

[Transcript] Faith on Trial: Hillsong / Not Guilty

It's about an hour before the court opens, we're outside the Downing Centre local court in Sydney, it's right in the heart of the city, it's just across from Hyde Park.

It's a bit of a chilly morning but it's pretty sunny and there's been some people gathered outside the courts in 6am to actually wait for Brian Houston's verdict.

Brian Houston has been charged with concealing his father's child sex abuse.

Specifically, he's on trial for not reporting his dad's the police, his dad Frank had confessed to him.

And what's at stake today?

Well what's at stake is Brian Houston's reputation, it's on the line this morning, if this is a guilty verdict then his whole foundation of his church which he started 40 years ago is really based on a lie, there's already been a bit of tension this morning between different groups outside the court, emotions are really highly charged, a lot of people have lost sleep over this because it's really personal, they have had friends who were victims of child abuse, they may have been victims of child abuse themselves and their faith has really been tested.

They believed in Hillsong, they believed in the church, they believed in Brian and it's all crumbling.

Okay well the doors are open now, we've been waiting for a while but we're going to have to turn the mics off now because you can't record inside a courtroom.

Brian Houston's hearing is listed for court 2.5.

Security let us in about 8.30am, the case was due to start an hour later.

On Drayon and I waited outside that courtroom in a cramped corridor.

Victims of abuse rub shoulders with Brian's family members, I asked one of them if they'll chat to me, not a bloody chance, one of his relatives says, then Bobby, his wife glides past wearing a soft pink coat, here we go again she says, as she says to the line up outside the court, Brian wearing a sharp dark suit and looking like he's just been to the barbers is a step behind, he says morning all.

The doors of the court open, everyone clambers for a seat, Brian sits on the left hand side of the court behind his barrister Phillip Bolton with Bobby and his daughter Laura at his side, Brett Singstock Frank Houston's victim comes in later, the court staff find him a seat, they wheel it in.

At 9.54am, everyone stands as Magistrate Gareth Costoffi walks in.

He begins delivering his verdict, he runs through the prosecution case, he calls some of their arguments a tall order, it's an agreed fact that Brian Houston's father Frank sexually abused Brett Singstock in 1970.

The magistrate says the prosecution had to prove beyond reasonable doubt that Brian Houston did not have a reasonable excuse not to tell police about his father's sex abuse of a child.

Magistrate Costoffi stops speaking at 11.28am, more than 90 minutes later, ending with his decision, he says I'm not satisfied beyond a reasonable doubt that the accused did not have a reasonable excuse for not reporting the information he had to the police.

Without being the case, one of the elements of the offence before the court remains unproven and the verdict therefore must be not guilty.

I've been kind of not guilty today but in fact I've always been not guilty.

I'm going to express my sadness to Brett Singstock, genuine sadness about what my father

did to him and all his victims, he was obviously a serial pedophile who probably will never know the extent of the pedophilia and a lot of people's lives have been tragically hurt and for that I'll always be very sad.

It's been 30 minutes since the verdict has been handed down.

That's Brian speaking outside court.

Bobby and Laura, his daughter, cried when they heard the decision.

But I'm not my father.

I did not commit this offence and I feel a sense of relief that at least the truth has come out.

After his short public statement, Brian walked away, trailed by cameras.

Andreia notices Brian's brother Graham, who had also sat through the trial.

They met months ago, earlier in the trial.

She'd offered him some mints when he had a coughing fit.

He said hello when he saw her and then he went on tape.

It's just such a relief, I can tell you, I will say that.

It's just so criminal that he was even charged, it's just so wrong.

You've been here since the first day of the trial.

I've been here every minute of every day.

All right, thank you.

We keep waiting outside for Brett.

We've heard from Brian, we've heard from the magistrate.

But what about the victim? What does Brett have to say?

So Brett's just about to come out and make a statement.

He was in court, he was just in front of us.

So there's a massive media pack, there's probably like five TV cameras and there's only five networks in Australia.

As we're waiting for Brett, we chat about the case.

So the prosecution had to prove beyond reasonable doubt that Brian didn't have a reasonable excuse for not going to the police.

And what he heard in court and what he relayed the evidence was is that Brett Sengton had told other people that he wanted to remain anonymous and he didn't want this to be made a big deal of.

So what the judge found was that just because it was convenient for Brian Houston not to report his father to police about being a pedophile it didn't mean it wasn't unreasonable that he didn't do so because what he'd been told by other people was that Brian, that Brett didn't want to go to the police.

The magistrate said that it was on the prosecution to prove that there was no reasonable excuse for Brian not to go to the police.

There was debate in court about what Brian and Brett said in a phone call when details about Frank's abuse were being dealt with at Hillsong.

Brian claims that he had a phone call with Brett where he said I don't want you to go to the police.

If anyone's going to the police it's me and I don't want to do it.

Brett disputes that so there's two different recollections of that phone call

which was made about 20 years ago and the judge said well it's hard to base that recollection on something that two people have heard when there aren't any contemporaneous notes.

I turned around and saw Brett walking out of the shadows of the building into the midday sun.

He was holding a handwritten note. His hands were shaking.

Brett was getting the chance to have his say

more than 40 years after he was abused

in his home in Kudji in Sydney by Frank Houston.

Today I've received some recognition for a seven year old child

who was brutally abused at the hands of a self-confessed child

breakers and coward Frank Houston.

Frank Houston was no pioneer for Christianity.

His legacy remains a faded memory of a pedophile.

Regardless of today's outcome I have received a life sentence.

Laming the victim is as repulsive as the assaults themselves.

This battle has gone on for 45 years.

45 years have added trauma from this.

Institution and their supporters.

Listening, it seemed that Brett was saying

the prosecution in Brian Houston did not result in a conviction

but it was still important it went to court.

I would like to thank the Crown, Mr Harrison and Miss Dide

and Detective Hamill for their dedicated work.

Also Senator David Shubridge for his tireless work in Standing Firm

for clergy, child sexual abuse survivors who still do not have a voice in this country.

It should not be this hard.

A special thanks to my wife Lisa for her strength and support

through such difficult years.

And thank you to my fellow supporters who have turned up here today for my support.

That's all I'd like to say, thank you. Thank you.

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I'm Anthony Dowsley, the host of The Devil's Apprentice,

a podcast which tells the story of the murder of two policemen.

It's the story of one of the men convicted of that crime

and his 22 year fight for freedom.

It's a story of sacrifice, secrets and bloodshed

and you'll hear directly from the man at the centre of it all.

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He speaks publicly for the first time.

The same goes, the truth will set you free.

I'll leave it at the part that will take 22 years.

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