

***THE 1663 TRIAL OF FRANCIS HOWGILL and the TESTAMENT, WILL, and COUNSEL TO HIS DAUGHTER ABIGAIL (abridged)***

[...]

Judge.—Clerk, read it [the indictment]. So he read it: That Francis Howgill had willfully, obstinately, and contemptuously denied to swear when the oath [of loyalty to the king] was tendered.

Francis Howgill.—I deny it.

Judge.—What do you deny?

Francis Howgill.—The indictment.

Judge.—Did not you deny to swear; and the indictment convicts you that you did not swear?

Francis Howgill.—First, I gave unto the court the substance of the oath, as you all know. Secondly, I told you I did not deny it out of obstinacy or willfulness, neither in contempt of the king's law or government; for my will would rather choose my liberty than bonds; and I am sensible it is likely to be a great damage to me. I have a wife and children, and some estate, which we might subsist upon, and do good to others; and I know all this lays at stake; but if it were my life also, I durst not do but as I do, lest I should incur the displeasure of God. And do you judge I would lose my liberty willfully, and suffer the spoiling of my estate, and the ruining of my wife and children, in obstinacy and willfulness? Surely nay.

Judge.—Jury, you see that he denies the oath, and he will not plead to the indictment, only excepts against it because of the form of words; but you see he will not swear, and yet he saith he denies the indictment, and you see upon what ground.

Then they called the jailer to witness and swear, that the last assizes [court session] he did refuse, etc. and the jury without going from the bar, gave in the verdict, guilty; and then the court broke up. The next day, towards evening, when they had tried all the prisoners, Francis was brought to the bar to receive his sentence.

The judge stood up, and said:—Come, the indictment is proved against you, what have you to say why sentence shall not be given?

Francis Howgill.—I have many things to say, if you will hear them. First, As I have said, I denied not out of obstinacy or willfulness, but was willing to testify the truth in this matter of

obedience, or any other matter wherein I was concerned; Second, Because swearing is directly against the command of Christ. Third, Against the doctrine of the apostles. Fourth, Even some of your principal pillars of the Church of England, as Bishop Usher, sometime Primate of Ireland, said in his works, the Waldenses did deny all swearing in their age, from the command of Christ and the apostle James, and it was a sufficient ground; and Doctor Gauden, late Bishop of Exeter, in a book of his. I lately read, cited very many ancient fathers, to show that for the first three hundred years Christians did not swear; so that it is no new doctrine; to which the court seemed to give a little ear, and talked one to another, and Francis stood silent.

[...]

Judge.—Why do you not come to church and hear service, and be subject to the law, and to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake?

Francis Howgill.—We are subject, and for that cause we do pay taxes, tribute, and custom; and give unto Caesar the things that are his, to wit, worship, honour and obedience: and if thou mean the parish assembly, I tell thee faithfully, I am persuaded, and upon good ground, their teachers are not the ministers of Christ, neither their worship the worship of God.

[...]

Then the judge interrupted.

Judge.—Well, I see you will not swear, nor conform, nor be subject, and you think we deal severely with you; but if you would be subject we should not need.

Francis Howgill.—I do so judge indeed, that you deal severely with us for obedience to the commands Of Christ; I pray thee, canst thou show me how any of those people for whom the act was made, have been proceeded against by the statute? though I envy no man's liberty.

[...]

Judge.—Well, you will meet in great numbers, and do increase; but there is a new statute which will make you fewer.

Francis Howgill.—Well, if we must suffer, it is for Christ's sake, and for well doing.

Francis then being silent, the judge pronounced the sentence, but spake so low, that the prisoner, though near to him, could scarcely hear it. The sentence was: “You are put out of the king's

protection, and the benefit of the law; your lands are confiscated to the king during your life, and your goods and chattels forever; and you to be a prisoner during your life.

Francis Howgill.—*A hard sentence for my obedience to the commands of Christ. The Lord forgive you all.*

So he turned from the bar; but the judge speaking he turned again, and many more words passed to the same purport as before.

At last the judge rose up, and said:—*Well, if you will yet be subject to the laws, the king will show you mercy.*

Francis Howgill.—*The Lord hath showed mercy unto me; and I have done nothing against the king, nor government, nor any man, blessed be the Lord, and therein stands my peace; for it is for Christ's sake I suffer, and not for evil doing.*

And so the court broke up. The people were generally moderate, and many were sorry to see what was done against him; but Francis signified how content and glad he was, that he had anything to lose for the Lord's precious Truth, of which he had publicly borne testimony, and that he was now counted worthy to suffer for it. [He spent the remaining five years of his life in Appleby Prison]

[...]

Francis Howgill bore his imprisonment with great patience, and evinced so much meekness, resignation, and love, as greatly to gain the love and esteem of the jailer's whole family, and of many others in the town of Appleby; and such was the confidence the people placed in him, that whilst in prison, they frequently referred their differences to him for settlement.

Often in the course of his [final] sickness, he said he was content to die; that he was ready, and praised God for the sweet enjoyments and refreshments he had received on that, his prison-house bed, whereon he lay, freely forgiving all who had a hand in his restraint. He said: "*This was the place of my first imprisonment for the Truth, here at this town, and if it be the place of my laying down the body, I am content.*" Several persons of note, inhabitants of Appleby, as the mayor and others, went to visit him; some of whom praying that God might speak peace to his soul, he sweetly replied: "*He hath done it.*"

A few hours before his departure, some friends, who lived several miles from that place, went to visit him; he inquired of all their welfare, and prayed fervently, with many heavenly expressions, that the Lord, by his mighty power, might preserve them out of all such things as would spot and

defile. And a little after, he was saying something concerning weeks, or a time, after which persecution would be ended, but his weakness was so great, and his voice so low, that it was not fully heard. A while after, recovering a little strength, he said: “I have sought the way of the Lord from a child, and lived innocently as among men; and if any enquire concerning my latter end, let them know that I die in the faith which I lived in, and suffered for.”

After these words, he spake some other in prayer to God, and sweetly finished his course in much peace, on the 20th of 11th month, 1668, in the fiftieth year of his age; after being a Prisoner for the testimony of Jesus, from the later part of the 5th month, 1663. His solicitude as a Christian parent, is remarkably exemplified in the following address to his daughter.

*THE UNCHANGEABLE TESTAMENT, AND WILL, AND COUNSEL OF FRANCIS HOWGILL, LEFT TO HIS DAUGHTER ABIGAIL HOWGILL.*

Daughter Abigail,—This is for thee to observe, and keep, and take heed unto all the days of thy life, for the regulating of thy life and conversation in this world; that thy life may be happy, and thy end blessed, and God glorified by thee in thy generation. These things I bequeath unto thee, and counsel thee ever to observe, being the chief things alone I have to bestow upon thee; which I prize more than outward riches. Do thou so also, and observe and keep my sayings; and I charge thee before God, and by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, that thou observe what I say; the which I am moved of the Lord to leave behind for thee, and in tender love and affection unto thee, my daughter, that the Lord may give his blessing unto thee, and make thy ways prosperous, and thy latter end peace.

First of all, know this: I was never born to great possessions, nor did inherit great matters in this world; but the Lord hath always endowed me with sufficiency and enough, and hath been as a tender Father unto me; because my heart trusted in Him, and did love the way of righteousness from a child.

[...]

And now, dear child, hearken unto the words of my mouth, and listen unto my counsel; ponder these things I leave behind me, unto thee to observe, that thy days may be long upon the earth, and blessed and comfortable unto thee, and an honour to God in thy generation. The time when thou wast born and came into the world, was a time of deep exercise and trouble with me, not from the Lord, who always spake peace unto me, and did sustain me; but by reason of the adversary of mankind, who always seeks to devour the good in all, and is the sower of discord and mischief in the hearts of them who fear not the Lord, neither abide in his counsel; in whom he enters, as any place is given unto his temptations, and corrupts the mind: but though it was a great trial that came upon me, the Lord kept my heart in uprightness unto Him and gave me

much patience; so that though the earth had been removed into the sea, and all outward things had run into confusion, and nature had changed its course, the Lord gave me a resolution and strength not to be troubled, neither offended; because He did support me.

At that time wast thou born; and therefore I called thy name Abigail; which signifies, the father's joy or delight; for in thee I was comforted; and my present trouble mitigated.

My counsel unto thee is, that thou remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth, and fear the Lord in thy youth; and learn to know Him, and serve Him all thy days. First, seek the kingdom of God, and the righteousness thereof; it is not far from thee; it is within thee; it consists in life and power; and it stands in righteousness, truth, equity, justice, mercy, long-suffering, patience, love, light, and holiness: this is the being and centre thereof. Therefore seek not lo here or lo there without thee, in this or that outward observation; for many seek there and never find it; but seek, and thou shalt find; wait, and thou shall receive.

If thou inquire in what must I seek, and what must I wait in, and how must I seek; I inform thee, thou must silence all thy own thoughts; and thou must turn thy mind to that which is pure, holy, and good, within thyself; and seek and wait in that, in the Light of Jesus Christ, wherewith thou art enlightened; which shows thee when thou dost evil, and checks and reproves. Take heed unto that, and it will show the evil motions and thoughts; and as thou lovest it, it will subdue them, and preserve thee for the time to come, out of evil: for though thou be born into the world a reasonable creature, yet thou must be born again, and be made a new creature; or else thou canst not enter into God's kingdom.—Thou must know the seed of the kingdom in thyself, of which thou must be born, and formed again into God's image. I have told thee that God hath sown it in thee, a grain of it, a measure of it, a portion of it, a measure of Light and Truth, of righteousness and holiness. Keep in thy mind to that, and love it, and thou wilt feel the Heavenly Father working in thee, and creating thee to life, through Jesus Christ, who hath enlightened thee; and thou wilt feel the power of the Lord strengthening thee in thy little, and making thee to grow in the immortal seed of his kingdom, and to out grow, and over grow all evil; so that thou wilt daily die to that, and have no pleasure in it; but in the Lord, and in his goodness and virtue shed abroad in thy heart; which thou wilt taste and feel within, and have joy and comfort therein.

Love the Lord with thy heart and soul, even Him that made thee, and gave thee and all things in heaven and earth a being; still wait for the knowledge of Him in thyself: He is not far from thee; but near unto thee, and unto all that call upon Him in an upright heart. And do thou inquire of thy dear mother, she will inform thee; she knows Him, and the way to life and peace; and hearken unto her instruction.

God is a Spirit, a pure Spirit of light, life, and power. He it is that searcheth the heart, and shows thee when thou dost evil, or thinkest evil, or speakest evil; and shows unto men and women their

thoughts. That which shows the evil is good, and that which shows a lie is Truth. This is within; take heed to it. This is called God's Spirit in the Scriptures; believe in it, love it, and it will quicken thy heart to good, and it will subject the evil. Here is thy teacher near thee; love it. If thou act contrary to it, it will condemn thee; therefore take heed unto this Spirit of Truth, and it will enlighten and enliven thee; and it will open thy understanding, and give thee to know what God is, and to do that which is good and acceptable in his sight. This Spirit never errs, but leads out of all error into all truth.

[...]

O Abigail! these are great and weighty things, not to be slighted! Accompany thyself always with them that fear the Lord, and fear and worship Him in spirit and truth, and lead a holy and a blameless life and conversation; deny not them, but love them, and suffer with them. Take heed that thou follow not the hireling teachers, who preach for gain and lucre, and abide not in Christ's doctrine; believe them not, heed them not, they do people no good; but thou wilt see them thyself: they have an outside show of Godliness sometimes, but deny the power of God, and true holiness. Remember I have told thee, who have had perfect knowledge of them; but be sure that thou let nothing separate thy love from God and his people: those are his people that keep his law, and obey Christ's voice, and lead a holy life; and they were ever hated, and belied, and persecuted; and evil spoken of, always by bad and evil loose people: these are God's people, and his love, and peace, and blessing is with them. Do thou grow as a natural branch, up among them, of the living Vine; and continue all thy days in obedience unto God's will; and thou wilt feel joy and love in thy heart, which above all things covet after, and thou shalt attain to and obtain everlasting peace; which the Lord grant unto thee, according to the riches of his mercy and love; which endure forever and ever, Amen.

*Excerpts from*

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