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James Ireland 1748-1806

By Homer Massey

In modern times much concern has been expressed for the humane treatment of prisoners. In 1949 in Geneva, Switzerland an international conference was held to establish principles for the humane treatment of victims of war, including prisoners taken during times of war. Better known as the Geneva Conventions, these rules are often called to mind when infractions are discovered and made known through the media.

In colonial times, however, such rules had not been established, and in some cases during the period when Baptist preachers were imprisoned for preaching without a license in the Virginia colony, officials charged with punishing offenders often resorted to questionable treatment. One such instance has been called “the most noted case of imprisonment during that trying time of our denominational history, that of James Ireland in Culpeper jail.”¹ Ireland was one of two preachers imprisoned during the period from 1768 to 1778 who left written accounts of their ordeals, the other being Joseph Craig. Keith Harper and Martin Jacumin have recently edited and published *Esteemed Reproach: The Lives of Rev. James Ireland and Rev. Joseph Craig*. In Ireland’s account we find interesting experiences that some might consider torture and attempted murder.

After James Ireland’s baptism and early ministry in Virginia, “his growing popularity and success excited the indignation of the rulers of the Established Church, and brought down upon his head fierce opposition.”² During the fall of 1769 Ireland participated in the organization of a Baptist congregation at Carter’s Run in Fauquier

¹ Lewis P. Little, *Imprisoned Preachers and Religious Liberty in Virginia* (Lynchburg VA: J. P. Bell and Co., 1938), 150.

² *Ibid.*, 159.

County. He had been advised that if he preached as scheduled the following day he would be arrested. His response was “I sat down and counted the cost, freedom or confinement, liberty or a prison; it admitted of no dispute. Having ventured all upon Christ, I determined to suffer all for Him.”³

Ireland then preached as he had promised, and the Parson of the Episcopal Church appeared, along with a local magistrate, and arrested him while he was praying and asked him by what authority he was acting as a minister. He answered, “the Author of the gospel.”⁴ Ireland tells us “they retorted upon me with abusive epithets, and then inquired of me if I had any authority from man to preach? I produced my credentials, but these would avail nothing, not being sanctioned and commissioned by the Bishop. They told me that I must give security not to teach, preach or exhort, for twelve months and a day, or go to jail. I choose the last alternative.”⁵

Baptist historian Garnett Ryland reports:

Bad as were all eighteenth century jails, the one-room building in Culpeper where Ireland lay from November until April was one of the worst, its keeper the most avaricious and heartless, and his persecutors the most outrageous. They abused him with the vilest epithets, reached through the bars to take hold of him, stripped and flogged the Negroes in his audience and practiced unmentionable obscenity to his face as he preached through the little iron gate. They filled the jail with fumes of burning sulphur and pepper, they exploded gun powder under it and formed a plot to poison him. He suffered from a scorching fever and his health was permanently injured. He was not twenty-two, yet the high-spirited youth bore it all with courage, dignity and serenity. Friends near the Court House supplied him with food and fuel (for heating) and paid the jailer’s fee of four shillings and eight pence to visit him. A fellow prisoner, who at first threatened his life, became his devoted body-guard and protector. A period of spiritual despondence passed away

³ Keith Harper and C. Martin Jacumin (editors), *Esteemed Reproach: The Lives of Rev. James Ireland and Rev. Joseph Craig* (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 2005), 121.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 122.

and he had so strong a sense of the divine presence that he headed his letters, “From my Palace in Culpeper.”⁶

Ireland wrote, “When I would be preaching through the little iron grate, the wicked and persecutors would ride up at a gallop among my hearers, until I have seen persons of respectability under their horses’ feet...To such a height of arrogance and wickedness have these miscreants went, that when I have been engaged in preaching the gospel of my dear Redeemer to the people, they have got a table, bench or something else, stood upon it, and made their water right in my face.”⁷

That these young preachers suffered imprisonment and indignities was amazing to begin with, but that they continued to preach under the most oppressive conditions is almost beyond comprehension. Could they have understood the necessity of their sufferings in order to eventually gain greater religious freedom? As they grew older they undoubtedly came to this conclusion, especially as they interacted with other ministers and shared experiences. In James Ireland’s case, a Baptist church was eventually built on the site where the small jail sat, and the lock and key of the jail are in the Virginia Baptist Historical Society.⁸

Whereas many other ministers during this period of history lived into their seventies and eighties, James Ireland lived to be only 58, having suffered not only while imprisoned, but afterward as well. He recounts, for example, an attempted poisoning by a

⁶ Garnett Ryland, *The Baptists of Virginia* (Richmond VA: Whittet & Shepperson, 1955), 64-65.

⁷ Harper and Jacumin, 127.

⁸ Ryland, 65.

woman living in his household and his servant. The result was permanent harm to all, and the death of his young son.⁹

The Winchester Virginia Gazette for Tuesday, June 17, 1006 carried the following notice:

Departed this life on the 5th ult. In the fifty-eighth year of his age, Elder James Ireland, pastor of the Baptist congregations at Buck's Marsh, Happy Creek and Water Lick, in Frederick and Shenandoah Counties, Virginia. This eminent servant of Christ had laboured nearly forty years in his Lord's vineyard, during a great part of the time, through much infirmity of body, but great strength of mind. He was always distinguished as an able minister of the New Testament, rightly dividing he word of truth, giving to saint and sinner their portion in due season.¹⁰

An interesting event happened after his notorious imprisonment. A petition was later gathered containing the names of several respected citizens who, among other things, engaged a competent lawyer who informed the magistrates that they had prosecuted Ireland under laws repealed in England upon the accession of William and Mary seventy years before, and that they themselves were liable for prosecution for their illegal action. "The confusion of the court was complete. The presiding justice picked up his hat and went out of doors. Another and another followed him until the bench was empty".¹¹

⁹ Ibid., 150-153.

¹⁰ Harper and Jacumin, 160.

¹¹ Little, 66.