

That I may have Boldness

John Bunyan was an Anabaptists preacher and author of the Christian Classic, Pilgrim's Progress. He was a firm believer in the Kings James Bible as the very word of God, and a Dissenter in the days of Oliver Cromwell. He spent 12-1/2 years of his life in Bedford Prison for refusing a government permit or license to preach. This is a transcript of the Court proceedings when he was sentenced to prison.

JUDGE WINGATE: "Mr. Bunyan, you stand before this Court accused of persistent and willful transgression of the Conventicle Act, which prohibits all British subjects from absenting themselves from worship in the Church of England, and from conducting worship services apart from our Church. You come, presumably with no legal training, and yet without counsel. I must warn you, sir, of the gravity of the charge, the harshness of the penalty, in the event of your conviction, and the foolhardiness of acting as your own counsel in so serious a matter. I hold in my hand the depositions of the witnesses against you. In each case, they have testified that, to their knowledge, you have never, in your adult life, attended services in the Church of this parish. Each further testifies that he has observed you, on numerous occasions, conducting religious exercises in and near Bedford."

JOHN BUNYAN: "The depositions speak the truth. I have never attended services in the Church of England, nor do I intend to do so. Secondly, it is no secret that I preach the Word of God whenever, wherever, and to whomever God pleases to grant me opportunity to do so. I have no choice but to acknowledge my awareness of the law which I am accused of transgressing. Likewise, I have no choice but to confess my guilt in my transgression of it. As true as these things are, I must affirm that I neither regret breaking the law, nor repent of having broken it. Further, I must warn you that I have no intention in the future of conforming to it."

JUDGE WINGATE: "It is obvious, sir, that you are a victim of deranged thinking. If my ears deceive me not, I must infer from your words that you believe the State to have no interest in the religious life of its subjects."

BUNYAN: "The State, M'lord, may have an interest in anything in which it wishes to have an interest. But the State has no right whatever to interfere in the religious life of its citizens."

JUDGE WINGATE: "The evidence I hold in my hand, even apart from your own admission of guilt, is sufficient to convict you, and the Court is within its rights to have you committed to prison for a considerably long time. I do not wish to send you to prison, Mr. Bunyan. I am aware of the poverty of your family, and I believe you have a little daughter who, unfortunately, was born blind. Is this not so?"

BUNYAN: "It is, M'lord."

JUDGE WINGATE: "Very well. The decision of the Court is this: In as much as the accused has confessed his guilt, we shall follow a merciful and compassionate course of action. We shall release him on the condition that he swear solemnly to discontinue the convening of religious meetings, and that he affix his signature to such an oath prior to quitting the Courtroom. That will be all, Mr. Bunyan. I hope not to see you here again. May we hear the next case?"

BUNYAN: "M'lord, if I may have another moment of the Court's time?"

JUDGE WINGATE: "Yes, but you must be quick about it. We have other matters to attend to. What it is?"

BUNYAN: "I cannot do what you ask of me, M'lord. I cannot place my signature upon any document in which I promise henceforth not to preach. My calling to preach the gospel is from God, and He alone can make me discontinue what He has appointed me to do. As I have had no word from Him to that effect, I must continue to preach, and I shall continue to preach."

JUDGE WINGATE: "I warn you, sir, the Court has gone the second mile to be lenient with you, out of concern for your family's difficult straits. Truth to tell, it would appear that the Court's concern for your family far exceeds your own. Do you wish to go to prison?"

BUNYAN: "No, M'lord. Few things there are that I would wish less."

JUDGE WINGATE: "Very well, then, Mr. Bunyan. This Court will make one further attempt in good faith to accommodate what appears to be strongly held convictions on your part. In his compassion and beneficence, our Sovereign, Charles II, has made provision for dissenting preachers to hold some limited meetings. All that is required is that such ministers procure licenses authorizing them to convene these gatherings. You will not find the procedure burdensome, and even you, Mr. Bunyan, must surely grant the legitimacy of the State's interest in ensuring that any fool with a Bible does not simply gather a group of people together and begin to preach to them. Imagine the implications were that to happen! Can you comply with this condition, Mr. Bunyan? Before you answer, mark you this: should you refuse, the Court will have no alternative but to sentence you to a prison term. Think Sir, of your poor wife. Think of your children, and particularly of your pitiful, sightless little girl! Think of your flock, who can hear

you to their heart's content when you have secured your licenses. Think on these things, and give us your answer, sir!"

BUNYAN: "M'lord, I appreciate the Court's efforts to be as you have put it, accommodating. But again, I must refuse your terms. I must repeat that it is God who constrains me to preach, and no man or company of men may grant or deny me leave to preach. These licenses of which you speak, M'lord, are symbols not of a right, but of a privilege. That will be unfortunate. In any event, I strongly suspect that we have heard the last we shall ever hear from Mr. John Bunyan. Now, may we hear the next case?"

Judge Wingate nor the world heard the last of John Bunyan, for during his lengthy incarceration in the old Bedford Jail, with his King James Bible as his constant companion and guide, Bunyan gave to the world the epic religious classic Pilgrim's Progress, arguably the greatest literary work in the history of the world next to the Bible. Bunyan was denied pen and paper while in prison, so he wrote Pilgrim's Progress with pieces of charcoal from the fire that kept his body warm, using a stick or piece of straw from his bed of straw, writing on the paper caps from the curdled milk they gave him to drink. During the twelve and a half years of his imprisonment, he was repeatedly asked to sign the license, the permit to preach, to which Bunyan replied to the prison guard, "If in a moment of delirium, I should reach forth my hand to sign that paper, you would do me service, if you would draw your sword and sever my arm from my body."

Implied therein is the principle that a mere man can extend or withhold them according to his whim. I speak not of privileges, but of rights. Privileges granted by men may be denied by men. Rights are granted by God, and can be legitimately denied by no man. I must therefore, refuse to comply."

JUDGE WINGATE: "Very well, Mr. Bunyan. Since you persist in your intractability, and since you reject this Court's honest effort at compromise, you leave us no choice but to commit you to Bedford jail for a period of six years (Editor's Note: This six ultimately became 12-1/2 for his repeated refusal to sign the license). If you manage to survive, I should think that your experience will correct your thinking. If you fail to survive