

The Breedlove Papers John Bunyan's Trial

Thomas Breedlove was an English legal scribe whose job it was to record court proceedings. Breedlove passed from the scene around 1675 leaving nearly one-thousand verbatim accounts of primarily minor trials from the period of 1660 to 1675, this during the time of King Charles II. What follows is the transcript of the trial of His Majesty, King Charles II, against John Bunyan, tinker and sometime preacher of a relatively new and strange--as well as illegal cult--known as Baptists.

(For purposes of readability, Breedlove's language and spelling has been modernized. The substance of the record remains unchanged, however, the necessity of copious footnotes to explain archaic language has been eliminated.)

PROCEEDINGS, being a true account of the trial of John Bunyan, Tinker, of Bedfordshire, His Lordship, Judge Wingate presiding at the Courthouse in Bedfordshire on October 3, in the Year of our Lord, 1660. The Accused is charged with willful and deliberate Violation of various and sundry Royal and Parliamentary Edicts. His Trial this Day, however, respects a single Charge: namely, Violation of the Conventicle Act, first proposed by Her Most High and Mighty Majesty, our Late Beloved Queen Elizabeth, and reinstated by His Beneficent Highness, King Charles II. All Parties being in Place, and the Witnesses having been sworn, the trial proceeds.

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. Are you cognizant of these facts, and do you understand the charge?

BUNYAN: I am, and I do, M'lord.

JUDGE WINGATE: In truth, I hope you do. Now, I hold in my hand the depositions of the witness 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. These depositions have been read to you, have they not?

BUNYAN: They have, M'lord.

JUDGE WINGATE: In that case, then, this court would be profoundly interested in your response to them.

BUNYAN: Thank you M'lord. And may I say that I am grateful for the opportunity to respond. Firstly, the depositions speak the truth. I have never attended services in the Church of England, nor do I

intend ever to do so. Secondly, it is no secret that I preach the word of God whenever, wherever, and to whomever He pleases to grant me opportunity to do so.

Having said that, M'lord, there is a weightier issue that I am constrained to address. 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 future of conforming to it. It is, on its face, an unjust law, a law against which honorable men cannot shrink from protesting. In truth, M'lord, it violates an infinitely higher law--the right of every man to seek God in his own way, unhindered by any temporal power. That, M'lord, is my response.

JUDGE WINGATE: This Court would remind you, sir, that we are not here to debate the merits of the law. We are here to determine it you are, in fact, guilty of violating it.

BUNYAN: Perhaps, M'lord, that is why YOU are here, but it is most certainly not why I am here. I am here because you compel me to be here. All I ask is to be left alone to preach and to teach as God directs me. As, however, I must be here, I cannot fail to use these circumstances as an opportunity to speak against what I know to be an unjust and odious edict.

JUDGE WINGATE: Let me understand you. You are arguing that every man has a right, given him by Almighty God, to seek the Deity in his own way, even, if he chooses, without benefit of the English Church?

BUNYAN: That is precisely what I am arguing, M'lord. Or without benefit of any church.

JUDGE WINGATE: Do you know what you are saying? What of Papists and Quakers? What of pagan Mohammedans? Have these the right to seek God in their own misguided way?

BUNYAN: Even these M'lord.

JUDGE WINGATE: May I ask if you are particularly sympathetic to the views of these or other such deviant religious societies?

BUNYAN: I am not, M'lord.

JUDGE WINGATE: Yet you affirm a God-given right to hold any alien religious doctrine that appeals to the warped minds of men?

BUNYAN: I do, M'lord.

JUDGE WINGATE: I find your views impossible of belief. And what of those who, if left to their own devices, would have no interest in things heavenly? Have they the right to be allowed to continue unmolested in their error?

BUNYAN: It is my fervent belief that they do, M'lord.

JUDGE WINGATE: And on what basis, might I ask, can you make such a rash affirmation?

BUNYAN: On the basis, M'lord, that a man's religious views--or lack of them--are matters between his conscience and his God, and are not the business of the Crown, the Parliament, or even, with all due respect, M'lord, of the Court.

However, much I may be in disagreement with another man's sincerely held religious beliefs, neither I nor any other may disallow his right to hold those beliefs. No man's rights in these affairs are secure if every other man's rights are not equally secure.

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: You are a tinker by trade, are you not, Mr. Bunyan?

BUNYAN: That is correct, M'lord.

JUDGE WINGATE: Would you mind apprising this Court of the extent of your formal schooling?

BUNYAN: Not at all, M'lord. Able I am to read and write, and that with difficulty.

JUDGE WINGATE: I surmised as much. I think I perceive why you are unable to appreciate the disaster that would accompany your views should ever they hold sway in our society. I myself--and I say this in all modesty--am not inconsiderably trained in the historian's discipline. If you were half so well-versed yourself, you would instantly recognize the fatal flaw in your reasoning. Throughout history, virtually every significant human tragedy has come about as a result of divergent religious views. Nation against nation. Brother against brother. War. Destruction. Devastation. Time and time again. And why? I shall tell your why, sir. It is because men cannot agree on which God to worship, and how to worship Him

Now, after a long and arduous struggle, we have succeeded in forging a conformity in the religious beliefs of all Englishmen. All our problems will be resolved when everyone finally agrees to accommodate himself, and adopt the same orthodoxy of religious opinion. No more religious wars! No more divisive doctrinal disputes! Think of it, Mr. Bunyan! Does this not portend a society of which any man would be proud and happy to be a part?

BUNYAN: To a degree, M'lord, it admittedly does. But only if everyone can be convicted by virtue of reasoning alone to adopt identical views of God. The society that you describe is an appealing one, but I fear the cost is far too high. It would necessitate that honest men repudiate convictions honestly held.

JUDGE WINGATE: You are, Mr. Bunyan, a strong-willed and opinionated man.

Yet, this Court finds it fascinating to speak with you, and wishes, time permitted, further discussion of our respective philosophies. But, alas, time is passing swiftly, and other cases await our attention. Let us move, then, to the matter before us, shall we? 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 right 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: Inasmuch 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 is it?

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: Mr. Bunyan, you are trying the patience of this Court.

BUNYAN: That is not my intention, M'lord.

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. The Court will not require you to sign any documents, but will require on your verbal commitment to proceed through proper channels to obtain licenses. 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 to 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 flock, who can hear you to their hearts' content when you shall 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. 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. If you manage to survive, I should think that your experience will correct your thinking. If you fail to survive, 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.

(While in prison, John Bunyan produced one of the most marvelous of all Christian works: Pilgrim's Progress.)