

## The Book of Sports, or Declaration of Sports (King James 1st)

Written by K B Napier

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The Book of Sports, or Declaration of Sports, was issued by King James 1<sup>st</sup> in 1617. It listed sports and recreations permitted on Sundays and other 'holy days'. This is the same James whose command led to our Authorised Version of the Bible. Just as Henry 8

th was an unrepentant sinner and yet was used by God to inaugurate the Reformation, so the James who gave us such a magnificent Bible also issued laws that were confused in their theology.

In collaboration with the bishop of Chester, Thomas Morton, James wanted to bring about a peaceable solution to arguments between the Puritans and 'the gentry' (mainly Catholics) in Lancashire. This localised law, however was soon passed on all of Britain in 1618. In many ways the declaration was, to some today, rather amusing, though the activities mentioned were far from amusing to strict Puritans.

Archery, dancing, and "leaping, vaulting, or any other such harmless recreation" was acceptable. "May-games, Whitsun-Ales, Morris dancing and the setting up of May Poles" were also considered to be harmless. Added to the list were women who wished to decorate their churches with rushes.

If you examine the Maypole traditions and Morris dancing, you will find much that could be condemned by Puritans and even scripture itself, because of their sexual content. Certain cruel and bloodthirsty 'sports' were condemned as illegal, including bull and bear baiting. 'Interludes' and bowling were also condemned as unsuitable for the Sabbath and holy days. 'Interludes' were very short plays in between longer main plays, or music played between acts. Though morality plays came under this heading, they were probably not condemned because of their supposed moral tone.

The Declaration came about because "precise persons" amongst the Puritans wanted to ban all recreational activity on the specified days. It also meant to admonish Catholics who did not attend their churches on the Sabbath before enjoying recreational pursuits. This might seem strange to us, as James was responsible for production of the 1611 Bible, but we should not assume a Christian character because of it. So, people could indulge in recreational activities if they had firstly attended a 'divine service'! At least this fits well with the idea of the confessional... do what you like so long as you confess to the priest afterwards!

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James' son, king Charles 1<sup>st</sup>, re-issued the Declaration in 1633 under the onerous title: "*The King's Majesty's Declaration to His Subjects Concerning Lawful Sports to be Used*". Some think it was penned by the then new Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, but he denied it. Also, as the main text is virtually the same as the one by James, it could best be described as a 'make-over' of the older text, with the addition of 'wakes and ales' to prohibited activities.

Charles ordered all ministers to read out the declaration, or they would be removed from office. But, Puritan power was growing, and in the lead-up to the English Civil War, anger grew against the Declaration, which was abolished with the fall of Laud in 1640. The Declaration was burned publicly in 1643, two years before Laud was executed. One cannot legislate personal conscience!

Today, it seems awful that a man should be executed for holding to his own beliefs. And so it is. Let God be the judge of those with unbiblical beliefs. On the other hand, no Christian can stand by and allow parliament to dictate to them what they may, or may not, do, if it contradicts scripture.

The original Declaration came about as James was on his Royal Progress from London to Edinburgh, when he observed certain antagonism between northern Puritans and their 'betters', the gentry. The Puritans refused to use the word 'Sunday', because of its 'heathen origin', and they had a very strict attitude towards the Sabbath. (It should not be assumed, however, that all Puritans were of this same strictness, because they were not). James, in an effort to placate Roman Catholics who, in countries ruled by Romanists were used to playing games on Sundays after they attended their churches. This was an affront to Puritans, and so James attempted, unsuccessfully, to find a suitable solution.

Many ministers, and even the Lord-Mayor of London, refused to obey the edict and so were taken to task by law... very similar to the way today's unscriptural laws are bringing prosecution upon Christians who refuse to obey sinful declarations. The result amongst Puritans who were well and truly angry, was their resort to a rigid and Judaistic form of Sunday worship. But, James could not handle this kind of objection. As we read in 'Harris's Life of Charles 1<sup>st</sup>', James "was an arrant bungler in affairs of government... By his self-conceit and injudiciously thwarting his subjects, he hastened those domestic conclusions that ruined his son after him." This kind of reaction may come upon the present-day governments who so hideously try to force Christians to obey sinful edicts!

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Modern Christians think it wise to try to bring in laws to uphold God's word. But, it is folly, for God says revenge is His. And, it is patently obvious that as the majority of people are not Christian, they will target any Christian law to remove it. We should, rather, stand up for what is right and oppose what is wrong. To bring in godly laws is to invite immediate reaction from wicked people, who will demand they are removed and replaced by something sinful and far worse. Far better to have the freedom to speak from conscience and to make our objections known. We can then argue for generalised social good and show that this is for the benefit of all... and not just Christians.

We cannot legislate others to comply with God's word! If we do so, they will eventually and quickly kick-back and become antagonistic. Thus, Christians must fight to retain freedom of speech and freedom of conscience, rather than laws to banish sin (which will not happen anyway). In this way we can openly oppose what is evil and make a moral stand in the public forum. Then, if something done is held to be evil, we can try to overturn it. An example is the way homosexuality is being given legal backing. What should we do? Yes, we should say that it is against God's law... but concentrate on showing it is wrong from biological, physical, health, social and economic angles. In this way we are not just 'pushing a Christian agenda' but are using the cool logic of a scientific approach.... an approach created by God anyway. In many ways we must learn to be more crafty, as scripture advises!

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