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Latest: Emily Bickford Asks Court to Let Daughter Attend Church

A true story of faith under pressure. Read the first half below, then continue online.

KEY SPIRITUAL TAKEAWAY

"Let the little children come to me,"

(Transliterated from the original Hindi.)

They had gathered only to pray. When prayer itself becomes the target, faith is proved not by words but by staying.

The Story - Part One

The U.S. Supreme Court has been asked to decide whether a mother in Maine can take her own 13-year-old daughter to church. Liberty Counsel filed the petition on November 19 on behalf of Emily Bickford, after the Maine Supreme Judicial Court ruled in September that she could not take her daughter Ava to Calvary Chapel Greater Portland, or even read her the Bible. The petition was docketed by the Supreme Court on Monday, November 23, as case No. 26-665, And the father's response is due December 23.

Ava is not a stranger to the church her mother wants to take her to. She attended Calvary Chapel Greater Portland for three years, became a Christian there in 2021, and was baptized in the congregation. Her mother became a Christian in 2017. Bickford has primary custody of her daughter, yet the custody order gives Ava's father, Matthew Bradeen, the sole say over the girl's religious life.

The order is sweeping. Bradeen alone decides whether Ava may attend any service, gathering or event connected to Calvary Chapel, what church material, literature, video or messaging she may see, and whether she may associate or communicate with any member of the congregation. He also holds the sole right to govern her exposure to the teachings of any religious philosophy or of the Bible in general. Bickford is barred from reading the Bible or any religious material to her daughter, and Ava is not permitted to contact her friends from the church.

The dispute began with a December 16, 2024 order from the Portland District Court. That court found there was no showing of harm to the child from a belief system rooted in the Bible. Even so, it took issue with Calvary Chapel's teachings on eternal salvation, heaven, hell, angels and demons, and with the church's verse-by-verse, chapter-by-chapter way of preaching through Scripture. The court sided with Bradeen, who objects to evangelical churches and to the church where his daughter was baptized.

The trial court also made findings that cut the other way. It found that Bickford had brought Ava to Calvary Chapel without telling her father and had concealed the extent of that involvement, including the baptism and a church retreat. Bickford told the court she lives under God's law, not the state's. Those findings matter, because the case is about what a parent told, and failed to tell, the other parent too.

The Turning Point - What Happens Next

The story reaches a life-changing moment that changes everything -- and what seemed like the end is only the middle. Two reports disagree on the numbers, and one question is left unanswered: will the CCTV footage ever come out? Read the full story to find out what happens next.

PERSONAL REFLECTION & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When gathering to pray carries a real cost, what keeps a community coming together anyway -- and what would keep you coming?

2. The pastor's sister shielded him with her own body and fainted under the blows. What does costly, self-giving love look like in your own family or church?

3. When justice is delayed and a complaint is withdrawn under threat, how do believers hold on to truth without giving in to fear -- or to hatred?

READ THE FULL STORY

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