

MOSCOW'S NEO-PURITANS REWRITE SALEM WITCH TRIAL HISTORY

By Nick Gier

Giving up of witchcraft is, in effect, giving up the Bible.

--Samuel Hibbert, English philosopher and physician

I have long believed that we should not be embarrassed by anything in the Bible.

--Moscow pastor Douglas Wilson

On June 10, 1692 Bridget Bishop, described as a "shrewd businesswoman and owner of a prosperous inn," was hanged as a witch on Gallows Hill in Salem, Massachusetts. During Bishop's trial teenage girls fell into fits at the sight of her and witnesses claimed that her ghost had tormented them. Several pastors questioned the use of this type of "spectral" evidence, which was not sanctioned by the Bible or English Common Law, but the trials continued unabated.

The witch hunting frenzy culminated with 185 people accused, 19 hanged (14 women), and one man Giles Corey crushed to death because he would not enter a plea. Three convicted women died in prison along with one of their infants.

In early October of 1692 Governor William Phips terminated the special court and dismissed the judges. Public sentiment was turning against the trials and his own wife had become one of the accused.

The general fear was that soon everyone would be charged with a crime of the dark arts. Even the great Rev. Cotton Mather's wife was accused of being a witch after giving birth to a deformed child.

Douglas Wilson, founder of New St. Andrews College and pastor of Christ Church (both in Moscow), is very fond of our Puritan Fathers. Wilson praises them for their piety and their commitment to follow God's Word exactly.

Christopher Schlect, a Fellow of History at Wilson's college, has written a very interesting reinterpretation of the witch trials in the Christ Church journal *Credenda Agenda* (7:1,2).

As a follower of Wilson's "biblical absolutism," Schlect warns his readers not to reject the reality of witchcraft nor the biblical injunction "you shall not suffer a witch to live" (Ex. 22:18).

Schlect also claims if it had not been "sober minded clergy" reaffirming Puritan standards of justice, there would have been far more executions. But the clergy who were consulted by the court were only concerned about spectral evidence, and apart from that reservation, they urged "speedy and vigorous prosecutions" of all those who "have rendered themselves obnoxious."

The Puritan ministers did not object to using torture to obtain confessions nor to the admissibility of testimony from hysterical teenage girls, who scarcely met the legal standard of two credible witnesses.

Ironically, Schlect resorts to the separation of church and state in his defense of the Puritan clergy. The witch court was a civil not a religious body, and Schlect praises the pastors for their "godly virtue of submission to authority." Insisting that the trials be stopped would have made them guilty of the sin of "humanistic individualism."

Schlect ignores the fact that the clergy were intimately involved in determining who was a witch and then recommending the accused for trial. Cotton Mather was called in to investigate family complaints about Mary Glover, who was hanged for witchcraft in 1688.

Martha Carrier's sons were tortured into testifying against her, and as she was led to the gallows, Rev. Cotton Mather yelled out that she was a "rampant

hag." It was Thomas Barnard, the assistant minister at her church, who had arranged for the brutal interrogation of Carrier's sons.

At the hanging of the Rev. George Burroughs, the condemned was able to recite the Lord's Prayer flawlessly, a sign that all Puritans would take as proof that the charge of witchcraft was false. The crowd was amazed and clamored for his release, but Cotton Mather asserted his pastoral authority and insisted that the execution proceed.

When Gov. Phips dismissed the special court in 1692, three Puritan leaders, including Cotton Mather, objected and urged that they continue. Later Mather gathered source materials from the trials and wrote *The Wonders of the Invisible World*, in which he defended the convictions of five defendants.

Only one man came forward to ask forgiveness for his role in the trials, and he was not a minister. His name was Samuel Sewall, a prosperous merchant and one of the witch judges. On January 14, 1697, in Boston's Third Church Sewall's minister read out his confession, in which he took upon himself "the blame and shame" of the whole affair. Sewall was wearing a rough hair undershirt and he did penance for "condemning the guiltless" for the rest of his life.

Schlect states that there is a "glaring need in our own society for a resurgence of stalwart Puritanism." Would that mean that disobedient children would be stoned to death in the city square? Following a biblical injunction the Puritan fathers passed such a law in 1648, but fortunately no child was ever prosecuted.

In *Credenda Agenda* (3:9,11) Greg Dickison, another Wilson congregant, declares that "if we could have it our way," then there would be capital punishment for "kidnapping, sorcery, bestiality, adultery, homosexuality, and cursing one's parents."

In 1994 Wilson and a neo-Confederate co-author from Louisiana wrote a booklet entitled *Southern Slavery As It Was*. In it they argue that Americans had a

biblical right to own African slaves. The people of Moscow rose up in protest and Wilson withdrew his screed from circulation, primarily because 20 percent of it was discovered to be plagiarized. To this day Wilson stands by the tract's basic thesis.

Let's hope that Wilson and his followers do not "have their way" to reestablish Puritan justice. Let's also support the "humanistic individualism" that allows free men and women to condemn "godly magistrates" who would make ancient religious laws the laws of the land. If American individualism is a sin, then I'm with Martin Luther who once said: "Sin boldly for grace abounds."

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. The main source of information for this column came from Eve LaPlante's *Salem Witch Judge* (HarperOne, 2007). For more on the Douglas Wilson see www.home.roadrunner.com/~nickger/Wilson.htm