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John Weatherford 1740-1833

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by Homer Massey

A couple of interesting characters during the persecution of Baptist preachers in the 1770s in Virginia were the opposing figures Col. Archibald Carey and the Rev. John Weatherford. Col. Carey was the Sheriff or Constable for Chesterfield County, where there are recorded more individual instances of arrests of Baptists for preaching without licenses than in any other Virginia county.

John Weatherford began preaching in 1761 at age 21, but did not run afoul of the law until 1773, when while passing through Chesterfield County he was arrested along with David Tanner for preaching without a license. The dramatic interaction of these two men during the five months of Weatherford's imprisonment is among the more memorable true stories in Virginia Baptist history.

Set during that stormy period from 1768 to 1778 when at least forty-four Baptists were in various prisons for the crime of preaching without a license from the Episcopalian Bishop, this drama began when Col. Carey set in motion his plan to show these Baptist upstarts once for all who was boss. The state church was determined to quell the growing movement that threatened to embarrass their effort for purity in doctrine and practice.

Carey's title implies that he was known for a military career, and that could have been one reason he was so determined to establish discipline and so carry out what he undoubtedly believed was his solemn duty in the matter of these prisoners. Before any kind of religious liberty was even conceived in the new American colonies, he might have been doing it for religious reasons as well, but whatever his reasons were, he was determined to be successful.

Likewise, Rev. John Weatherford was now some years into his ministry, where he already had a reputation for effective preaching: “Wherever he went crowds attended his ministry. It was a source of wonder that a plain man without any pretensions to learning should so far obtain the confidence of the people.”¹

Sometimes when these Baptists were imprisoned they were told that they would be released if they promised not to preach further without first following the orders of the state church. It is interesting that throughout this period the individuals, whether young and inexperienced or older as Weatherford was at this time (thirty), their answer was the same – they could not so promise. Robert Semple, commenting on one such instance stated, “The court, requiring them to bind themselves to do, what they could not, in conscience, comply with, they continued in jail...”²

Either that was the case with Rev. Weatherford, or Col. Carey did not even offer the alternative, and the prisoner was held for five long months. What does a Baptist preacher do when he’s in that situation? Well, in those days the people who had been expecting to be able to hear a man who had come from out of town to preach to them, came to the jail!

Imagine the scene: deprived of hearing the preacher they had heard so much about, they came and waited outside the jail building which apparently was not that large, and had open windows with metal grates to prevent prisoners from escaping. Picture in your mind fifteen or twenty, or perhaps more, standing or sitting on the ground, listening to the man of God expound the Scriptures. Let’s say the first week or two this irritated the

¹ R. H. Winfree, quoted in Lewis P. Little, *Imprisoned Preachers and Religious Liberty in Virginia* (Lynchburg VA: J. P. Bell and Co., 1938), 339.

² Robert B. Semple, *History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia*, revised and extended by George W. Beale (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publications, 1810), 33.

officials and the Episcopalian parson when he heard about it, but they figured it would pass.

When the same thing happened again in another week or so, or in the case of people who were without a regular preacher and decided to come regularly, meetings between Col. Carey and the parson were undoubtedly held to determine what to do about this problem. In such an open setting they could not do much to Weatherford. R. H.

Winfree, in reporting on this said:

Some base fellows cut his hands with knives as he thrust them through the bars of the prison window. These scars he carried to his grave, being remarked upon by those attending his burial. In order to prevent their (the people) hearing, a brick wall was erected ten or twelve feet high before the prison and the top thereof lined with glass bottles set in mortar to prevent the people from sitting on the top of the wall to hear the Word. Weatherford devised means to overcome this.

A handkerchief was to be raised by the congregation on a pole above the wall, as a signal that the people were ready to hear. His voice being very strong, he could throw it beyond the impediments and convey the words of life and salvation to the listening crowd. Souls were blessed and converted by his preaching. Of those who felt they had experienced the renovating influence of Divine grace, nine wished to follow their Master by being buried in baptism.³

A preacher from a nearby county came during the night and baptized them.

That this battle seemed to have been won by the Baptists is not the point. The perseverance and determination of the growing group of Baptists in the face of any obstacles placed before them came to be expected throughout the colony. When asked about their apparent disobedience they would often reply, "Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye; for we cannot but speak the things we have seen and heard. (Acts 4:19-20).

³ Little, 338-339.

James B. Taylor in *Lives of Virginia Baptist Ministers* wrote of Weatherford: “Between seventy and eighty years did he preach a crucified Saviour and recommend Him to the lost and guilty. He was willing to suffer and did suffer much, for the sake of Christ. He began his active ministry as an evangelist. Near the close of the eighteenth century he became pastor of churches in Charlotte and Campbell counties. In 1813 he removed to the county of Halifax, remaining there ten years and removing in 1823 to Pittsylvania where he spent the remainder of his life.”⁴ He lived to the age of 93.

The large Weatherford Memorial Baptist Church in Richmond is a lasting memorial to this hero of the Baptist heritage.

⁴ James B. Taylor, *Lives of Virginia Baptist Ministers* (Richmond: Sheldon and Co., 1860), 355.