to ensure that such will not happen again. Whatever a church or synagogue or mosque or any other religious body believes about marriage or sexuality, the preaching and teaching of those bodies should be outside the scope of government intimidation or oversight.

This is about more than “walking back” a bad public relations move. This is about something that is fundamental to basic, self-evident rights that are endowed not by government but by nature and nature’s God.

Sincerely,

Russell D. Moore, President
Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission
of the Southern Baptist Convention

J. Brent Walker, Executive Director
Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty

Frank Page, President
Executive Committee
of the Southern Baptist Convention

Suzii Paynter, Executive Coordinator
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

Jim Richards, Executive Director
Southern Baptists of Texas Convention

David Hardage, Executive Director
Baptist General Convention of Texas

Jimmy Pritchard, President
Southern Baptists of Texas Convention

Jeff Johnson, President
Baptist General Convention of Texas

Robert B. Sloan, Jr., President
Houston Baptist University

Gus Reyes, Director
Christian Life Commission
Baptist General Convention of Texas