

JULY 18th and 19th

WHO FOUGHT FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM?

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” **MATTHEW 5:10-12**

What happens when a Unitarian, a denier of miracles and the Trinity, and evangelicals walk into a church meeting house? The birth of religious freedom and the separation of Church and State. Thomas S. Kidd, a Christian history professor from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary writes in his book, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution*, “...evangelicals wanted disestablishment [of religion] so they could freely preach the gospel; the rationalists and deists wanted disestablishment because they felt an enlightened government should not punish people for their religious views.

Chances are you’re aware of the names Madison and Jefferson. There’s less of a chance that you’ve heard of Samuel Davies, and there’s almost zero chance that you’ve ever heard the name John Waller. These are men that worked for religious freedom even before the Declaration of Independence. Religious freedom has always been a topic that brings emotional responses. In England, the Act of Uniformity in 1662 forced preachers in the Anglican Church to swear allegiance to the Book of Common Prayer. 2,000 Puritan pastors were ejected from their churches in response to their dissent. Think this is simply a British problem? Think again! The United States of America has a strong history of religious persecution (after all, many of us originally came from the British). Here’s where John Waller enters the story.

According to Kidd, John Waller was an unconverted man whose nickname says it all: “Swearing Jack.” He was a brawling and vulgar “gentleman” of Colonial Virginia. He despised the Baptists in Virginia because they opposed his acts of violence and profanity. It’s important to note that it was illegal to be a Baptist in Colonial Virginia, since the only established church recognized was the Anglican Church. Waller was a lawyer that prosecuted one of the Baptists whose name was Lewis Craig. According to Kidd, Waller came in with force to get Craig convicted. However, what he found in Craig was a “quiet strength and fortitude” that he had never seen before. Waller was intrigued by Craig’s example and began attending Baptist meetings and trusted Christ as his Savior seven or eight months later. Waller was a changed man that began preaching and was arrested for the first time in 1768 for “disturbing the peace by confronting people with passages from the Bible.” Persecution increased against Waller, when in 1771, he was brutally whipped. According to Kidd, once Waller cleaned himself off, he returned to his preaching station and continued preaching. “He counted himself blessed to suffer for the cause of Christ...in an unfree place like Virginia.” A gentleman that you may have heard of, James Madison, observed what was going on in the persecution, and wrote to a friend in Pennsylvania in 1774, “asking him to pray that liberty of religious conscience would be given to all citizens of the colonies. Madison and Jefferson worked together to write the “Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom” which was approved in 1786.

Men, we must approach our religious freedom in the United States with gratitude. Many were not so fortunate. However, there are two edges to the sword. Even as we are grateful for our freedoms, our freedom can create laziness and comfort. Since many men and women in Snyder County call themselves Christians, we can live life as if the gospel doesn’t need to be shared anymore. But God. We have our King Jesus who called us to make disciples. The message remains the same and will never change until He returns again. “While you are going, make disciples of all nations.” How will you respond to our call in our “free” world.

Spend some time thinking about our freedom of religion. How have you used this freedom to share the gospel this year?

For Further Reading: Romans 13:1-7