

“Active Religion: James Ireland, the Separate Baptists, and the Great Awakening in Virginia,  
1760-1775”

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On the Task of a Preacher

Deal plainly with sinners and shew them their state,  
If dying in sin how unhappy their fate,  
If saved through Jesus how blessed their case,  
For glory to steer as a vessel of grace.

Discharging your duty you'll certainly find  
The wicked and Satan against you combin'd;  
Regard not their malice nor envy, for lo  
Your Master is with you wherever you go.

Your warfare when ended and foes brought to yield,  
King Jesus will sound a retreat from the field;  
To glory He'll waft you to dwell with all those,  
Whose spirits are blest with eternal repose.

Judgment being ended, with Christ you'll ascend,  
Your glorious Redeemer He doth attend;  
With pleasure transcendent free grace you will sing.  
In strains of perfection to Jesus your King.

- James Ireland

## Introduction

The Great Awakening reshaped much of the religious landscape of the American colonies by the middle of the eighteenth century. Colonial Virginia, however, remained mostly unaffected. The social, religious, economic, and political pillars that maintained the status quo in the Old Dominion seemed fixed and unassailable. Then, in the decade preceding the American Revolution, Virginia witnessed the beginning of a major religious transformation when two intensely different Christian denominations collided. Upstart evangelical Separate Baptists such as James Ireland and John Waller threatened to erode the influence of the Anglican Church, which had served as one of the major buttresses upholding social hierarchy in Virginia for most of the first 150 years of the colony's history.<sup>1</sup> Despite tremendous efforts by the Anglican clergy, the planter elite, and even the general populace of Virginia to eradicate Baptist preachers, their evangelical gospel message ultimately took root and grew beyond all expectations. In 1768, when imprisonments began, there were five Separate Baptist congregations in Virginia. Six years later, in 1774, there were fifty-three.<sup>2</sup> By the outbreak of the Revolution in 1775, these churches totaled ten thousand members.<sup>3</sup> Within only a few years, evangelical religion had become a permanent feature in Virginia.

Recent historical works on religious events in eighteenth-century Virginia offer valid but incomplete explanations for the rise of evangelicalism. Historians describe the many social and political causes that helped bring about the advent of Virginia's Great Awakening. For example,

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<sup>1</sup> A more extensive description of the distinctive characteristics of the "Separate Baptist" denomination will be offered later in the chapter. For the time being, it will suffice to say that Separates were unique in their radical approach to evangelism that set them apart from other evangelical denominations that preferred comparatively moderate strategies for expansion. Also, it is helpful to recognize that eighteenth-century Baptist "Separates" in America were not the same as the seventeenth-century English "Separatists," a term that described people from a variety of denominations that dissented in some way from the Anglican Church.

<sup>2</sup> Garnett Ryland, *The Baptists of Virginia, 1699-1926* (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1955), 85.

<sup>3</sup> Wesley M. Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia, 1740-1790* (Gloucester, MA: Duke University Press, 1965), 106.

evangelicals brought to the colony a lively religion that appealed to the lower orders of society. Baptist churches offered empowerment to people languishing at the bottom of Virginia's social hierarchy. Furthermore, the event undoubtedly reflects the political context in which it occurred. During the 1760s, political tension with Britain was a growing issue in the American colonies. Evangelical efforts to achieve freedom from civil oppression opportunely fell under the greater umbrella of colonial resistance to British political tyranny in the 1770s. In *Virginians Reborn* (2008), Jewel Spangler explains that evolving perceptions of legitimate government in Virginia “converged in some measure with Baptist practices” that had the same democratic flavor.<sup>4</sup> The American Revolution ultimately provided an avenue for Baptists to press for separation of church and state, which they achieved after the war.

Several enigmatic factors beyond these social and political causes, however, challenge those explanations or at least demonstrate that they are insufficient to explain the event as broadly as historians try to apply them. Puzzling dynamics in the Virginian context require a more complex interpretation to answer several major questions: why did Baptist ministers persevere under persecution, and why did so many Virginians convert when doing so often meant making significant sacrifices? Furthermore, why did well connected and relatively affluent Virginians such as James Ireland, John Waller, Samuel Harriss, and John Pickett convert and then engage in an aggressive ministry that brought them rejection and imprisonment as Separate Baptist preachers? Understanding the background of such men demonstrates why their conversion and ministry are a paradox.

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<sup>4</sup> Jewel Spangler, *Virginians Reborn: Anglican Monopoly, Evangelical Dissent, and the Rise of the Baptists in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 216. Spangler elaborates by explaining that the “war created a context in which the Anglican establishment could be challenged and ultimately toppled, opening up religious competition in Virginia as it had never been known before.” Spangler, *Virginians Reborn*, 227.

The life of James Ireland in particular provides a unique window into possible answers for each of those questions. While his autobiography affirms most of the common historical explanations for the socio-religious transformation stimulated by the Baptists, it also provides evidence for what appears to be the most fundamental reason for evangelical religion's successes in Virginia. Ireland's account, published in 1819, fastidiously describes specific ideas within the evangelical tradition that were the primary causes for his own conversion. The radical changes in his life, combined with the transformations of other people in his story, demonstrate that religious ideas were actively shaping and directing colonial Virginians. Furthermore, although the conflict between Virginia's Anglican elites and the Baptists arose initially from the threat that Baptists posed to the Virginian social order, Ireland's memoirs confirm that the perseverance and eventual success of the Baptists despite severe persecution resulted largely from the intellectual and emotional potency of the evangelical message. That message imbued Baptist ministers such as Ireland with remarkable endurance as well as transformed large numbers of Virginians who heard it preached.

The words "evangelical" and "evangelicalism" refer to ideas aptly defined by David Bebbington, a preeminent historian in this field of study. In his 1989 work on *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, Bebbington identifies four key ingredients of evangelicalism. The first is conversion, or the belief that a person will experience a major life change when he or she encounters the Christian message. The second mark of evangelicalism is the supremacy of the Bible, or the belief that all spiritual truth resides in its pages. The third is activism, or the idea that all believers, including laypeople, will dedicate themselves to lives of service to God, especially as manifested in evangelism and foreign missions. The fourth and final component defining evangelicalism is what Bebbington calls "crucicentrism," or the conviction that Christ's

death was the crucial event that provides atonement for sin and an avenue for the sinner to renew relationship with God.<sup>5</sup> This definition of evangelicalism is the first building block toward constructing a more coherent understanding of the events in this study.

Only a handful of sermons preached by ministers from all Baptist denominations in the American south before 1800 are available to historians today. No recorded sermons remain from Separate Baptists who preached in Virginia before the American Revolution. Unlike evangelical ministers in New England, they simply did not put many of their thoughts on paper. This is due in part to the minimal education that many Separate ministers acquired before they received ordination. As James Ireland's autobiography demonstrates, a Baptist minister would often learn his craft as an apprentice to other preachers rather than undergo years of academic instruction in a seminary. Additionally, Separate Baptists developed a reputation for depending on the Holy Spirit for the words to preach, resulting in unwritten, extempore sermons.<sup>6</sup> In *With a Bible in Their Hands* (1994), Al Fasol notes that even Shubal Stearns, Daniel Marshall, and Samuel Harriss, all of whom were major leaders in the Separate Baptist movement in the south, left none of their sermons to posterity.<sup>7</sup> Sources that describe the content and delivery of Separate messages in the colonial era typically come from witnesses who heard the sermons preached.

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<sup>5</sup> David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 1-17.

In *The Rise of Evangelicalism* (2003), Mark Noll defines a general time frame in which evangelicalism arose. Noll notes that a series of interconnected church movements in the middle of the eighteenth century that grew out of the legacy of the Protestant Reformation "marked the origin of a distinctly evangelical history." Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 18. From these revivals emerged "a consistent pattern of convictions and attitudes that have been maintained over the centuries since the 1730s." Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism*, 19. Just as the growing evangelical, or "New Light," approach to Christianity challenged the staid traditionalism of the "Old Light" form of Christianity in New England, so did evangelicalism challenge the Anglican churches that still held sway in Virginia during the middle of the eighteenth century.

<sup>6</sup> Rhys Isaac remarks that "Virginia Baptist sermons from the 1770s have not survived, perhaps another indication that their purely verbal content was not considered of first importance." Rhys Isaac, "Evangelical Revolt: The Nature of the Baptists' Challenge to the Traditional Order in Virginia, 1765 to 1775," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 31:3 (July 1974): 357.

<sup>7</sup> Al Fasol, *With a Bible in Their Hands: Baptist Preaching in the South, 1679-1979* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 24, 26, 30.



This makes the autobiographical account written by James Ireland immensely important for constructing the best possible historical understanding of the ideas that propelled the Great Awakening in Virginia.

Approximately forty-five Baptist ministers spent time in jail for various crimes against Virginia's established church in the two decades preceding the Revolution. Only two of them, James Ireland and Joseph Craig, left autobiographical accounts of their persecution and imprisonment. Ireland's memoir is substantially longer and more explanatory than Craig's work.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Ireland provides a thorough narrative of his conversion experience that is astonishingly unique among all the primary sources from Virginia's colonial period.<sup>9</sup>

Ireland recounted his life's story to a second party just before his death in 1806. His scribe finished a manuscript after his death and delivered it to the printer, but delays prevented its publication until a third party discovered it, added a few observations to the text, and published *The Life of the Rev. James Ireland* in 1819.<sup>10</sup> Keith Harper and C. Martin Jacumin combined Ireland's 1819 text with Joseph Craig's autobiography and published them in *Esteemed Reproach: The Lives of Reverend James Ireland and Reverend Joseph Craig*. Although Harper and Jacumin faced several editorial challenges, they ultimately made minimal alterations to the 1819 text and clearly indicated where they did so.

As with all primary sources, Ireland's account deserves some skepticism. The three decades that transpired between the occurrence of the events in Ireland's account and his recording of them might have blurred his memory. Since Ireland was the main character in the story, he might have embellished events to improve his image or omitted details to avoid

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<sup>8</sup> In *Esteemed Reproach*, Ireland's autobiography spans 163 pages while Craig's is only 27. Ireland's conversation narrative, which spans approximately 50 pages, is especially useful for this study.

<sup>9</sup> Keith Harper and C. Martin Jacumin, introduction to *Esteemed Reproach: The Lives of Reverend James Ireland and Reverend Joseph Craig* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005), 6.

<sup>10</sup> Harper and Jacumin, preface to *Esteemed Reproach*, vii-viii.

criticism. He recognized the weaknesses that might beset his autobiography. Speaking of his illness, Ireland wrote, “This circumstance will, I doubt not, render the relation more incorrect, and the chain of events less connected than they might otherwise have been.”<sup>11</sup> He then described his motivation for writing the autobiography, explaining that its purpose was “to give a just relation of the wonderful dealings of a gracious God to me[,] a sinner,” so that fellow “followers of the dear Redeemer” might receive “comfort and encouragement in their heavenly pilgrimage.”<sup>12</sup> Although some hints of faulty memory, embellishments, and omissions are scattered throughout the text, the extent to which other records and accounts corroborate Ireland’s description of Virginia’s culture and the rising influence of Separate Baptists indicates that his recollection is reliable enough to merit closer study. Additionally, its use for this particular inquiry is immense because of Ireland’s attention to the ideological inner-workings of his own conversion experience, which subsequently provided the chief motivation for his endurance through persecution.

Most historians who study religion in eighteenth-century Virginia draw examples and anecdotes from Ireland’s autobiography. His account offers useful descriptions of Virginia’s culture as well as the Anglican persecution of Separate Baptists. No book or article, however, has comprehensively studied his experiences to acquire a fuller understanding of why he became an evangelical Christian and how he endured persecution. Furthermore, historians often overlook one of the most revealing portions of Ireland’s autobiography: his conversion narrative.

A few historians do offer some analytical commentary on portions of Ireland’s story, but those interpretations are either incomplete or attribute causality to the wrong sources. For

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<sup>11</sup> James Ireland, *The Life of Rev. James Ireland*, in *Esteemed Reproach: The Lives of Reverend James Ireland and Reverend Joseph Craig*, edited by Keith Harper and C. Martin Jacumin (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005), 14.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

example, Janet Lindman remarks on the visible transformation evident in Ireland's life during his conversion experience. She attributes the alteration of his outward appearance to "internal changes that were expressive of a new manhood."<sup>13</sup> The idea of "manhood" for most Virginians typically revolved around the public culture of drinking, gambling, racing, dancing, and fornicating. Evangelicals, on the other hand, forbid participation in those activities.<sup>14</sup> Instead, they encouraged piety, humility, service, and restraint. Those were the new standards of manliness for converts to evangelicalism, and they "required a rigorous regimen of religious belief and activism" to achieve.<sup>15</sup> According to Lindman, evangelicals somehow convinced Virginians like Ireland to embrace "the Christian ideal of suffering as a means to define a new manliness."<sup>16</sup> Although Lindman's description of the newly defined manhood in Virginia explains why the evangelical worldview elicited a violent response from people who maintained the opposing traditional Virginian worldview, it does not sufficiently explain why that transformation took place in anyone. What would cause someone to leave the pleasure-seeking Virginian culture to embrace a comparatively austere Baptist life that might include suffering for one's beliefs? A redefinition of "manliness" is insufficient to explain that kind of change.

A closer look at Ireland's life offers a clearer understanding of why people converted to evangelicalism, relinquished Virginian culture, and persevered through persecution. Ireland was a nominally Presbyterian Scotsman who immigrated to Virginia in the mid-1760s and took a position as a schoolmaster. The first chapter of this work describes Ireland's pre-conversion life as well as the Virginian context that became his home when he moved from Scotland to Virginia. Within this setting, he achieved the social status required to enjoy many of the pleasures that

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<sup>13</sup> Janet Moore Lindman, "Acting the Manly Christian: White Evangelical Masculinity in Revolutionary Virginia," in *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 57:2 (April 2000): 394.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 407.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 408.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 394, 405.

Virginians typically coveted. These enjoyments lost their attraction, however, during a season of deep angst when he came under a complex conviction after encountering the evangelical message. The second chapter relates the details of Ireland's conversion to evangelical religion. After his long but life-altering spiritual transformation, he experienced such a strong satisfaction in his new faith that he became convinced he should leave behind his former life forever. Feeling the call to ministry, Ireland received informal training by several Baptist pastors and began itinerating as a preacher in northern Virginia. The third chapter explores Ireland's experiences as a Baptist minister, including his persecutions. The planter elite and the Anglican establishment, both of which felt threatened by the growing incursion of Baptists into their colony, linked arms to undermine ministers like Ireland. The authorities in Culpepper County arrested and imprisoned him in the local jail for approximately five months before he received pardon and continued his ministry in the area. The same satisfaction that Ireland derived from his conversion experience appears to have empowered him to embrace the discomforts and sacrifices that accompanied his imprisonment.

The source of the satisfaction that Ireland received from evangelical Christianity seems to have been rooted primarily in his perception of Christ. He described Jesus as his "adorable redeemer," "precious redeemer," and "glorious redeemer."<sup>17</sup> The fullest understanding of Ireland's conversion and his subsequent perseverance through persecution is not possible apart from that observation. Although his experience should not be monolithically superimposed on all Virginian converts to evangelicalism or on all the Baptist ministers who suffered maltreatment for preaching, his autobiography does offer a matchless window into the intellectual and emotional potency of the evangelical message that appears to have been the primary cause for evangelicalism's rise in Virginia during the eighteenth century.

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<sup>17</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 60, 68, 95.

Ten ideas inherent to evangelical Christianity shaped and motivated Ireland. First, the prospect of eternal life after death arrested his mind. Second, he understood that a creator-God made the earth and designed humanity for special and intimate communion with himself. Third, he believed the first humans willfully rebelled against God, and their disobedience separated humanity from its special relationship with God. Fourth, he realized that a person's separation from God means that he or she is under God's righteous condemnation and will receive eternal punishment in hell. Fifth, he realized that the only solution to humankind's problem is a complete restoration of relationship with God. Sixth, he saw that people are incapable of achieving reconciliation with God by performing good works. Seventh, he embraced the "good news" of the evangelical gospel that God came to earth in the form of a human in order to live a perfect life and accomplish the task of reconciling humanity to himself by bearing his own punishment for sin while dying on the cross. Eighth, Ireland comprehended that a person must place his or her trust in Jesus in order to access the righteousness of Christ. Ninth, he came to understand that faith itself is a miraculous gift from God that a person cannot create on command. Tenth, after his conversion, he realized that converted people immediately receive adoption into God's divine family and stand before him completely justified because they are covered in the righteousness of Christ. The joy resulting from his restored relationship with God because of Christ appears to have been overwhelming.

Although Ireland's description of his conversion is unique, his pre-conversion lifestyle and post-conversion persecutions as a Baptist preacher were not. The experiences of Samuel Harriss and John Pickett offer additional examples of Virginians who were well connected and affluent and yet experienced conversions to evangelical religion and afterwards became Separate Baptist ministers persecuted under the Anglican establishment. Furthermore, both of them

eventually served as mentors to James Ireland.

Samuel Harriss was born on January 12, 1724, in Hanover County.<sup>18</sup> Before his conversion, he occupied several prominent positions in Virginian society. He was a warden of his local Anglican church, sheriff, justice of the peace, burgess for the county, colonel in the militia, and captain of a military fort.<sup>19</sup> He possessed “a vigorous and cultivated mind.”<sup>20</sup> When he heard the preaching of Separate Baptists Joseph and William Murphy, Harriss came under a deep conviction. He agonized over his sin for a time until he experienced “the joy in realizing deliverance from the kingdom of darkness.”<sup>21</sup> After receiving baptism by Daniel Marshall in 1758, he chose to resign his official positions in the army and provincial government so that he could “devote his time to the propagation of the gospel.”<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, he severely limited his formerly lucrative business ventures in order to secure more time for preaching. He decided to remain with his family in an old residence and use a new one as a meeting place for his church.<sup>23</sup> Although his ability to teach doctrine was mediocre, Harriss had a magnetic personality and a penchant for ministering to a person’s heart.<sup>24</sup> He expressed his love for his fellow believers in tangible ways, and people celebrated his generosity.<sup>25</sup> His family even lived frugally so that he could give much of his wealth to religious work.<sup>26</sup>

Harriss also experienced a measure of persecution. When he first went north of the James River into Culpeper County in 1765, he preached a sermon that inspired a mob armed

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<sup>18</sup> Morgan Edwards, *Materials Towards a History of the Baptists in the Provinces of Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia* (n.p., 1772), <http://repository.clemson.edu/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/jbt&CISOPTR=241&REC=1> (accessed February 15, 2013), 57-58.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 58; James Barnett Taylor, *Virginia Baptist Ministers* (Sheldon & Company, 1859), 31.

<sup>20</sup> Taylor, *Virginia Baptist Ministers*, 31.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>22</sup> William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations in the South: Tracing through the Separates the Influence of the Great Awakening, 1754-1787* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1961), 88.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 89; Taylor, *Virginia Baptist Ministers*, 84.

<sup>24</sup> Taylor, *Virginia Baptist Ministers*, 84.

<sup>25</sup> Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations in the South*, 89.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

with sticks, whips, and clubs to drive him out. On another occasion in Orange County, a ruffian pulled him from his pulpit and dragged him about by his hair until a friend rescued him.<sup>27</sup> James Ireland, who was the first person Harriss baptized after his ordination at a meeting of Baptists in North Carolina, recalled that Harriss “was a great favourite of the ministers in Virginia.”<sup>28</sup> Ireland likened him to the Apostle Paul because Harriss, “like a blazing comet, would rush through the colony or state displaying the banner of his adorable master, spreading his light and diffusing his heat to the consolation of thousands.”<sup>29</sup>

John Pickett was born on January 14, 1744 into a respectable family that lived in King George County. James Barnett Taylor explains in *Virginia Baptist Ministers* (originally published in 1838) that Pickett developed “a very strong propensity to gaming, and sports of every kind.”<sup>30</sup> He eventually became a “dancing-master” responsible for training young colonists in one of Virginia’s most popular pastimes. He traveled to North Carolina in the mid-1760s and heard the preaching of one of the ministers who converted Harriss, Joseph Murphy. As he came under conviction of his sin, Pickett started “to loathe the sports and pleasures to which he had been devoted.”<sup>31</sup> He eventually experienced conversion and received baptism from Murphy in 1766. His family thought him an oddity for undergoing such “marvelous change,” while his brothers “continued to be the same.”<sup>32</sup> When he returned to Virginia in 1767, he started to warn his family and friends about the eternal consequences of their sin. Taylor writes that many were “convicted and some converted,” so Pickett began to preach in and around Fauquier County.<sup>33</sup> In 1768, Harriss and David Reed visited his community and baptized thirty-

<sup>27</sup> Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 119.

<sup>28</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 116.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> James Barnett Taylor, *Virginia Baptist Ministers* (Sheldon & Company, 1859), 67.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 68.

seven people. They organized the group of communicants into a church that James Ireland later joined as a member after his conversion. The little congregation attracted the contempt of the community. Taylor writes of one instance in which the “mob broke into the meeting-house and split to pieces the pulpit and table” while the magistrates seized Pickett and confined him to the Fauquier prison.<sup>34</sup> He remained there for three months, but he frequently found opportunity to preach to people gathered outside his jail. He continued his ministry after his imprisonment and even extended it over the Blue Ridge Mountains, where he met great success in making converts.

The complex transformations that occurred in men like Harriss and Pickett invite further investigation. John Waller is another Separate minister whose story contains many similarities to Ireland’s experience. Late-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century historians of Virginian Baptists offer substantial commentary on Waller’s experiences. Additionally, several poems and letters that Waller penned, including two letters that he wrote from prison, are available for examination. Although the volume of information on Waller is much smaller than what is available on Ireland, his life offers a helpful accompaniment to Ireland’s experience. Thus, he will provide a first look at the subject matter in each chapter and will accordingly provide a suitable springboard into Ireland’s material.

The potency of the evangelical ideas operating in Virginia during the 1760s becomes apparent upon closer examination of the evidence, but the purpose of this work is not to incline readers to offer undue weight to religious ideas in history. Indeed, other factors were certainly shaping eighteenth-century Virginia in the decades preceding the Revolution, including, for example, the political foment occasioned by strained relations with Britain, the increasing economic conflict between planter elites in the eastern Tidewater region and the growing population of small farmers in the western backcountry, and the social tensions elicited by an

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.



expanding slave population.

The relationship between American religion and politics or religion and society sometimes operated in reverse: individuals and groups driving toward political or social goals sometimes shaped and wielded religious ideas in order to achieve those goals. One example in proximity to Virginia's Great Awakening occurred in the 1770s and 1780s. During the Revolution, political forces reshaped elements of evangelicalism in America. The active involvement of evangelical denominations (including Separate Baptists) in the conflict caused many American churches to ingest portions of American culture that "democratized" ecclesiastical polity and even theology in many churches.<sup>35</sup> Other pockets of America's religious history portray individuals and institutions wielding Christianity to pacify and control the urban poor, advance the cause of imperialism, and inculcate virtues such as temperance and civic commitment for the purpose of maintaining societal balance and cultivating national loyalty. Nonetheless, numerous cases, including Virginia's Great Awakening, affirm the idea that religious concepts often powerfully shaped and wielded people, rather than the reverse, thereby producing events that are so paradoxical that explanations lacking attention to religious concepts are insufficient.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> See Mark Noll's "The American Revolution and the Religious History of the United States," *Christians in the American Revolution, 163-175, 1977*, in *Critical Issues in American Religious History: A Reader*, Second Revised Edition, Edited by Robert R. Mathisen (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006). Also see Nathan Hatch's *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

<sup>36</sup> I will not pretend to be an unbiased observer entirely aloof from personal interest in the subject. I grew up in an evangelical Christian home. My parents, uncles, cousins, teachers, pastors, and friends trained me to study the Christian scriptures. In the process, I experienced a personal transformation that gradually led to a significant rearrangement of priorities and reshaping of my worldview. Additionally, it caused me to commit to the tenants of the Christian faith and savor the God it directs its followers to worship. It is because of this commitment that I greatly desire to seek out the truth in the past and communicate the most veracious picture of historical events possible.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, I believe that I am in a special position as an "insider" to understand and translate the experiences of former Christians into a lucid presentation that will help the reader understand Anglo-American Christianity and the events that it stimulated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In a historiographical look at evangelical historians, Maxie B. Burch quotes Robert T. Handy, who wrote, "I suspect that there lurks a theologian and/or philosopher in most historians; the better they are aware of that and

On a broader scale, beyond the Virginian context in which Ireland's story occurs, understanding the potency of ideas within evangelical Christianity is important to the historiography of religious studies in America in at least three ways. First, religious events form an integral part of American cultural history, so understanding the root causes of those events is essential to understanding the history of American culture. Second, those root causes are exceptionally complicated. Historians often mistake easily recognizable preconditions or secondary factors as the primary causes while the origins chiefly responsible for the events regularly go unnoticed and unexplained. Third, although many influences might spark and propel a religious event, the primary causes are usually born from within religious ideology. Thus, although such conceptual origins are typically more difficult to understand and communicate, achieving a more complete comprehension of religious events in American history requires the excavation of ideas within the evangelical Christian tradition.

Some historians, including Bebbington, Mark Noll, George Marsden, and Thomas Kidd, recognize the causative power within the ideas of evangelical Christianity. For example, in Marsden's seminal work on *Jonathan Edwards* (2003), he writes, "To make sense of Edwards' life, one must take seriously his religious outlook on his own terms."<sup>37</sup> The central principle in Edwards' thinking was the sovereignty of God over the creation and ruling of the entire universe. Thus, Edwards believed that everything in the universe "pointed ultimately to the loving

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yet remain faithful to historical method, however inconvenient, the better and more acceptable historical work they will do...." Maxie B. Burch, *The Evangelical Historians: The Historiography of George Marsden, Nathan Hatch, and Mark Noll* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 1996), 22.

The Dutch Reformed educator, theologian, and Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Abraham Kuyper, encouraged Christians to view their faith as a matter of everyday life and not just a Sunday occurrence. Thus, Kuyper thought, Christians should see every field of work, including those not directly related to the ministry, as imbued with special dignity and significance, giving Christians great motivation to pursue their work with excellence. Kuyper believed this included a rigorously academic study of history. Burch, *The Evangelical Historians*, 28. I hope that my background as a Christian will inform and motivate rather than detract from my desire to pursue thorough and honest historical research, consequently yielding a more fruitful study in religious history than would otherwise be the case.

<sup>37</sup> George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 4.

character of the triune God.”<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, Edwards genuinely believed that nothing was more important than one’s personal relationship to God. Consequently, if Edwards’ emphasis in his writings sometimes “appears difficult, or harsh, or overstated... often the reader can better appreciate his perspective by asking the question: ‘How would this issue look if it really were the case that bliss and punishment for a literal *eternity* was at stake?’”<sup>39</sup> Modern observers will find themselves unable to construct accurate apprehensions of the many topics Edwards addressed in his writings without first understanding these ideas.

The clarity with which Marsden handles the ideological foundations of Edwards’ life is unusual. Even the aforementioned scholars sometimes neglect to develop and explain the ideological origins of the religious events that fill their studies. For example, in *The Great Awakening* (2007), Thomas Kidd notes that it is difficult to explain “with much specificity” why the Great Awakening happened.<sup>40</sup> He acknowledges that participants in the Awakening believed the revivals occurred because of the Holy Spirit. He then appropriately points out that other “earthly means, more accessible to an historian’s view, played a major role.”<sup>41</sup> For example, British nationalism, Protestant internationalism, and anti-Catholicism shaped the religious culture of New England after 1688, inclining church leaders to seek a renewal of godliness among the people, which then led to the First Great Awakening. New forms of media as well as simple hard work on the part of those who sought to propagate revival also played a role.<sup>42</sup> Kidd recognizes that these explanations are inadequate, but he does not offer additional thoughts on the foundational ideological operating in the Awakening. Although preconditions like

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), xvii.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., xvii-xviii.

transatlantic anti-Catholicism might have created a riper setting for revival in New England, what role could it have played in preparing the southern colonies for the Awakening? New media sources and the hard work of evangelists like George Whitefield certainly created a setting in which widespread revival was more possible, but did those things in themselves actually spark the events? Newspapers and pamphlets as well as colorful evangelists and eloquent preachers were vital vessels, but the biblical concepts they delivered to the American people appear to have formed the core substance sparking and fueling the Awakening.

Religious historian Mircea Eliade illuminates the possibility that “religious beliefs themselves are the ‘real and underlying’ forces” behind religious occurrences.<sup>43</sup> People in a post-Christian world might look back on religious experiences in history and perceive only irrational worldviews operating in an environment not yet desacralized by scientific advances. Yet the only way to understand a religious event is to acknowledge that, for the people experiencing those events, the world around them was (or was in the process of becoming) sacred, and the ideas filling that world were usually quite complex.<sup>44</sup> According to Eliade, historians should avoid reducing explanations for religious events to external factors and instead view religion on its own terms, thereby seeing the event as best as possible from the inside out.<sup>45</sup> Like Roman law, which is comprehensible only through understanding Roman values, “religious behaviors, ideas, and institutions must be seen in the light of the religious perspective... that

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<sup>43</sup> Daniel L. Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 193.

<sup>44</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion, the Significance of Religious Myth, Symbolism, and Ritual within Life and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 10. Eliade leans on the early-twentieth-century work of Rudolf Otto, who “had read Luther and had understood what the ‘living God’ meant to a believer. It was not the God of the philosophers – of Erasmus, for example; it was not an idea, an abstract notion, a mere moral allegory. It was a terrible *power*, manifested in the divine wrath.” Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 8-9. Modern historians must strive to wrap their minds around such complex concepts in order to form the fullest understanding of the people who purported to believe those ideas about God to be reality.

<sup>45</sup> Pals, *Eight Theories*, 194.

inspires them.”<sup>46</sup> Eliade’s approach offers assistance in forming a comprehension of evangelical Christianity’s paradoxical entrance into colonial Virginia.

Among the many legitimate explanations for evangelical Christian movements, the one that appears to be the most consistently common denominator in a multiplicity of different contexts is the Christian gospel message.<sup>47</sup> Other important preconditions undoubtedly created settings in which those events became more conceivable, but the primary catalysts that caused and sustained movements such as the Great Awakening in Virginia were the ideas that form the major ideological ingredients of evangelical Christianity. Despite the growing number of written works by historians who have spent their careers constructing exceptional surveys of evangelicalism’s history, there remains a need in the field of religious history for a fuller understanding of the complex religious ideas that interacted with varying environments to shape and wield different people. Rather than an interpretive sentence at the beginning of a chapter or an explanatory paragraph somewhere in a book’s conclusion, a direct examination of a case study within an evangelical event might yield a clarifying effect for approaches to interpreting occurrences in Christian history. James Ireland’s experience in the middle of Virginia’s Great Awakening offers historians an excellent opportunity to understand the powerful ideas within an active religion.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>47</sup> Details of what this gospel message is will be provided in subsequent chapters. The essential elements, however, are as follows. The Christian scriptures, to which evangelicals look for the formation of their worldview, explain that all people have sinned, or engaged in willful rebellion (Romans 3:9-18, 23), against an infinitely holy and perfectly pure God (Psalm 5:4-6, 7:11-13). People are therefore destined to spend eternity under his just wrath after they die (Matthew 18:18, 25:46). The “good news” of the gospel message is that God himself entered this world as a human (the “incarnation” – John 1:14), Jesus Christ, who subsequently lived a perfect life, keeping the whole law of God (1 Peter 2:22, 1 John 3:5). He then willfully clothed himself in the sins of humanity and bore the full wrath of God for those sins (Romans 3:21-26). Those who place their trust in him, believing him to be the only and perfect way to salvation, or reunion with God, receive forgiveness for sins (John 3:14-18, Romans 5:1-2). They are also clothed in the righteousness that Christ earned in his life on this earth, so that God views them now as perfectly justified sons and daughters (Romans 8:1-4). This seals their “adoption” as his eternal children and destines them to spend eternity in joyful, sinless, painless fellowship with him and with other believers in paradise (Romans 8:31-39, 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:5, 1 Peter 1:3-9).

## CHAPTER I

*Ireland's Entry into Eighteenth-Century Virginia*

In the middle of the eighteenth century, people in colonial Virginia appeared to be unshakably rooted in a planter-dominated social hierarchy. The hegemonic power of the colony's aristocratic elites effectively crushed and eradicated every threat that rose against it during the first 150 years of the colony's history. Their monopoly on education and their de facto authority over the established Anglican Church helped preserve their power to regulate ideas. This ideological influence enabled them to eliminate alien notions that might threaten to subvert their dominion. It was in this setting that James Ireland began his journey toward conversion to evangelical religion.

While Ireland will remain the focus of this study, the experiences of his contemporary, John Waller, provide additional insight into the ordeal of evangelical Christians in colonial Virginia. Born on December 23, 1741 in Spotsylvania County, Waller grew up in an Anglican home. Early in his life, he demonstrated a talent for satire, so his uncle gave him the money to receive a decent classical education with the intent that John would become a lawyer.<sup>48</sup> He did not finish his classical studies, however, as he eventually "turned his attention to gaming rather than law."<sup>49</sup> His involvement in gambling circles "brought him to many a scrape."<sup>50</sup> On one occasion, Waller was on his way to Fredericksburg with several companions when a drunken butcher intercepted them "and began to be saucy."<sup>51</sup> One of Waller's friends had a horse that he had trained to rear back and strike whatever was before him. He used the horse to pummel the inebriated butcher to the ground. Soon after, the butcher died. The men were accused of murder

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<sup>48</sup> Taylor, *Virginia Baptist Ministers*, 78-79.

<sup>49</sup> Edwards, *Materials*, 72; Taylor, *Virginia Baptist Ministers*, 79.

<sup>50</sup> Edwards, *Materials*, 72.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

and put on trial but were acquitted because it appeared that the horse's pawing had not been the cause of the butcher's death.<sup>52</sup>

In addition to gaming and keeping company with a rowdy group of companions, Waller became notorious for swearing. He swore so often that he received the nickname "Swearing Jack Waller." Someone even remarked, "there could be no deviltry among the people unless Swearing Jack was at the head of it."<sup>53</sup> Among his companions, Waller was a leader in pursuing Virginia's pleasures and pastimes. Evangelicalism's growing strength in the colony during the 1760s, however, soon confronted Waller with a set of ideas that would dramatically alter his pre-conversion worldview.

Ireland's life before his conversion was similar to Waller's early years in Virginia. His story, however, began in Scotland, where his religious and classical education as a young man played a major role in shaping his personality, intellect, and the desire for approval that became a dominant character trait. He was born into a middle class Presbyterian home in Edinburgh in 1748.<sup>54</sup> His father's career as a lawyer supported the family handsomely and provided Ireland and his siblings with a "genteel education."<sup>55</sup> Although his parents were not yet "acquainted with vital and experimental religion," they sought to inculcate strict morals in their children as well as instruct them in the principles of the Bible.<sup>56</sup> Ireland recalled that it was customary for parents to send their children and servants twice a year to the local church for a special examination performed by a minister. The purpose of the examination was to see how much improvement the children had made in the Presbyterian faith under the tutelage of their parents.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Taylor, *Virginia Baptist Ministers*, 79.

<sup>54</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 14-15. Chronological markers are scarce in Ireland's text. It is clear that he traveled to Virginia sometime in the 1760s and that his imprisonment lasted from November 1769 to April 1770. The dates for the remainder of the events, however, can only be estimates.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

Ireland consistently received “approbation and praise” from the minister, who would draw attention to Ireland’s abilities in front of the whole congregation.<sup>57</sup> He enjoyed this attention, and he soon “imbibed a tolerable degree of Pharisaical pride.”<sup>58</sup>

Ireland provided several examples of his fastidious efforts to maintain his moral purity. Whenever he heard his friends take the name of God in vain while playing with them in the streets of Edinburgh, he would put his fingers in his ears and depart from their presence. He dutifully spent time praying every morning and evening. He even savored opportunities to hear preaching and frequently desired to read the Bible. In studying the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, he came to believe that all greedy misers go to hell and all beggars go to heaven. When he saw beggars on the street, he would hand over the money in his pocket or use it to purchase bread for them. Similarly, when beggars came to the door of his house calling for alms during dinnertime, Ireland would bring his food to the door and offer it freely. Their usual response was to say, “The Lord bless you,” which made Ireland conclude that he would go to heaven for his generosity.<sup>59</sup>

Ireland briefly digressed in his autobiography to elaborate on a point that is essential for understanding his conversion to evangelical religion later on in his life. As a child, the basis of Ireland’s worth was his ability to live up to the moral standard set for him by his parents and community. He later came to view this worldview as blind. He lamented the prospect of “thousands and tens of thousands” of people “encouraged and taught to believe that there is an ability in themselves which, if exerted and improved, will bring them to a state of salvation.”<sup>60</sup> He even indicted nominal Christians for giving Christ the credit for their justification before God

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 15-16.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 16.



when, in actuality, the basis of their system “is founded on the merit of works.”<sup>61</sup> Such Christians, he noted, might demonstrate orderly moral conduct, but they are otherwise unable to give “any relation of the work of God’s divine grace in their hearts.”<sup>62</sup> Instead, they abhor the idea that God would “elect” a person for salvation and unilaterally move upon that heart to regenerate it. The reason for this, Ireland believed, was that “the doctrines of divine grace” undercut the true source of their confidence: their moral decisions and proper actions. To the post-conversion Ireland, this approach to Christianity was similar to the behavior of those in the Bible who blindfolded Jesus, struck him on the face, and taunted him to prophesy who struck him. Understanding the difference between a salvation derived from one’s good works and a salvation derived from the finished work of Christ would later be one of the great struggles in Ireland’s conversion experience.

In the late-1750s, when Ireland was nearing his teenage years, George Whitefield came to Edinburgh to minister for several months.<sup>63</sup> Ireland remembered that thousands came to his meetings every morning and evening. His own father attended frequently, and Ireland believed that Whitefield’s ministry led to his father’s conversion to evangelical faith. Despite this change in his father, however, Ireland began to relinquish his former interest in religion.<sup>64</sup>

Like Waller, Ireland experienced the privilege of receiving a classical education at a school in Edinburgh. There he found himself surrounded by wild youths and “had not fortitude sufficient to support my religion.”<sup>65</sup> Before long, it disappeared altogether. He recalled, “my natural religion soon became extinct in me, having no other basis or foundation but nature, from

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Dugald Butler and John Wesley, *George Whitefield and John Wesley in Scotland, or The Influence of the Oxford Methodists on Scottish Religion* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1898) 52-54.

<sup>64</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 18.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 19.

which it sprang.”<sup>66</sup> The erosion of moral restraint in Ireland’s life allowed a proud and contentious attitude to emerge, which he blamed on a militant spirit that pervaded Edinburgh because of an ongoing war between Britain and France.<sup>67</sup> Ireland remembered seeing splendid military parades, recruiting parties, martial music, army encampments, and French prisoners. Such displays “infused a similar spirit of military ardour among the boys of my own age.”<sup>68</sup> Although his father tried to direct his conduct with his schoolmates, Ireland found himself increasingly unable to endure insult without challenging his antagonists to a fight.<sup>69</sup> Despite his small stature, Ireland began engaging in boxing matches and quickly acquired a reputation as a hard-nosed scrapper who was not to be crossed.<sup>70</sup>

When one of Ireland’s friends chose to join the naval service and stood before him in a splendid-looking midshipman’s uniform, he “felt a glow of ambition.”<sup>71</sup> This inflamed in Ireland “the pride of life and dress,” and he sought an opportunity to go to sea.<sup>72</sup> Although his father preferred that he take up a profession in law, he encouraged Ireland to take several voyages to experiment with life as a mariner.<sup>73</sup>

Probably in the early 1760s, when Ireland was in his mid-teens, he participated in multiple seafaring excursions. During a winter voyage, a violent storm arose while he was sailing off the coast of England. The captain commanded all hands on the ship to take in the sails and prepare the vessel to weather the tempest. Ireland joined the ship’s carpenter at the

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ireland writes of “victory attending the British arms, through every quarter of the globe.” Ireland, *The Life*, 20. In light of the general time frame in which Ireland made his way to Virginia (the mid-1760s), it is most likely that the conflict of which he speaks is the Seven Years’ War.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 20-22. His physical description is offered by an additional source included in *Esteemed Reproach*, 160.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 25-26.

water pump to help bilge the ship of seawater.<sup>74</sup> The storm raged unbroken for thirty-two hours, inspiring Ireland to swear that he would never return to sea if he somehow made it back to Edinburgh. Even though he feared with every buffeting wave that the ship would plunge to the bottom of the ocean, he later recalled never possessing “the least sense of the unpreparedness of my soul for eternity; and no thought of heaven or hell, God or Devil, as far as I can recollect, ever entered into my mind.”<sup>75</sup> Ireland remembered having no fear of God in his life during that season but instead “seemed bent on doing mischief and wickedness.”<sup>76</sup>

Ireland repeatedly demonstrated a reckless daring in order to acquire the respect and accolades of his peers. During one winter, a body of water called the North Locke outside Edinburgh froze enough to bear a large number of ice skaters. Ireland remembers joining groups of “forward adventurers” who were the first to try the ice.<sup>77</sup> On one of these occasions, Ireland fell through the ice with several of his companions. Although they nearly drowned, ropes brought to them from the shore rescued the boys from the frigid waters.<sup>78</sup> His craving for recognition and affirmation would continue to dominant his personality until he encountered evangelical religion in Virginia.

Ireland found further opportunity to participate in life-threatening activities when he committed to several whaling voyages in the North Atlantic (despite his former promise never to leave British shores again), where he beheld extraordinary creatures, including walruses, seals, whales, and even polar bears that tried to attack the ship when provoked by the sailors.<sup>79</sup>

Ireland’s “airy, antic and volatile spirit” gained him the affection of the officers and sailors on

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 27-28.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 31-32.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 32-34.

board his vessel.<sup>80</sup> He found opportunity to exercise that adventurous spirit when a gale rose up and threatened the ship with large swells. In the midst of the tempest, a boatswain addressed several young men, including Ireland, to see which of them would be willing to venture up to the top of the mast to fasten a loose sail. “I immediately sprung forward,” Ireland recalled, “and offered my service to perform it.”<sup>81</sup> He climbed up the mast to the top and began his work while sweeping from side to side every time the ship rolled with the waves. After accomplishing his task, he descended to the deck, and a panic suddenly seized him in realizing how close he had been to death.<sup>82</sup> “Natural fears would at times attend me,” he recalled, “but no sense of gratitude to my great Preserver.”<sup>83</sup>

Shortly after this voyage, he writes, “I embarked for America.”<sup>84</sup> Ireland is vague about the circumstances leading to his permanent departure from his family and friends in Scotland. He concedes, however, that the cause was “an act of juvenile indiscretion, and the rigor of the penal laws of the government under which I was born and raised.”<sup>85</sup> Although this explanation is disappointingly ambiguous, he admits that a criminal act drove him from his native land and compelled him to find asylum in America, where he began a new life.

Colonial Virginian society and culture formed a setting fundamentally at odds with evangelical Separate Baptists. Eighteenth-century Virginia was hierarchical, and the planter aristocracy was at the top. Planters owned much of the land, most of the servants, and nearly all the slaves in the colony.<sup>86</sup> Such advantages enabled the elite to gain control of Virginia’s

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 35-36.

<sup>86</sup> David Hackett Fischer, *Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 374.

government during the mid-seventeenth century and retain it until the Revolution.<sup>87</sup> It also put them in a position to shape the culture of Virginia as they pleased.<sup>88</sup>

According to David Hackett Fischer in his 1989 *Albion's Seed*, this planter class was a relatively large group: as many as 10% of adult males. They owned 55-75% of the productive assets in Virginia. Below the planter elite were white yeomen who owned their own land and tilled it themselves, often with the assistance of a servant or two. They comprised about 20-30% of the population. The 60-70% at the bottom of society owned no land at all: tenant farmers, poor white laborers, servants, and black slaves.<sup>89</sup> The elite controlled the distribution of land because they dominated the Virginian government and “employed it to maintain their own hegemony.”<sup>90</sup>

Virginian elites maintained deep attachments to the culture of the Old World they left behind, and this caused them to be “profoundly conservative in every sense – elitist, hierarchical, and strenuously hostile to social change.”<sup>91</sup> At the head of each elite Virginian family was the patriarch. By extension, patriarchal expectations shaped almost every sphere of life. Each leading family saw itself as a small dynasty, under which was a host of workers who largely remained fixed in their position of subordination.<sup>92</sup> The “psychological cement” that held together the societal hierarchy in Virginia was a culture of subordination.<sup>93</sup> Gentlemen expected their social inferiors to display deference, “and by and large they received it.”<sup>94</sup> Evidence

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>88</sup> Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 19.

<sup>89</sup> Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 374.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 378.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>92</sup> Brendan McConville, *The King's Three Faces: The Rise & Fall of Royal America, 1688-1776* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 88; Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 279.

<sup>93</sup> Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 384.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. Fischer also notes that this expectation of deference extended to all levels of society. He writes, “Just as the gentlemen of Virginia deferred to their King, so the yeomanry were expected to defer to gentlemen,

indicates that common folk actually did regard the planter elite with a certain feeling of awe that inspired them to keep a humble distance.<sup>95</sup> Virginian patriarchs invested heavily in the maintenance of the structures that reinforced a society in which everyone deferred to them.

The planter aristocracy's control of several social institutions empowered them to perpetuate the social hierarchies that solidified their patriarchal authority. One of these institutions was academics. Virginian elites prided themselves in maintaining large libraries, but the prospect of literacy becoming available to the general populace horrified them. They intended that literacy remain their own luxury and instrument of control. Allowing literacy and learning to trickle down to the masses might close the tremendous social gap that had to exist for planters to maintain their power.<sup>96</sup>

Another institution that planters used to perpetuate social hierarchies was the established church. Technically, since 1675, Virginia had been part of the London diocese of the Anglican Church. In reality, however, the Bishop of London seldom exercised oversight.<sup>97</sup> Even the deputies he appointed at the end of the seventeenth century had little real authority. Instead, the secular authorities retained control over most ecclesiastical matters. The governing body of each parish was the vestry, consisting of twelve prominent men, usually planters. The power for managing ecclesiastical affairs rested in their hands. Their responsibilities included selecting the minister, collecting and managing the tithes, paying the ministers, and disciplining moral

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servants were required to defer to their yeoman masters, and African slaves were compelled to submit themselves to Europeans of every social rank." Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 385.

<sup>95</sup> Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 23.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 20. Virginian yeomen owned few books. Servants usually owned none. Planters forbid slaves to read at all on pain of harsh punishment. Fischer adds, "The penalty for a slave who tried to learn how to write was to have a finger amputated." Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 348. According to Rhys Isaac, The elite assumed that those fitted for book learning (themselves) were "of a superior nature to those who did the material work that sustained civilization. Rhys Isaac, *Landon Carter's Uneasy Kingdom: Revolution and Rebellion on a Virginia Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 99.

<sup>97</sup> Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 29-30.

transgressors.<sup>98</sup> Because of this power, planters sometimes “behaved as if they owned the Anglican churches near their estates.”<sup>99</sup>

In addition to the benefits that accompanied vestry positions, Virginian patriarchs also enjoyed the church’s affirmation of clear social divisions. Anglican elites viewed Adam’s fall in the Garden of Eden as a heinous rebellion against a benevolent father. Religion’s primary purpose in society, therefore, was to serve as a corrective to the disrupted creation order by teaching *obedience*.<sup>100</sup> Eternal matters were often secondary to “religion’s contribution to the improvement of society.”<sup>101</sup> Anglican revulsion for nonconformists’ obsession with theology and doctrine inclined them to focus their teachings on practical morals, including submission to one’s social superiors. Sermons were typically only a secondary part of the service, and they “were much shorter than in New England, less theological, more pietistic.”<sup>102</sup> Liturgy dominated the Virginian church service, as the Book of Common Prayer strictly defined the order of worship.<sup>103</sup>

The elites’ intention for the church to perform practical social purposes extended beyond the Anglican church service, and it highlights the chief motivations for sustaining their power as patriarchs: the accumulation of wealth and the consumption of pleasure. Church was a time for

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<sup>98</sup> Ronald L. Heinemann, John G. Kolp, Anthony S. Parent Jr., and William G. Shade, *Old Dominion, New Commonwealth: A History of Virginia, 1607-2007* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 33. The vestry was incredibly important to the running of Virginia at the county level: “the parish performed so many critical functions that by the eighteenth century its budget and tax rates were often two or three times larger than those of the county government.” Heinemann et al., *Old Dominion*, 33.

<sup>99</sup> Fischer, *Albion’s Seed*, 378. Also see Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 31. A favorite practice of vestrymen was to hire ministers by the year instead of having them placed in their position for life. In this way, writes Gewehr, “they kept the ministers in a state of dependence.” Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 32.

<sup>100</sup> Isaac, *Uneasy Kingdom*, 94.

<sup>101</sup> John Fea, *The Way of Improvement Leads Home: Philip Vickers Fithian and the Rural Enlightenment in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 114.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* An eighteenth-century Presbyterian visitor to Virginia, Philip Vickers Fithian, noted that sermons were seldom longer than twenty minutes and largely consisted of moral teachings. Fischer, *Albion’s Seed*, 336. This contrasted with the sermons of dissenters, such as Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Baptists, all of whom typically focused their church services on the lengthy exposition of a passage in the Bible. Fea, *Way of Improvement*, 212.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 336.

tobacco planters to discuss business. On Sunday mornings, planters would join at church not only for worship, “but to exchange business documents, discuss tobacco prices, argue over the quality of horses, catch up on local gossip, and share news of the wider world.”<sup>104</sup> Sundays were also a time for recreation. Horseracing in Virginia reached the height of its popularity in the middle of the eighteenth century. In Rappahannock, a horseracing field lay next to the church. On Sunday mornings, the congregation would retire to it after the service to see if the young men might challenge one another to a race. Even the clergy would attend.<sup>105</sup>

Hefty wagers made on horseraces and other amusements added to the excitement of the gathering. It also demonstrates the elites’ passion for acquiring wealth. Gambling permeated the world of Virginian planters, who “made bets not merely on horses, cards, cockfights and backgammon; but also on crops, prices, women and the weather.”<sup>106</sup> Such risk-taking certainly contributed to the ruin of more than one wealthy planter.<sup>107</sup> The elite’s proclivity to be chronic gamblers explains one reason why wealthy Virginians became notorious for engaging in self-indulgence. Residents and visitors to Virginia condemned the elite’s extravagance, luxury, and “growing addiction to pleasure, especially gambling.”<sup>108</sup> They also noticed that Virginian gentlemen sometimes possessed a voracious appetite for making predatory conquests of women, a practice that further demonstrated their patriarchal power. While adultery, fornication, and bastardy often led to a heavy punishment for the woman, the customs of Virginia actually encouraged men to maintain a sexually predatory attitude toward women. They assumed that a

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<sup>104</sup> Heinemann et al, *Old Dominion*, 72. Also see Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 33. Such activities often prevented Anglican gentlemen from entering the church on time for the service, requiring a clerk to come fetch them in for prayers. Fea, *The Way of Improvement*, 112.

<sup>105</sup> Fischer, *Albion’s Seed*, 361-362; Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 21.

<sup>106</sup> Fischer, *Albion’s Seed*, 342.

<sup>107</sup> Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 22. Lavish hospitality and reckless gambling compelled many planters to put their estate on the market. Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 24.

<sup>108</sup> Jack P. Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 97.



wife's adultery threatened the bloodline within a family, but the husband's adultery did not.<sup>109</sup> The Virginian moral atmosphere was increasingly permissive, demonstrated by "a rising tolerance for the frailties of individuals, including unmarried lovers, drunks, and other obvious violators of stated social norms."<sup>110</sup>

Virginian gentlemen only sustained their lifestyle of wealth accumulation and pleasure consumption by remaining at the top of an intricate hierarchical system supported at the bottom by a massive pool of cheap labor. Although Virginian elites worked hard when the seasonal ebb and flow of planting required their attention, they aspired to be as independent as possible of the need to participate in labor.<sup>111</sup> They coveted the freedom to waste time.<sup>112</sup> This independence "could be achieved or maintained only by labor of the sort that a gentleman was trained to despise," and that demand for labor necessitated the perpetual subordination of an uneducated, poor populace whose work sustained the exorbitant lifestyles of the Virginian aristocracy.<sup>113</sup> Thus, any threat to the hierarchy that made successful pursuits of happiness possible for Virginian elites would quickly attract their displeasure.

Ireland arrived in this Virginian setting in the early 1760s. He took up lodging while seeking opportunities for employment. While waiting, he had a peculiar dream in which the devil appeared, laid hold of him, and began to carry him down to hell, where he came so close that he felt "an awful steam of heat issued therefrom."<sup>114</sup> Yet, before his captor could execute his plans, Ireland felt himself bound under the arms by a long silver cord that wrenched him from the devil's arms and pulled him up to heaven. Ireland had the dream multiple times on

<sup>109</sup> Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 299-300.

<sup>110</sup> Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 97.

<sup>111</sup> Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 365. Many Virginians in the middle and upper ranks of society aspired to live like English gentlemen. Fischer writes, "In the seventeenth century, an English gentleman was defined as one who could 'live idly and without manual labor.'" Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 366.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 372; Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 23.

<sup>113</sup> Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 366.

<sup>114</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 37.

subsequent nights. Each time, the devil would appear to carry him down, and each time Ireland experienced the same mysterious deliverance. The dreams provoked soul-searching contemplations, he later recalled, but they did not produce in him a sense of guilt for his sin. Soon after he had these dreams, a stranger who lodged at the same residence informed Ireland that he was in search of a schoolmaster for a town about forty miles away. Ireland produced a few evidences of the learning he had acquired in Scotland, and the man hired him for the position.<sup>115</sup>

As Ireland acquainted himself with the culture of his new home, his experiences “produced a very considerable shock.”<sup>116</sup> Although he did not fear God at the time, his Presbyterian upbringing taught him to maintain a degree of reverence for the Sabbath. In his new residence, however, “there was not the least appearance of respect for the Sabbath excepting amongst a few Quakers.”<sup>117</sup> Virginians instead viewed Sundays as a time for sport and merriment, and “no scenes of vanity or wickedness, would they hesitate to pursue, or practice.”<sup>118</sup> Despite Ireland’s recent lack of religious inclination, the culture shock caused him to retreat to the woods by himself with his Bible to spend the better part of a day reading, weeping, and praying. The experience, however, “left no impression of sin and guilt” upon his conscience.<sup>119</sup>

Ireland’s revulsion to Virginian pastimes soon dissipated. Before long, he “could heartily join them in all their wicked amusements without remorse.”<sup>120</sup> Indeed, because of his insatiable ambition, it did not suit him to be a mere common accomplice in their vices.<sup>121</sup> Like Waller,

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

Ireland sought to be “an active head or leader in every practice of wickedness.”<sup>122</sup> A considerable number of men and women his age resided in the settlement, and “their recreations, pleasures and pastimes, were very congenial” to Ireland’s tastes.<sup>123</sup> Dancing became his “darling idol” and earned him the esteem of all who saw him “perform upon the floor.” Perhaps most appealing to Ireland was that his skills acquired him “the confidence and esteem of those called, now a days, young ladies.”<sup>124</sup> Ireland’s charming personality and athletic prowess endeared himself to others. Like many in Virginian society, the attention of other people seemed to captivate him. He later commented on his ability to be a social chameleon. He could accommodate himself to every kind of company: “with the religious I could moralize a little; with the well bred I could be polite; with the merry I could be antique; and with the obscene I could be profane.”<sup>125</sup> Indeed, Ireland prided himself in the orderly example he set for his students and the rigid conformity to rules that he enforced among them, even though his actions outside of the classroom demonstrated his growing disregard for boundaries.<sup>126</sup>

During this time, Ireland attended two vastly different meetings of Virginians. First, his friends prevailed upon him to join the local Masonic society, which gave him another opportunity to acquire the approval of his peers. He recalled that he attended many Masonic meetings and “was esteemed an excellent proficient,” enabling him to pass through several grades of advancement among the Masons, which gave him “a considerable degree of pleasure.”<sup>127</sup> Sometime contemporary to these experiences, Ireland and his friends attended a yearly meeting of Regular Baptists, where attendees addressed one another “by the affectionate

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 42

<sup>124</sup> Ibid. While Puritan and Quaker communities (and later Baptists) discouraged dancing, sometimes with vehemence, people desiring to engage in genteel Virginian society were practically compelled to dance. Fischer, *Albion’s Seed*, 313.

<sup>125</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 43.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 58.

appellation of Brethren.”<sup>128</sup> Ireland and his companions subsequently formed a poor opinion of the Baptists. They received information of the imprisonment of some Baptist teachers as well as some negative reports about them. Because of that, Ireland and his friends “entertained the most violent prejudices against them and their followers.”<sup>129</sup> Ireland even likened himself to Saul of Tarsus, who violently threatened the early Christian churches and sought to diminish their progress. When one of Ireland’s friends took an oath never to become a Baptist, he heartily joined him.

Several months before his evangelical awakening began, one of Ireland’s companions presented him with an immense opportunity for advancement. He introduced him to a young woman who came from a respectable family. Her father “was a man of circumstance.”<sup>130</sup> Ireland’s first encounters with her went so well that an advantageous marriage seemed to be a real possibility.<sup>131</sup> The young woman represented for Ireland a potential avenue into Virginia’s coveted gentry class.

Amidst Ireland’ growing opportunities to propel himself into higher social circles through his Masonic connections and the courtship of a young lady in the upper class, it appears that the erosion of his morality is what most enabled him to fit in with others in his community. He recalled that the young men as well as heads of many families in that settlement were “destitute of every virtuous or moral qualification,” a “wild and dissipated” lot. When they came together, “nothing was heard, comparatively speaking, but obscene language, cursing and swearing, drinking and frolicking, horse racing and other vices,” and Ireland remorselessly relished such

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 64.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

experiences.<sup>132</sup> Although Ireland probably exaggerated his description of society's dissipation in hindsight, it is clear that the pleasures of the world enamored him. He wrote that if he had the chance, "I would not have changed my present pleasures in sin, for the happiness of the saints above."<sup>133</sup> He explained, "I was not only willing to be wicked, but studied to be so."<sup>134</sup> He felt himself on his way to being an atheist, very near the edge of losing religion completely. Quoting Isaiah 5:18, he later lamented that his early Virginian life "drew iniquity with the cords of vanity and sin as with a cart rope."<sup>135</sup> He also quoted Romans 2:5, noting that he was on a road "to treasure up unto myself wrath, against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God to come."<sup>136</sup> Although these biblical passages meant little to Ireland during his season of worldly merriment, his conversion experience would soon confront him with the terrifying ideas inherent to these texts.

Growing weaknesses in the structural framework that upheld Virginia's planter-led hierarchy started making room for erosive threats to enter the colony. The Anglican Church in Virginia faced several problems that hindered its ability to offer adequate ministry, particularly for the lower orders of society, consequently leaving people either numb to religious matters (as seemed to be the case with Ireland and Waller) or restless and yearning for a more vital spirituality. One immediate and widespread cause of this problem was a scarcity of Anglican ministers in Virginia.<sup>137</sup> The lack of an episcopate in the colony meant that the Bishop of London had to ordain Virginia's clergy. The number of ministers the Bishop of London sent to the colony was insufficient to keep up with Virginia's growing population, and "Virginia's

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 42-43.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 39

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 43

<sup>137</sup> Edward L. Bond, *Damned Souls in a Tobacco Colony: Religion in Seventeenth-Century Virginia*. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2000) 238-239.

shortage of clergy remained an abiding quandary.”<sup>138</sup> Large pockets of Virginia were only loosely under the oversight of Anglican churches.<sup>139</sup>

Furthermore, many of the ministers chosen for service in the colonies came to the New World after earning reputations of incompetence in England. Some of them exhibited immoral excesses, and their hypocrisy gave people more reason to remain at home on Sundays. Many people simply found attending church regularly to be too inconvenient. Churches were usually far apart. The seasonal demands of tobacco planting often hindered attendance. Heat in the summer, snow in the winter, and sheer apathy kept many Virginians from attending worship.<sup>140</sup> Religion simply was not one of Virginia’s main preoccupations. Meanwhile, vestries seldom offered incentives for ministers to take a more active role in seeking out their absentee parishioners or engage in missionary efforts.<sup>141</sup>

One factor that caused this religious state in Virginia is that the church “contented itself with serving only one social group, namely, the planter class.”<sup>142</sup> Many clergymen tended to associate with the planter elites, which meant that they were often “out of touch with the people of America” and accordingly had little positive effect on the spiritual welfare of the majority of Virginians.<sup>143</sup> The church often meant little to the social group to which it catered, and “it was next to nothing in the lives of the common folk.”<sup>144</sup> Most Anglican sermons were brief, dull, and

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 239. During the “Great Migration” in from the 1640s to 1670, the population of Virginia swelled so much that one-third of the parishes had no regular clergy. The practice of circuit riding arose to cover parishes as large as 270 square miles. Heinemann et al, *Old Dominion*, 34.

<sup>139</sup> Spangler, *Virginians Reborn*, 117.

<sup>140</sup> Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations*, 106; Bond, *Damned Souls*, 240-241. Bond notes that between 1709 and 1712, William Byrd II “attended church on less than forty-five percent of the Sundays covered by his diary, and the church was on his property, less than half a mile from his residence.” Bond, *Damned Souls*, 240.

<sup>141</sup> Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations*, 106.

<sup>142</sup> Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 32.

<sup>143</sup> Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations*, 106.

<sup>144</sup> Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 33.

offered little spiritual food to laypeople.<sup>145</sup> All these weaknesses in Virginia's established church created a kind of religious vacuum that made room for alternative forms of Christianity to enter the colony and take root.

During the first century of Virginia's history, several dissenting groups tried to make inroads into Virginia. The planter elite and the Anglican clergy, however, collaborated to eradicate those who threatened the religious establishment and the planter-led social hierarchy that it supported.<sup>146</sup> In 1643, the General Assembly, under the direction of Governor William Berkeley, passed a law that forbade dissent. No one could preach religion, publicly or privately, who was not a licensed minister of the Church of England. The same law "instructed governor and council to expel all nonconformists from the colony."<sup>147</sup> In 1649, some Puritans who tried to settle in Virginia were compelled to leave. When Quakers appeared in Virginia and did not obey commands to depart the colony at once, "they were severely persecuted."<sup>148</sup> This persecution worked. Puritan congregations virtually ceased to exist in Virginia, and Quaker meetings dwindled to an unthreatening number. In 1689, the Glorious Revolution produced a number of reforms in England, including the English Act of Toleration, which granted nonconformists more freedoms. For a number of years afterwards, however, Virginia hardly paid attention to the Act. The policies of the government continued to reinforce a remarkable religious uniformity.<sup>149</sup>

Despite such long-lasting and thorough Anglican hegemony, dissenting groups started making inroads in the first half of the eighteenth century. The first signs of the coming disturbance began in the early 1740s, when common people began absenting themselves from

<sup>145</sup> Fea, *Way of Improvement*, 111, 212.

<sup>146</sup> Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 333.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 234. Also see Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations*, 105. Additionally, in the first half of the seventeenth century, the law required colonists to provide financial support to the church and attend services regularly. Heinemann et al, *Old Dominion*, 33. By 1655, all Virginian heads of households had to pay a certain amount of tobacco for ministers' salaries and to support the churches. Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations*, 105.

<sup>148</sup> Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations*, 105.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

church and reading religious tracts at home.<sup>150</sup> People began practicing piety on their own, and, in doing so, they discovered a more “vital” religion. Even before ordained ministers from the north arrived during the Great Awakening, the public reading of works by Martin Luther and John Bunyan as well as the sermons of George Whitefield produced gatherings that became quite emotional. Attendants cried out, wept bitterly, and repented of their sins.<sup>151</sup> When Presbyterians arrived from the north, they found ready listeners. The Anglican establishment condemned their meetings as unruly and dangerous.<sup>152</sup> Local persecutions broke out, and “juries convicted dissenters without regard to English law.”<sup>153</sup> Presbyterian ministers, however, quickly learned how to play by the rules in Virginia. They paid their parish levies as required by law, got official licenses for their ministers, had their members married in the Anglican Church, and refrained from aggressively proselytizing.<sup>154</sup>

Leading Presbyterian minister Samuel Davies vigorously defended his approaches to ministry, but he “became the consummate evangelical moderate” by regulating any hint of enthusiasm in his congregations and tactfully reassuring Anglicans that he did not intend to convert the whole colony to Presbyterianism.<sup>155</sup> He simply wanted “to relieve the sad religious condition in Virginia.”<sup>156</sup> Hundreds of people flocked to hear him preach. His ministry to African Americans was surprisingly fruitful.<sup>157</sup> Gentlemen, yeomen, and slaves alike converted

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<sup>150</sup> Rhys Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 148.

<sup>151</sup> Kidd, *The Great Awakening*, 234.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 234. Anglicans believed the principle of freedom of conscience did not give dissenters the right to hold unauthorized meetings. They were also frustrated by evangelicals who were calling on people “to abandon graceless Anglican ministers and to seek churches where they would be fed.” Kidd, *The Great Awakening*, 236.

<sup>153</sup> David Hackett Fischer and James C. Kelly, *Bound Away: Virginia and the Westward Movement* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 105.

<sup>154</sup> Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations*, 106.

<sup>155</sup> Kidd, *The Great Awakening*, 236-237. Davies tactfully deflected criticisms of the Anglican establishment to ministers who were more radical. Kidd, *The Great Awakening*, 238.

<sup>156</sup> Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations*, 108.

<sup>157</sup> Kidd, *The Great Awakening*, 239.



to evangelical faith under his teaching.<sup>158</sup> Meanwhile, Davies fought for Virginia's recognition of the Act of Toleration, which eventually won Virginia's evangelicals greater freedom for dissent.<sup>159</sup> Ultimately, however, Presbyterian ministers were too few, too educated, and too strictly tied to creeds "to take the revival to the masses."<sup>160</sup>

Baptists came to Virginia in three groups: General Baptists, Regular Baptists, and Separate Baptists. While Regular and Separate Baptists maintained a Calvinistic soteriology, General Baptists were largely Arminian. The first groups of General Baptists traveled from England to Virginia around 1700. Because they lived quietly and without significant organization, they received reluctant toleration from the colonial government.<sup>161</sup> After 1752, Regular Baptists settled in Virginia. They mostly planted churches on the frontier of northern Virginia and therefore did not draw too much attention from the authorities. Regular Baptist leader David Thomas, like Samuel Davies, tried to present his denomination as sober, theologically sound, and moderate. Yet Thomas still encountered persecution and harassment from Anglicans and even Presbyterians. Some people perceived the Regular Baptists as a threat to Virginia's "traditional social order of male independence, social dominance and public leisure."<sup>162</sup> Among other instances of violence against him, an angry mob once interrupted Thomas's sermon and dragged him out from the tobacco house in which he was preaching. Another time, an outraged man tried to shoot him. The authorities accused Thomas of criminal actions and even illicit sexuality, anything to slander his reputation. Despite these threats, he

<sup>158</sup> Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations*, 108. Kidd writes, "By 1757, Davies estimated that he had baptized 150 African American adults in all, and 60 participants in one communion service." Kidd, *The Great Awakening*, 240.

<sup>159</sup> Kidd, *The Great Awakening*, 238; Fischer, *Bound Away*, 105; Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations*, 108-109.

<sup>160</sup> Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations*, 108-109. Also see Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 35.

<sup>161</sup> Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations*, 106.

<sup>162</sup> Kidd, *The Great Awakening*, 244-245.

“tried publicly to paint the Baptists as mainstream Protestants.”<sup>163</sup> Regulars were typically more educated, less demonstrative in their worship services, and more willing to apply for licenses under the Toleration Act than their denominational brethren, the “Separates.”<sup>164</sup>

The entrance of the Separate Baptists produced the advent of an entirely new era in Virginian religious history. Separates emerged from New England Presbyterianism during the sectarian foment of the Great Awakening.<sup>165</sup> In many ways, they inherited the views and methods of George Whitefield. The great English evangelist believed that humans are so completely depraved that they are unable to save themselves apart from God’s electing grace. The teachings of Separate Baptists reflected this. Their sermons focused on individual conversion and regeneration. They believed conversion came to a person through an act of God upon the individual.<sup>166</sup> Whitefield also believed that anyone could hear the gospel preached, experience a supernatural new birth, and undergo a total conversion with faith and repentance. Since anyone could experience this, he “drove himself to declare the truth to as many men as he could possibly reach. There was an overwhelming urgency about his preaching; the door of salvation must be thrown open to every man.”<sup>167</sup> This urgency lived on in the Separate Baptists, who consistently displayed zeal to spread the gospel to every kind of people in all kinds of settings. They also inherited Whitefield’s preaching style. He constructed relatively simple sermons in order to reach the widest audience possible. The simplicity of Separate sermons is something that made their message unusually accessible to the lower orders of society.

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 245. Thomas tried to draw a clear line between Regular and Separate Baptists, “as the latter countenanced the more exotic bodily effects of the Spirit.” Kidd, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 245. Also see Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations*, 91.

<sup>164</sup> Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 115.

<sup>165</sup> Kidd, *The Great Awakening*, 244; Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 108.

<sup>166</sup> Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations*, 61.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

Whitefield also employed an emotional fervor that certainly characterized the preaching of Separate Baptists. Unlike the Regulars, the Separates were “more zealous and noisy.”<sup>168</sup>

While General and Regular Baptists defended a more moderate evangelicalism, the Separates embraced a radicalism that stood in stark contrast to the established church. Separate ministers Shubal Stearns and Daniel Marshall traveled into the southern colonies in the 1750s. They spent a short time preaching in Hampshire County, Virginia. When the people there did not show much interest in their teachings, they moved on to North Carolina, where they settled and began to meet remarkable success.<sup>169</sup> In the late 1750s, however, the Separates started reentering Virginia from North Carolina. Separate minister James Read toured Virginia several times in the mid-1760s and met with considerable success, baptizing hundreds of converts. The evangelicalism that Read brought to Virginia was reminiscent of New England’s religious fervor two decades before. His meetings typically ran late into the night, “and sometimes the floor would be covered by people under conviction of sin.”<sup>170</sup> Through the late-1760s, Separate churches grew slowly in southern Virginia. Once these roots were planted, however, “the Separates swarmed throughout the rest of the colony.”<sup>171</sup> Some of them eventually crossed paths with Ireland and Waller.

Ireland and Waller’s pre-conversion experiences offer pictures of colonial Virginia before the ascendancy of evangelical religion. Waller was a man enamored by the pleasures of Virginian society, particularly gambling. His thoughts appear to have been devoid of serious religious contemplation. A common theme seems to unite the description of Ireland’s younger years: vanity motivated many of his actions as a youth. He apparently yearned for the people in

<sup>168</sup> Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 110.

<sup>169</sup> Ryland, *The Baptists of Virginia*, 37.

<sup>170</sup> Kidd, *The Great Awakening*, 245-246. Also see Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 107-108.

<sup>171</sup> Kidd, *The Great Awakening*, 246.

his life to have a good opinion of him. During his years in Scotland, he painstakingly sought to keep the moral rules imposed by his parents and local minister so that he could receive their praises as well as earn a heaven-deserving worthiness before God. After he entered his classical schooling, acquiring the respect of his peers seemed to drive his activities. He won a reputation as a feisty boxer, raced off to sea when it offered an attractive opportunity to achieve glory, and jumped to lead the way onto the thin ice of the North Locke and up the mainmast to secure the topsails during a raging storm. Similarly, after the brief Virginian culture shock that temporarily drove him back to a moralistic mindset, he clambered for opportunities to win the admiration of his peers and start climbing the social ladder toward Virginia's respectable ruling class. He seemed to fit in quite well. Vanity drove many of the activities in which Virginia's middle and upper class colonists participated. Ireland rigorously pursued dancing for the attention of his peers. He also postured himself as a social chameleon in advantageous ways while engaging in conversations with all sorts of people. With a possible marriage into the gentry class, he seemed to be on his way toward achieving the Virginian life that many colonists perceived was most desirable to live. Then, one day, he encountered an evangelical Baptist.

## CHAPTER II

### *Ireland's Conversion to Evangelical Religion*

Ireland's conversion narrative is the most understudied portion of his autobiography. While historians prefer to examine his pre-conversion and post-conversion experiences, they usually skim over the piece of his life that holds the key to understanding his perseverance as a minister under Anglican persecution. Ireland's description of his conversion comprises approximately a third of his autobiography. It is evident that he thought this part of his life was essential to understanding the whole. The ideas within his narrative are often complex and therefore require meticulous excavation. Understanding the ideological nuances in Ireland's conversion narrative is only possible by examining the biblical texts that explicitly or implicitly informed the various stages of Ireland's change.<sup>172</sup> A parallel investigation of his conversion and the accompanying ideas from the Christian scriptures unveils the major concepts that formed the ideological foundation of Ireland's personal transformation and his subsequent endurance through persecution.

Ireland's conversion narrative fits into a specific genre of eighteenth-century historic literature. In *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative* (2005), D. Bruce Hindmarsh explains that thousands of eighteenth-century men and women who believed they experienced a spiritual transformation after encountering evangelical teachings "turned to a kind of spiritual

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<sup>172</sup> In *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative*, D. Bruce Hindmarsh stresses the importance of looking at biblical texts. He writes, "the principle source" of early evangelical understandings of the gospel "remained the New Testament." D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 13.

Thus, explanations of explicit references and implicit connections to the Bible are explored in the text and especially in the footnotes of this chapter. Looking at passages of scripture related to Ireland's experience will illuminate more of the ideological substance behind Ireland's conversion experience. Because the King James Version was the standard biblical text read in Virginia during the eighteenth century, that version will remain the one used when looking at these verses.

autobiography to make sense of their experience.”<sup>173</sup> For many evangelicals, their conversion was the defining moment of their lives. Describing one Englishman’s conversion in 1745, Hindmarsh writes, “Everything that preceded his conversion was prologue; everything that followed was epilogue.”<sup>174</sup> That seems to be the case with Ireland. His conversion is the crux of his autobiography, the hinge upon which the rest of his story turns.

Observers should approach Ireland’s recollection of his conversion with a healthy skepticism. Hindmarsh encourages readers not to accept every written line in a conversion narrative as sure historical fact. Some retrospective creativity was likely involved, as Ireland might have excluded certain details and inflated others in order to construct a desired picture.<sup>175</sup> Oftentimes there is a “moral” to the narrative, an overall structure that “points beyond itself to some larger principle of meaningfulness.”<sup>176</sup> Nonetheless, spiritual autobiography is not merely literature, and too much critique might distract the reader from understanding that the narrative points to an event that actually happened.<sup>177</sup>

Hindmarsh identifies three major categories of eighteenth-century conversion based on theological differences. The first consists of Arminian narratives influenced by John Wesley. These focused on how the convert engaged the will for salvation and, subsequently, for sanctification (the process of growing as a Christian). The second is a group of Moravian narratives that were “self-abasing and quietist, upholding an ideal of exquisite contemplation of the wounded Saviour.”<sup>178</sup> The third category consisted of Calvinist narratives in which people described their experience as “introspective, providential, and more rationalized in terms of

<sup>173</sup> Hindmarsh, *Evangelical Conversion*, vii.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 324.

salvation.”<sup>179</sup> The idea that conversion came from God and was for his glory heavily influenced the Calvinist accounts. Ireland’s conversion experience mostly falls into the third category. He carefully and frequently referred to the futility of his own will (in contrast to the Arminian narratives) and described fiercely painful reflections on his guilty state (partially in contrast to the Moravian narratives). He pointed often to his need for God’s sovereign action to move forward his conversion, which he carefully rationalized in terms of his later understanding of the Bible.

A brief look at John Waller’s spiritual awakening offers a preview of the forces behind Ireland’s conversion. The catalyst for his transformation occurred in the midst of an ironic circumstance. Waller developed a reputation for loathing Baptists. He even proceeded to engage in active persecution of Baptist ministers and strove to bring them to court as public nuisances. One of the men he helped accuse was Lewis Craig, whose awakening to evangelical convictions began under the ministry of Samuel Harriss. Waller served on the jury that fined Craig for preaching.<sup>180</sup> After the judge dismissed the jury, Craig caught their attention and said, “I thank you, gentlemen, for the honour you did me. While I was wicked and injurious you took no notice of me; but now having altered my course of life, and endeavoring to reform my neighbours[,] you concern yourselves much about me.”<sup>181</sup> When Waller heard these words, and observed Craig’s humility, “he was convinced that Craig was possessed of something that he had never seen in man before.”<sup>182</sup> Craig’s actions were like an arrow that “stuck in Waller’s mind” and caused his reformation to begin.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Morgan, *Materials Towards a History of the Baptists*, 73.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Taylor, *Virginia Baptist Ministers*, 79.

<sup>183</sup> Morgan, *Materials Towards a History of the Baptists*, 74.

Soon after Waller's encounter with Craig, he started attending Separate Baptist meetings. He then began "to call upon the name of the Lord."<sup>184</sup> The growing conviction about his sinful state ran deep, inspiring him to avoid "pleasant bread" and "pleasant water" for seven or eight months.<sup>185</sup> He almost reached a state of total despair. James Barnett Taylor quotes Waller's description of the experience: "I had long felt the greatest abhorrence of myself, and began almost to despair of the mercy of God."<sup>186</sup> He determined, therefore, not to rest until he felt God's mercy enter his heart or until he became convinced that he was hopeless. While listening to a minister preach, Waller heard a man in the audience suddenly exclaim "that he had found mercy and began to praise God."<sup>187</sup> Horror seized Waller, and he concluded that his damnation was certain. He departed from the meeting and entered a nearby wood to pray and beg God for mercy. In an instant, he wrote, "I felt my heart melt, and a sweet application of the Redeemer's love to my poor soul."<sup>188</sup>

Waller's feeling of assurance was short-lived, however. For a season, he swung back and forth between moments of strength and weakness. He sometimes felt ready to give up hope. It was in those times that the application of several texts from the Bible gave him great comfort. One stated, "Who is among you that feareth the Lord; that walketh in darkness and hath no light; let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God.' Isaiah 1:10."<sup>189</sup> This text encouraged Waller to trust that even though he felt burdened by his weakness, he could trust in God's sovereign provision of salvation. Another text that encouraged him came from 1 John, saying, "By this we know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 79-80

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 80

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.



brethren.”<sup>190</sup> When Samuel Harriss and James Read itinerated to Waller’s region, he felt confident to become a candidate for baptism. Thus, in 1767, Read baptized him in Orange County. Afterwards, Waller willingly sold property to pay off debts he had acquired from gambling.<sup>191</sup>

Ireland’s conversion followed a similar path, although Virginia presented numerous obstacles to his evangelical conversion. After he overcame his initial culture shock in the New World, he quickly grew fond of the colony’s many opportunities. He discovered that his personality and abilities empowered him to acquire the favor of his fellow Virginians. He had the education and intellect needed to become a respectable schoolmaster and dialogue with elite members of society. He also could dance with a dexterity that delighted “the young ladies” and had the wit to entertain his rowdy peers. Ireland never indicated a desire to return to his life as a mariner or continue his education to become a lawyer in Scotland. It appears that he was content to leave those ambitions in the past. Now he was a Virginian, and he seemed quite happy to be so.

Ireland’s conversion began when he encountered an evangelical whose lifestyle inclined him to face some serious questions. He admitted to having a “veneration” for religious people who demonstrated with their actions that they truly believed the religion they professed.<sup>192</sup> Such people displayed “a native grandeur, dignity and majesty” that commanded so much respect that Ireland had a difficult time practicing mischief in their presence.<sup>193</sup> After establishing himself in

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 39.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

Virginia, he crossed paths with such a person, a Regular Baptist described in Ireland's autobiography as "N.F."<sup>194</sup>

Ireland met him at a social gathering that took place at a gentleman's house. N.F. politely chose to remain close to Ireland throughout the evening in order to pursue conversations with him that focused upon religious subjects.<sup>195</sup> N.F. "appeared to have a most ingratiating and insinuating manner of address," which won Ireland's attention.<sup>196</sup> Later in the evening, Ireland's attention shifted to another man who started disrupting the gathering with obnoxious behavior. The man's actions so annoyed him that he yearned to teach him a lesson by giving him a beating. N.F.'s presence so convicted Ireland, however, that he felt compelled to draw the ruffian away from N.F. before he could "run him aground" for a few minutes to teach him a lesson.<sup>197</sup> The next time Ireland encountered N.F. was on a Sunday when the two men crossed paths on the road. N.F. greeted Ireland and inquired about his welfare. Ireland responded in a friendly manner, but, not being disposed to engage in spiritual discourse at the time, he turned to another companion, challenged him to a horse race, and quickly made his escape.<sup>198</sup>

N.F. found another way to engage the young schoolmaster, and it ultimately set Ireland on a path towards conversion, probably sometime in 1768. He learned that Ireland had a penchant for composing songs and satirical poems for the entertainment of his companions.<sup>199</sup>

Thus, when he again met him on the road one day, N.F. offered an affectionate greeting and then

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 44, 59. Ireland remarks that he and N.F. attended a "yearly meeting" of a religious group that he later specified as Regular Baptist.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 40. Ireland briefly digresses to explain N.F.'s motivation for pursuing a relationship with him. N.F. later informed Ireland that he possessed "some strange and unusual impressions towards" him. Ireland, *The Life*, 40. Although N.F. could not account for those impressions at the time, they inspired him to travel from his home to the gathering at the gentleman's estate in order to find and engage Ireland in a conversation about religion. N.F. soon realized that he would have to exercise great patience with Ireland. He was "a youth that might be led, but could not be drove," so N.F. determined to lay siege to Ireland's various forms of resistance. Ireland wrote, "Every ingratiating method that he could take, he pursued in order to acquire my confidence." Ireland, *The Life*, 40.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 40-41.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 43.

brought up the subject of Ireland's poetry. He said that his poems were successful in providing entertainment, but he also candidly suggested to Ireland that his ability to write poetry was a gift from God and should therefore "be improved for Him and not in the service of the Devil."<sup>200</sup>

N.F. suggested that a fitting topic might be a religious subject such as charity.

Ireland understood "charity" to be the humane disposition that made a person inclined to relieve the distresses of the needy (the kind of charity he demonstrated as a child by giving alms to the poor). Before parting, however, N.F. explained the word by describing charity as synonymous with "brotherly love." As Ireland reflected upon his task, he recalled that he had recently attended a Regular Baptist meeting in which the men called each other "brother." Since they were not actually blood relations, he concluded that they must possess "a religion which united them together in affection."<sup>201</sup> Drawing from this observation and probably from

knowledge acquired during his catechism in the Presbyterian faith, Ireland wrote that a Christian's love for other believers grows out of God's love for his children as demonstrated by Christ's suffering and death for sin so that those children might be reconciled to himself.<sup>202</sup>

Ireland delivered the poem to N.F. at his residence. Although N.F. spoke highly of the poem after reading it, Ireland knew that its composer was a person "whose conduct and practice, at that time, spoke this language[:] 'Depart from me, O Lord! For I desire not the knowledge of thy way.'<sup>203</sup>

N.F. urged the young poet to write a second composition on a subject of Ireland's choosing. While on his way from N.F.'s residence to his schoolhouse, Ireland meditated on what

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 45-47. Ireland's description of "brotherly love" was probably shaped by several texts from the Bible. 1 John 3:16 – "Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." Romans 5:8 – "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." John 15:13 – "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

<sup>203</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 48-49.

subject to select. An idea suddenly penetrated his thoughts: ““Make one on the [natural] man’s dependence for heaven.””<sup>204</sup> He then altered the thought into a personal question: what was his own dependence for heaven? In other words, what did Ireland individually depend upon to secure a good position in the afterlife? He realized that his nature caused him to savor his sin so much that he could not part with it. Sin “was so pleasant and agreeable” to him that his plan for quite some time had been to pursue worldly pleasures prohibited by the Bible until he aged so much that those enjoyments lost their relish.<sup>205</sup> At that time, he would turn to God, who was merciful and “would accept a few days or weeks of my sincere repenting, by which salvation would be secured, my sins pardoned and I received into favour.”<sup>206</sup>

Four significant ideas are present in Ireland’s prevailing pre-conversion views on the afterlife. The first is that he believed his soul was eternal and would retain a conscious existence in some fashion after he died. The second is that his “sins,” or the breaking of moral laws detailed in the Bible, separated him from God. The third is that some form of reconciliation to God needed to happen in order for him to earn a good position in the afterlife. Finally, the fourth is that one of God’s attributes is mercy. More specifically, God’s mercy found expression in his inclination to look upon sinful people and not treat them as they deserve to be treated. Although these ideas underwent transformations during Ireland’s conversion, they remained the foundational ideological substance that achieved significant changes in his life.

Another major precondition for Ireland’s transformation was his view of the Bible.

Nearly all of the ideas that operated on him during his conversion came directly from specific

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 49

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid. Despite his upbringing in Presbyterian Calvinism, Ireland’s view appears to align far more closely to Anglican Arminianism, which affirmed that Jesus died to redeem sinners but that the salvation process endowed humans with power to choose when to access the benefits of Christ’s saving work. Bond, *Damned Souls*, 252-253. Bond’s observations on Anglican soteriology will receive greater attention at a later point in this chapter.

biblical texts. He wrote that he truly believed the biblical scriptures were “the word of God.”<sup>207</sup> The teachings in those scriptures “came home with such authority as bore evidence to me of their divine authority and origin.”<sup>208</sup> Ireland’s belief in the authority of scripture is essential for the observer to understand. It meant that the Bible’s descriptions of the nature of man, the nature of God, the purpose of life, the mandates for the church, and commands for individual believers held a powerful position of authority in his life. Ideas derived from passages in the scriptures would dictate how Ireland reshaped his life in Virginia, pursued the ministry, and suffered for the purpose of propagating the gospel message.

Ireland’s second poem exhibited a sense of growing alarm at his own life. He described the imprudent disposition of people who avoided practicing religion: they intellectually agreed that there was a hell where the wicked would go, but they felt no need to surrender the world’s pleasures until the last few weeks of life, when a brief stint of repentance would secure their salvation from eternal judgment.<sup>209</sup> Ireland then warned those who maintained such an understanding of salvation to realize that God’s judgment day “will soon appear,” requiring all to “answer at His awful bar” for their deeds on earth.<sup>210</sup> The next stanza offered a terrifying picture of what would follow:

O how dreadful will it be,  
When the wicked with terror  
The enraged Son of God will see,  
Darting forth beams of horror;

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<sup>207</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 61.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid. Ireland’s opinion of scripture aligned with the view described by the author of Hebrews, who wrote, “the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (v. 12). Similarly, Ireland likely adhered to the views of scripture maintained by King David, who wrote in Psalm 119, “The law of thy mouth is better unto me than thousands of gold and silver... How sweet are thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth!... Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path... Therefore I esteem all thy precepts concerning all things to be right; and I hate every false way... Thy word is true from the beginning: and every one of thy righteous judgments endureth for ever” (vv. 72, 103, 105, 128, 160).

<sup>209</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 50-51.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 51.

Crying depart;  
 Corrupt in heart,  
 There's for you no salvation;  
 For you shall dwell  
 With fiends in hell  
 In the regions of damnation;  
 You spurned at my gospel word,  
 And abus'd my truth saith the Lord;  
 Therefore from my presence retire  
 Into everlasting fire,  
 Where you with devils there shall roar  
 And burn in flames for evermore,  
 And never die,  
 But gnash and cry,  
 Through everlasting ages.<sup>211</sup>

Ireland finished the poem with a more hopeful description of the grace available to sinners in Christ, but the general tone of anxious uncertainty continued to linger.

The second poem generated deep and anguished introspection in the usually light-hearted James Ireland. One line in particular continued to torture him: "The law does breathe nothing but death to slights of salvation."<sup>212</sup> He attempted to drive the thought from his mind by spending time with people, singing songs, and carrying on conversations, but each of these efforts failed. When he visited N.F. to give him the poem, he explained his obsession with the

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 52. Specific ideas from several Biblical texts are evident in this poem. In Matthew 25, Jesus describes a time when "the Son of Man shall come in his glory" to judge mankind (v. 31). He will sift humanity by placing "the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left" (v. 33). After determining which ones belong to him, he will say to those on the left, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels" (v. 41). Those consigned to that fate "shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal" (46). Previously in the passage, Jesus describes the place of judgment as one of "outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (v. 30).

In Mark 9:42-50, Jesus says to his disciples that it is better to lose much in this life and gain heaven than retain the pleasures of this world only "to be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched" (vv. 47b-48). In Revelation 20, the Apostle John describes the final judgment. He writes that the devil would be "cast into the lake of fire and brimstone," where he would be "tormented day and night forever and ever" (v. 10). Subsequently, John saw all people pass before God to receive judgment, and "whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire" (v. 15).

<sup>212</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 54. The idea that the "law does breathe nothing but death to slights of salvation" perhaps is best explained by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans. He writes in Romans 7 that "the law" causes people to realize what sin is so that they know they have done wrong in the sight of God (vv. 7-11). This consequently causes angst in the awakened sinner, who realizes with Paul, "I am carnal, sold under sin... I know that in me (that is, in my flesh), dwelleth no good thing" (v. 14b, 18a). Ireland was on his way to acknowledging this idea.

one phrase. N.F. smiled slightly at Ireland, who figured that his religious acquaintance thought his preoccupation with the single poetic phrase was a sign of spiritual immaturity. It angered Ireland enough to make a cordial but speedy departure.<sup>213</sup> When he was far enough from N.F.'s residence, Ireland "began to sing wicked and lascivious songs," of which he "had a great number."<sup>214</sup> Although he sought to sing as loudly as he could, the line from the poem only resounded louder in his mind. He even bent over, placed his hands on his knees, and shook his head in an effort to force other subjects into his mind, "but nothing could avail to dispossess me of that impression."<sup>215</sup> He attended a dance at a gentleman's house that evening, but his thoughts about human nature convicted him so strongly that he informed his companions of his expectation never to dance with them again. They asked him why, but he could not give a satisfactory answer. He felt tremendously confused.

In his distress, Ireland sought some direction from people who professed to have undergone a conversion to evangelical religion. He traveled to the residence of several young men who "believed themselves converted" to hear them speak about their experiences.<sup>216</sup> Ireland paid close attention to what they said, even though their use of passages in the Bible appeared to be untrained. He then visited a respectable Presbyterian family, where he interacted with an old woman who, he believed, was a strong evangelical. On his way to her house, it had occurred to him that he was the "sighter of salvation," and that "the law of God was then breathing death" against his soul.<sup>217</sup> After dining with the Presbyterian family, he retired to a quiet place on their

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<sup>213</sup> N.F. later explained to Ireland that he apprehended that God "was about to do something" to Ireland. Ireland, *The Life*, 55.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid. Ireland later told a story that demonstrates how much even an individual sin offended God. When a man came to him confessing that he had stolen some money from a local tavern keeper, Ireland counseled him by explaining that "if he had no other sin against him but that one, it would damn his soul." Ireland, *The Life*, 76. The

property to pray. “I can venture to say,” he later wrote, “this was the first time that ever I bowed my wicked knees and lifted up my guilty hands under a conscience sense of guilt before God.”<sup>218</sup> For two or three days, Ireland languished in confusion. He remembered that “those ways and practices” that “I with so much greediness pursued,” and which formed “my leading darling idols, were slain in me at once.”<sup>219</sup> He simply lost his appetite for common Virginian pastimes and pleasures.

Restless and uneasy, Ireland tried to form a plan to solve his problem. He recognized that his life of impiety had broken God’s law, and God was offended. To solve that problem, he decided that he must strive with all his might to conform his life to the law of God. He hoped that by confessing, praying, and repenting, “God would be satisfied.”<sup>220</sup> Ignoring “any consideration of His justice,” Ireland believed that quitting his former company and relinquishing his previous preoccupation with the world’s pleasures might win him access to God’s “compound of mercy.”<sup>221</sup> Eventually, he trusted, God would have mercy on his soul. Ireland labored incessantly at this work. He recalled, “If heaven could have been obtained by the exercise of human endeavours and self-sufficiency, I, perhaps, might have laid in for a claim.”<sup>222</sup> The fear of hell and the terror of walking in a damned state inspired him to toil ceaselessly. This entire approach, he later admitted, “was founded upon no other basis than self-merit.”<sup>223</sup>

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weight of that guilt bore heavily on Ireland’s mind as he contemplated his sins during the season of his spiritual conviction.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid. 60.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid. Ireland’s negative tone toward dependence on self-merit for justification before God probably arose from passages in the Bible such as the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Galatians. In chapter two of that epistle, Paul writes, “Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified” (v. 16). Paul explains that if the Christians in the Galatian churches put their hope in their own works, then they would “frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain” (v. 21). In other words, no one justifies themselves before God by



Ireland then offered a brief aside that illuminated his eventual understanding of “merit,” or good deeds, in the process of acquiring one’s salvation. He explained that he did not want his readers to think that he had any intention to discourage an “awakened” sinner from actively engaging in dutiful acts. The awakened sinner should lay “close siege to the kingdom of heaven, and to storm it with his groans and tears.”<sup>224</sup> At the same time, however, he fervently condemned putting those dutiful acts “in the room of Christ, and making saviours of them.”<sup>225</sup> Doing so would be tantamount to “robbing Christ of His glory, and plucking the brightest pearls out of His mediatorial crown, and lessening His dignity, by attributing that to the creature that is the royal prerogative of the adorable Redeemer.”<sup>226</sup> In other words, Ireland continued to explain, it “would be destroying the efficacy of His satisfaction, the meritoriousness of His righteousness, and the influences of His Spirit and grace, in renewing and sanctifying the soul.”<sup>227</sup> Looking in retrospect upon the first major stage of his conversion, Ireland concluded that his endeavor to solve the problem of his sin had begun by entirely missing the source of the solution. His merits, though arduously attempted, would continually fall short of satisfying God’s law.<sup>228</sup>

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attempting to obey the law. If people could acquire righteousness by that means, their works would nullify the need for God’s grace and would demonstrate that Christ did not need to die on the cross for sins (or, as Ireland stated, it would be “robbing Christ of His glory, and plucking the brightest pearls out of his mediatorial crown”). This point would become clearer to Ireland later in his conversion.

<sup>224</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 60.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> An obvious question arises from this understanding of salvation. If merits do not satisfy God’s law or earn his favor, then why would Baptists strive so energetically to reject many aspects of Virginian culture, resist temptation, and suffer for spreading the gospel message? Ireland offers an answer to this question later in his autobiography. He points out that the Apostle James wrote in his New Testament letter that “faith without works is dead.” Ireland, *The Life*, 141. The evidence of one’s conversion was a demonstration of change. Justification before God was only the beginning of the Christian life. Following one’s conversion was a long road of “sanctification,” or the “progressive work in the soul, by which we were to die to sin and live to God.” Ireland, *The Life*, 142. He describes it as the “internal change” that results in a converted person’s increasing proclivity to resist temptation and be “conformed to God and Christ in the ways of holiness.” Ireland, *The Life*, 142.

People who experience regeneration, or conversion, are “new creatures” that have “the Spirit of Christ” and enjoy “a participation of the divine nature.” Ireland, *The Life*, 142. In other words, it is natural for a person with a heart transformed by the Holy Spirit through conversion to devote his or her life to pursuing a godly life. Ireland quotes Titus 3:8, in which Paul admonishes his disciple Titus to remember ““that they which believed in God, might

An optimistic thought came to Ireland during his endeavors to acquire God-pleasing merit. While walking in a quiet place, Isaiah 65:1 “bolted in upon my mind, ‘I am found of them that sought me not.’”<sup>229</sup> He looked back upon the circumstances of his growing conviction, and it occurred to him that he had written the poems for N.F. in order to acquire his favor and applause. Nonetheless, God used those poems to awaken him to his guilty condition. This realization gave Ireland a distant hope that God had used his corrupt motivations to bring about something good, which perhaps meant that God was at work in his life.<sup>230</sup>

Despite this hope, however, Ireland started to see the futility of his endeavors. He gradually discovered that his outward, visible sins were not the source of his corruption. Instead, he saw that “the law was spiritual and reached even to the discovery of my inbred pollution.”<sup>231</sup> The source of the problem was in Ireland’s heart, and “it was from thence my outbreaking practices flowed.”<sup>232</sup>

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be careful to maintain good works.” Ireland, *The Life*, 142. Thus, a person who makes a passionate profession of faith and yet lives “in the omission and general neglect of the practice of good works” is likely a person who never experienced a true conversion. Ireland, *The Life*, 143.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 61. The Apostle Paul quotes Isaiah 65:1 in Romans 10:20, which states, “But [Isaiah] is very bold, and saith, I was found of them that sought me not; I was made manifest unto them that asked not after me.” Ireland increasingly realized that his blindness had prevented him from seeing the truth about his sinful nature and the extent to which it offended God’s holiness. Thus, Ireland later understood his “awakening” to have come because of God’s intentional orchestration of the events of Ireland’s life to unveil his wickedness and incline his heart toward repentance.

<sup>230</sup> This idea likens to another of Paul’s letters. In 2 Corinthians 7, he encourages the Corinthian church to realize that Paul’s harsh words in a previous letter had grieved them into a life-giving repentance. He writes, “For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of” (v. 10a). Although Ireland’s growing conviction produced a miserable angst and discomfort in his life, he maintained the hope that it might lead to a positive conclusion.

<sup>231</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 61.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid. Ireland likely recalled that Jesus emphasized the importance of understanding one’s inner corruption and the need for a pure heart. Although sin might manifest itself outwardly, the human heart was its ultimate origin. The gospel of Mark quotes Jesus saying, “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: all these evil things come from within, and defile a man” (7:21-23). Even the Pharisees, who were experts at the law and fastidiously sought to keep it externally, were internally impure. According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus said, “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but

Ireland concluded that his first plan to acquire God's satisfaction would remain unsuccessful. Still having a "legal spirit," however, he adopted another plan. He decided that he would continue to pursue a life of prayer, repentance, and good works, but he would also lean in part on the merits of Christ. "I concluded," Ireland recalled, "that what I could not do, Christ by what He has done would make up the deficiency, which I hope God would accept of."<sup>233</sup> Thus, he formed a compound between his own merits and the merits of Christ. He later clarified this idea by writing that he was "willing to compliment Christ with the whole credit and honour of my salvation, provided I could be a part Saviour therein."<sup>234</sup>

This second plan likened strongly to the general soteriology held by Anglican Virginians. Edward L. Bond describes Anglican views on salvation as such a mixture. Anglicans in England "believed the Puritan doctrine of 'faith alone' had damaged the nations' moral life by inadvertently sanctioning antinomianism."<sup>235</sup> They reacted to this perceived error by recovering the Catholic Church's soteriology, and the product was "a practical theology stressing duty, one that the colonists accepted as readily as their brethren on the other side of the Atlantic."<sup>236</sup> Anglicans mocked the idea that the Christian gospel rested entirely on the promise of God and that the part of the person was only to believe and embrace those promises.<sup>237</sup> Bond writes, "Duty was a necessary facet of the Anglican believer's journey to heaven."<sup>238</sup> Anglicans affirmed that Christ had died to redeem humanity, but men and women were to play a role in gaining their salvation.

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are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity" (23:25-28). This likens strongly to Ireland's description of himself.

<sup>233</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 61.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 68-69.

<sup>235</sup> Bond, *Damned Souls*, 247.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

Anglicans therefore maintained an Arminian understanding of redemption, which meant, as one minister proclaimed, ““We are workers together with God,” and ““we must not be merely [*sic*] passive.””<sup>239</sup> Virginian Anglicans emphasized repentance and human action, thereby heightening “the role of human endeavor in the economy of salvation.”<sup>240</sup> God had satisfied his side of the covenant by offering the death of his son as a means of justification for mankind. “By faith and repentance,” writes Bond, “demonstrated through a holy life of conformity to God’s law, men and women met their part of the covenant’s obligations... God [thereby] cooperated with man in this drama of salvation.”<sup>241</sup> Ireland conformed at least in part to this Anglican pattern by depending upon the sincerity of his repentance and his improved morality. In those places where he fell short, however, there was grace because of the supplemental righteousness available to him in Christ. The combination of the two, he thought, would assure him that his soul, sufficiently justified, rested safely in God’s hands.

Ireland then faced a particularly sharp temptation. The young lady who was a prospective wife for Ireland decided to attend his school “to enjoy the benefit of my tuition for three months.”<sup>242</sup> Ireland felt as though Satan “immediately laid siege to my soul” as he did to Jesus when he presented the kingdoms of the world to him “with a promise of bestowing them

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 257-258. Although Anglicans might not have claimed that a person’s works accrued righteousness sufficient to justify them before God, their emphasis on human choice and effort in the process of acquiring salvation likely affected Ireland’s understanding of how he might be saved.

Bond elaborates further on the Anglican sequence of salvation. He writes, “God had justified sinners through the resurrection of Christ and had thereby invited all of humanity to partake of the covenant of grace. Through Christ’s death and resurrection, God had communicated to all people a measure of grace sufficient to overcome the effects of original sin and to recognize the truth of the Gospel. It remained, however, for men and women to take hold of the ‘title to eternal life’ exhibited to them by responding with their own faith and repentance. For without repentance there could be no justification. This sequence could suggest that sanctification occurred simultaneously with or preceded justification, thus making human action the means whereby God accepted persons as righteous. But to Virginians, God was always the original actor.” Bond, *Damned Souls*, 256-257.

<sup>242</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 64.

on Him if He would fall down and worship him.”<sup>243</sup> Ireland felt that Satan likewise presented to him “many pleasing prospects and advantages” that would result from the beneficial match.<sup>244</sup> The distresses arising from his recent convictions, however, were too strong to attract him toward a pursuit of the young lady. He genuinely felt that agreeing to the marriage was equivalent to betraying Jesus.<sup>245</sup> He conceived that God frowned upon him for considering it, so he repeatedly went to the woods to pray. In his growing awareness of the impurity of his desires, he found himself speechless, “but like the publican smote upon my breast saying, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner.’”<sup>246</sup>

Rather than achieving relief through his acts of self-denial and self-abasement, Ireland faced several major disappointments as he experienced the abandonment of his friends. Two or three of his companions, he recalled, were “in some measure engaged about their salvation,” and intended to meet with Ireland at the schoolhouse to pray.<sup>247</sup> Seeing his miserable state, however, “disposed them to turn their backs upon what they were seeking after.”<sup>248</sup> Ireland recalled that

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid. Ireland alludes here to Matthew 4, where Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan for 40 days before the beginning of his ministry in Judea. The author of Matthew’s gospel writes, “Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; and saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve” (vv. 8-10).

<sup>244</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 64.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 65. Ireland’s perception that he was “rejection and selling Jesus” perhaps alludes to Judas’ betrayal of Jesus described in Matthew 26:14-16, where he agreed with the chief priests in Jerusalem to deliver Jesus into their hands for thirty pieces of silver.

<sup>246</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 65. Ireland here refers to Luke 18:9-14, where Jesus told a parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector. While the Pharisee stood in the temple and proudly thanked God that he was not like sinful men, a despised tax collector, or “publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner” (v. 13). The passage highlights the humility and genuine repentance of the tax collector, although society viewed men of that profession to be some of the greatest sinners. Rather than the proud Pharisee, it was the publican who “went down to his house justified... for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted” (v. 14). The humility that Ireland now sought, so different from his former preoccupation with acquiring the praises of others, demonstrates that a remarkable change had dramatically altered his priorities.

<sup>247</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 65

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

each returned like a “Dog to his vomit and the sow to her wallowing in the mire.”<sup>249</sup> Some of Ireland’s former playmates initially tried to sway him back to his previous lifestyle.<sup>250</sup> Their efforts gained no ground, however, for “the arrows of conviction were shot deep... so that no attempt of theirs could extract them.”<sup>251</sup>

Others who formerly considered Ireland to be a friend began to avoid him. They would hide in the woods when they saw him approaching on the road because they feared he would subject them to reproof.<sup>252</sup> Still others expressed pity and concluded that his “senses were all gone.”<sup>253</sup> One friend lamented that Ireland, who enjoyed the good opinion of so many people, “should forfeit all public esteem by becoming a fool.”<sup>254</sup> He expressed grief in seeing that Ireland had surrendered “that sprightly behavior which was pleasing to company.”<sup>255</sup> Feeling very alone, Ireland observed himself breaking under his trial. While praying in the woods, however, the last clause of Hebrews 13:5 entered his mind: “I will never leave thee nor forsake thee.”<sup>256</sup> Even in this relief, however, he “found no basis for the security of my soul to rest upon.”<sup>257</sup>

Despite the frequent rejection and abandonment by Ireland’s friends, he also beheld spiritual awakenings in some of his former companions. One of them, beholding that Ireland’s depression was weakening his body, believed he was a danger to himself, so he called for a blacksmith to make a chain that would secure him from destroying himself further. Ireland then

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid., 65. The broader context of this clause from Hebrews 13 encourages the Christian to avoid covetousness (particularly applicable to Ireland’s quandary regarding whether to pursue the young lady) and instead to “be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me” (v. 5b-6).

<sup>257</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 65.

handed his friend his most recent poem, describing the inner wrestling that he was enduring. His friend quietly read it over twice, sighed, and surprisingly declared, “I believe that we are all fools, and you are the only wise man amongst us.”<sup>258</sup> He visited Ireland the next evening to tell him that since his visit the day before, the weighty matters that Ireland dealt with in his poem increasingly burdened him. Ireland encouraged him to pray. Soon, the man “was brought home to God through Jesus.”<sup>259</sup>

Another of Ireland’s friends, a fellow Scotsman who was at the highest place in the local Masonic society, heard the rumors spreading through the settlement that James Ireland was on his way to conversion. Hearing these remarks, Ireland’s countryman swore that the rumors were not true, “for there could not be a dance in the settlement without [Ireland] being there.”<sup>260</sup> He therefore took it upon himself to convince Ireland to go to a dance at a wealthy neighbor’s house. As the man rode up to the schoolhouse, Ireland recalled, “I never beheld such a display of pride in any man... he rode a lofty elegant horse... his countenance appeared to me as bold and daring as Satan himself.”<sup>261</sup> He halted his horse and commanded that Ireland come out. Ireland emerged, fearful that his friend’s persuasion might break his resolve to remain constant in piety. Yet, he recalled, “How quickly can God level pride to the ground, if He does but once touch the heart.”<sup>262</sup> His friend nearly fainted at seeing Ireland’s gloomy countenance and his frail body emaciated from days of self-depravation. “In the name of the Lord,” he said to Ireland, “what is the matter with you?”<sup>263</sup> Weeping, Ireland spoke plainly, “My dear friend I possess a soul that

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<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 66-67.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid., 68.



will be either happy or miserable in the world to come.”<sup>264</sup> He explained that God had made him aware of his guilty and condemned state, “and I plainly see that if my soul is not converted, regenerated and born again, I will be damned.”<sup>265</sup> The man, deeply convicted, broke down and desperately pleaded with Ireland not to leave him alone. Ireland responded by imploring him to seek God’s pardon through Jesus Christ. The friend promised he would do so.

The same Scotsman later paid Ireland a visit. His countenance evinced “something of a lightness and a serenity” that inclined Ireland to think his friend had lost his convictions and was coming merely to persuade him to return to his former ways.<sup>266</sup> Ireland again trembled under the weakness of thinking that he would have to battle the man’s persuasions. His friend, however, dropped to his knees before him, “and lifting up his hands and eyes towards heaven, cried out, ‘I have found the Lord Jesus Christ precious to my soul.’”<sup>267</sup> Despite hopeful experiences such as this one, however, Ireland’s melancholy persisted. He felt Satan remind him of a scripture, “‘Two of a city, the one taken the other left,’” which referred to God’s election of some and

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid. Here again is the idea that Ireland truly believed in the eternity of his soul, which laid a great burden on him to discover the right means by which he could secure a good place in the afterlife.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid. Ireland refers to conversion, regeneration, and being “born again.” These concepts are important to understanding his perception of what causes a radical change in an “unconverted” and “unregenerate” person. The concept of regeneration appears in Paul’s letter to Titus. He describes the life of the unconverted sinner as one in which “we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another” (3:3). Yet, “after that,” writes Paul, “the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour” (3:4-6).

Thus, “works of righteousness,” or meritorious good deeds, are not the source of a person’s transformation. Instead, regeneration refers to a sinner’s new beginning as a follower of Christ, in which that person is made a “new creation,” an idea further explored in 2 Corinthians 5, where Paul writes to Corinthian believers, “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (v. 17).

The transformation engendered by that regeneration, or new creation, requires a miracle to occur in the human heart. In John 3, Jesus dialogues with an inquisitive Pharisee named Nicodemus and explains, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (v. 3). Nicodemus, understandably confused, asks Jesus how a person who is already old could enter his mother’s womb and be born again (v. 4). Jesus responds by explaining that the work is a miraculous and sovereign achievement of the Holy Spirit (vv. 5-8). Thus, Ireland yearned to see his soul “converted, regenerated, and born again.”

<sup>266</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 78.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.



rejection of others. Ireland felt that perhaps God gave him awakening impressions in order to use him as an instrument to bless those who were elect while still leaving him behind.<sup>268</sup>

Ireland realized that his second plan, forming a compound between his own merits and the merits of Christ in order to justify himself before God, was not going to work. He saw that underlying his feigned reliance on Christ was a self-righteous spirit that “needed a deeper stroke from the Spirit of Christ” to change.<sup>269</sup> He acquired a fuller view of his “original guilt and actual pollution.”<sup>270</sup> He saw himself as “a mass and sink of sin... shapen in sin and brought forth in iniquity, [so] that my heart was corrupt and depraved, deceitful and wretchedly wicked.”<sup>271</sup> He felt as though it would be easier for a leopard to lose his spots than for him “to perform any good action of myself... or to lay any obligation upon God to bestow His eternal favour upon me.”<sup>272</sup> He felt utterly unable to endear himself to God by his own efforts. His first and second plans

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid. The verse comes from Luke 17, where Jesus warns his disciples of the arrival of his kingdom, which would liken to the time of Noah, when people were caught by surprise when the flood came (vv. 26-27). It also would liken to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, where people were going about their lives without consideration of God before “it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all” (v. 29). The gospel of Luke records Jesus saying that when the kingdom comes, “I tell you, in that night there shall be two men in one bed; the one shall be taken, and the other shall be left. Two women shall be grinding together; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Two men shall be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left.” (vv. 34-36).

<sup>269</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 69.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid. The idea of being “shapen in sin and brought forth in iniquity” comes directly from Psalm 51, where King David arduously repented over his murder of Uriah and adultery with Bathsheba. David believed he could trace his sinful tendencies to the very beginning of his existence. According to this view, sin is part of the human condition from the beginning of every life. Ireland describes his heart as “corrupt and depraved.” Perhaps the best expression of this belief is a passage in Romans 3 that is a foundational text for the doctrine of total depravity that describes the unconverted person’s relationship to sin.

In that chapter, Paul cites portions of Psalm, Proverbs, Jeremiah, and Isaiah when he writes, “There is none righteous, no, not one: there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God... there is none that doeth good, no, not one. Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: their feet are swift to shed blood: destruction and misery are their ways: and the way of peace they have not known: there is no fear of God before their eyes” (vv. 10-18). Paul reiterates that this condition applies to everyone: “both Jews and Gentiles... they are all under sin” (v. 9), and “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (v. 23).

<sup>272</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 69.

were defunct because “salvation was not by the law in part or in whole; for by the deeds of the law no living flesh could be justified.”<sup>273</sup>

One reason why Ireland’s view of his sin appeared to be deepening and causing him even greater discomfort was that he also “discovered God to be a just God.”<sup>274</sup> Although he retained his view that God was merciful, he understood his own sin to be heinous. It separated him from his maker so completely “that if God had cut the thread of my life, and sent me to hell, I must have said, He dealt justly and righteously by me.”<sup>275</sup> Ireland therefore concluded that all his plans to vindicate himself through good deeds and a reformed lifestyle were useless. Yet the yearning for salvation remained. Had he “possessed ten thousand worlds all at my disposal,” he said, “there would not have been the least hesitation in me, to give them all in exchange for one

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid. Also in Romans 3, Paul writes, “Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (v. 20).

<sup>274</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 69.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid. Ireland’s view of God’s justice is perhaps less palatable than his earlier description of God’s mercy. While people naturally embrace God’s merciful and loving attributes, they are inclined to recoil at his justice, righteousness, and holiness, particularly when God’s justice places them in a category with the condemned. Yet scripture’s description of God’s justice, particularly in the Old Testament, must be considered in order to understand Ireland’s growing awareness of the void between himself and his maker caused by sin.

The Psalmist writes that “the heavens shall declare his righteousness: for God is judge himself” (Psalm 50:6), and “he cometh to judge the earth: with righteousness shall he judge the world, and the people with equity” (Psalm 98:9). The writer of Exodus records God saying that his people were not to bow to idols, “for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me” (Exodus 20:5). The author of Deuteronomy adds, “He is the Rock, his work is perfect: for all his ways are judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he” (Deuteronomy 32:4). The Chronicler adds, “now let the fear of the LORD be upon you; take heed and do it: for there is no iniquity with the LORD our God, nor respect of persons, nor taking of gifts” (2 Chronicles 19:7).

One of Job’s friends states in the book of Job, “Yea, surely God will not do wickedly, neither will the Almighty pervert judgment” (Job 34:12). The prophet Nahum likewise writes that although “The LORD is slow to anger,” he is also “great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked” (Nahum 1:3a). The prophet Zephaniah states, “The just LORD is in the midst thereof; he will not do iniquity: every morning doth he bring his judgment to light, he faileth not” (Zephaniah 3:5). The writer of Genesis asks, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Genesis 18:25), and John writes in Revelation, “true and righteous are his judgments: for he hath judged the great whore, which did corrupt the earth with her fornication, and hath avenged the blood of his servants at her hand” (Revelation 19:2).

Ireland came to view his sin as a serious affront to the just God described in the passages above. Although he would soon behold the merciful and loving aspects of God’s character, these terrifying realizations occurred first during his conversion.

small ray of hope of Christ's pardoning mercy to my guilty spirit."<sup>276</sup> Ireland suffered under these thoughts through "distressing days and sorrowful nights."<sup>277</sup>

Even as Ireland came to accept that his own plans were hopeless, a new hope broke into his darkness. He began to have a view of Jesus "in a more enlarged light."<sup>278</sup> Compounding different sources of merit would not work. Christ "must be a whole Saviour or none."<sup>279</sup> Ireland read in the scriptures that salvation came when a person had faith in Christ. Yet, he found it impossible for him to believe. He recalled, "for a poor sinner, enveloped in darkness, and loaded with guilt and sin, to... venture upon an unseen Christ, for eternal happiness, was a work and act beyond myself to accomplish."<sup>280</sup> He frequently felt that Satan was battering him with discouragements, and he agonized that his former companions continued trying to draw him back to his old ways. The pressures caused him to retire often to secluded places in the woods, where he would drop to his knees, wring his hands, and implore God for forgiveness. Still, no relief came. He viewed himself as "the most wretched, the most wicked, and the most guilty sinner, that existed on the globe."<sup>281</sup> When he viewed his sin, he would "hate it in my heart, and myself for it."<sup>282</sup> He wrote that this was a fulfillment of what the prophet said, "Then shall you look upon your ways that were not good, and shall loathe yourselves in your own sight, because of

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<sup>276</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 69. Again, Ireland's genuine belief in the eternity of his soul made him willing to relinquish the enjoyments of Virginian culture. The author of Mark records Jesus asking a crowd, "what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul?" (8:36-37).

<sup>277</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 69.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.* Ireland's view of his own incapability likely derives from Ephesians 2, where Paul explains to Christians in Ephesus that before their conversion they "were dead in trespasses and sins" (v. 1), walking "according to the course of this world... in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind," (vv. 2, 3a), which made them "by nature the children of wrath" (v. 3b). The only thing that delivered them from the dead state of incapability was when "God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ" (vv. 4-5). Having been rescued from their spiritually dead state and made alive, they could look back and acknowledge, "by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast" (v. 8-9).

<sup>281</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 70, 71.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

your iniquities and abominations.”<sup>283</sup> Ireland felt somehow relieved, however, that his sin, veiled so long by his spiritual blindness, was at least open to sight now.

In addition to Ireland’s terrifying view of his own sin and its affront to God’s justice, he also developed a seemingly paradoxical delight in God’s “beauty and excellency of holiness,” which became “amiable and desirable” to him.<sup>284</sup> Contrasting God’s holiness with his own sin inspired in him “the warmest desires after holiness... whereby I might never sin, against so just, so pure and so holy a God.”<sup>285</sup> He wondered how such a God could even suffer a sinner like him to remain alive. This contemplation actually gave him some hope, because he saw that God was good and merciful enough to preserve his life on earth “when He might in justice have cut me off, and sent me to hell.”<sup>286</sup>

For the time being, however, he continued to languish in uncertainty. “[A]las! alas!” he wrote, “this is not for me, nor never will be.”<sup>287</sup> No matter how many tears he shed over his sin, he felt “that if I could have commanded heaven, and secured my eternal peace, by the shedding a

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<sup>283</sup> Ibid. This verse comes from Ezekiel 36, where the prophet foretells God’s deliverance of Israel from captivity. He describes God’s intention to put his spirit within his people so that they would walk before him in righteousness and purity. He writes of the result of this transformation of the heart: “Then shall ye remember your own evil ways, and your doings that were not good, and shall lothe yourselves in your own sight for your iniquities and for your abominations... be ashamed and confounded for your own ways, O house of Israel” (36:31, 32b).

<sup>284</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid. Biblical commands for a Christian to pursue holiness are clear. The Apostle Peter writes, “as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy” (1 Peter 1:15-16). Paul likewise states in 1 Thessalonians that “God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness” (4:7).

Ireland’s delight in the “beauty and excellence” of God’s holiness seems paradoxical, though. How could he have the “warmest desires” for that which sealed his condemnation? A similar delight in God’s holiness is evident in several Old Testament texts. The author of Exodus records a song composed by Moses after God delivered the Israelites from the Egyptians by parting the Red Sea and leading them to safety. He extols God for being greater than all other gods and “glorious in holiness” (15:11). The Psalmist likewise implores his listeners to “worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness” (29:2b). Because God “sent redemption unto his people” and established a covenant with them forever, “holy and reverend is his name” (111:9). The author of 1 Samuel writes, “There is none holy as the LORD: for there is none beside thee: neither is there any rock like our God” (2:2).

Perhaps Ireland’s delight in God’s holiness stemmed from the hope that God would redeem his soul, thereby inclining him to praise God as the authors of these texts did when they perceived the transcendent, unique, and matchless nature of God’s redemptive, delivering, and protective actions toward his children.

<sup>286</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 71.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid., 72.

few tears, it was not in my power.”<sup>288</sup> In fact, he despaired when Satan, he believed, would bring against him scriptures like Romans 9:18, “Whom He will he hardeneth” in order to convince Ireland that God had chosen not to save him.<sup>289</sup> Since he did not yet carry the marks of salvation, he figured, he must be outside the reach of God’s electing grace in Christ.<sup>290</sup> While crying out for mercy under the burden of this contemplation, Ireland received a counter to the enemy’s discouragement. It came from the same verse in Romans 9:18, “But I will have mercy upon whom I will have mercy.”<sup>291</sup> This scriptural defense caused Ireland to feel as though Satan had withdrawn from him, “as a tempter that was ashamed and conquered.”<sup>292</sup> The resulting relief brought Ireland to tears for several hours, and for a brief period his “hard heart was thawed into contrition, whilst my soul lay low in the dust before God, under the sweet impressions of His present goodness, deliverance and encouragement to me.”<sup>293</sup>

Despite such intervals of joy and the hope of deliverance, Ireland concluded that he was unable to do his job as a schoolmaster, so he resigned from the position and retreated further into seclusion. For many lonely days and nights, he continued to wilt “under the pressures of a hard heart and a wounded spirit.”<sup>294</sup> He felt dead to worldly pleasure. Had someone informed him that he was to inherit a wealthy estate where he could “live in affluence and swim in flowing tides of sensuality and pleasure,” he would have covered that person’s mouth to keep from

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<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid. In Romans 9, Paul carefully explains the doctrine of election. As an example of God’s sovereignty over the actions of people, he notes that God intentionally raised Pharaoh to a position of power and hardened his heart against Israel so he could demonstrate his power in Pharaoh “and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth” (Romans 9:17). Ireland feared that he was such a vessel of wrath “fitted to destruction” (Romans 9:22).

<sup>290</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 73.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., 77.

hearing more.<sup>295</sup> Ireland's priorities had certainly altered dramatically since he entered the colony. The climax of his misery seemed to come when he viewed himself "in a state of spiritual death," wherein he "possessed no more power to perform a spiritual action... than a man literally dead, would be able to see, to hear, to breathe, to feel, and to walk about in his own strength."<sup>296</sup>

Two scriptures encouraged Ireland to continue trusting that his regeneration would come soon. The first passage "forced itself into my soul, as if God had spoken it from heaven to me – 'Thou art of Abraham's seed, and an heir according to the promise,' (Galatians 3:29)."<sup>297</sup> The second passage came from Acts 16:31, "'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved."<sup>298</sup> This inclined him to believe that nothing separated him from Christ but his lack of

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid. See footnote 91 on Ephesians 2, from which Ireland likely derived this statement.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid. The idea of being "an heir according to the promise" appears diametrically opposed to one being condemned and sentenced to an eternity of misery under the wrath of God in hell. How could a sinner be transformed from something so filthy and wicked to something so prized and privileged?

Yet, this new identity that is given to a sinner saved by grace pervades many of the writings in the New Testament. Paul writes of this phenomenon in several of his letters. In Galatians 3 and 4, quoted in part here by Ireland, he says that God's children, though they had been "in bondage under the elements of the world" (4:3b), but "God send forth his Son, made of a woman, made under law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons" (4:4-5). As adopted children, believers have the intimate privilege to consider God their Father and to see themselves as "an heir of God through Christ" (4:6, 7). In Romans 8, he similarly writes that those who are indwelt by the Spirit of God can know that they have been adopted as God's children (Romans 8:14-15), "And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together" (Romans 8:17).

In Ephesians, Paul also writes that God "hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved" (Ephesians 1:4-6). Similarly, Peter writes that God, "according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you" (1 Peter 1:3b-4). John likewise states, "Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God... Beloved, now we are the sons of God" (1 John 3:1a, 2a).

This "adoption" as a son of God and co-heir with Christ is precisely the goal that Ireland sought to achieve. He knew that such attainments alone entailed the life worth living. Yet the reconciliation with God required for Ireland to receive that new identity seemed to remain beyond his reach, and, as he increasingly discovered over the course of his conversion, the only one who was capable of achieving that work of reconciliation was God himself.

<sup>298</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 81.

faith, “that if I only possessed faith, in the blessed Redeemer, I should be saved.”<sup>299</sup> Ireland then determined to visit his hiding place in the woods and remain there until he successfully believed in Christ. Faith, he thought, was an act of the whole soul. In this view, he recalled, he did well to believe that faith was the means of receiving salvation, but “herein lay my error[:] I was engaged to produce and perform that act myself.”<sup>300</sup> He repeatedly dropped to his knees in order to produce in his heart a firm enough faith. After many hours, he at last perceived “that salvation was by grace through faith, and that not of myself for it was the gift of God, for, as the scripture saith, ‘Unto you it is given to believe,’ and that faith by which the soul is saved, must come from God, and be wrought in the heart by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>301</sup> Ireland cried out to God for such faith, but he still viewed himself as un-reconciled to God, making him unqualified to “say that Jesus was mine.”<sup>302</sup> It appeared that all hope was extinct.<sup>303</sup>

Eventually, Baptist minister John Pickett heard about the spiritual stir in Ireland’s community and traveled from sixty miles away to investigate and offer his assistance. He spoke at length with Ireland about his experiences and encouraged him to trust that there had been great changes in his life that were evidences of conversion.<sup>304</sup> It was not until several days later,

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid. The author of Hebrews describes faith as “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). Essentially, Ireland felt that the only way he could access the blessings of Christ’s work on the cross was if he generated in his heart a deep trust in the Bible’s promise to redeem those who look to Jesus (see, for example, John 3:16, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life”).

A person’s faith gave him or her access to the righteousness earned by Christ and needed for a person’s justification before God. Paul writes in Romans 3:21-22, “But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and prophets; even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe.”

John records Jesus saying that belief will gain a person access to the true source of life: “I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst... And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day... Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life” (John 6:35, 40, 47).

<sup>300</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 81.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid. See Ephesians 2, quoted by Ireland here, where Paul describes faith as a gift from God.

<sup>302</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 82.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid., 81, 84.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid., 93.



however, that Ireland received assurance. While praying with several of his friends (including the one who sent for a chain to bind Ireland and the one who came to convert him to the dance), it suddenly “pleased God to shed abroad His rich love and grace in my heart; I viewed then the glorious Redeemer as my Saviour... my faith was enlarged, and I can say from my heart I believed unto righteousness... God converted my soul, removed my burden of sin and guilt, giving me to possess that peace which was beyond understanding.”<sup>305</sup> Finally, Ireland gained relief, and his consequent joy appears to have been overwhelming.

The crux of Ireland’s conversion was this: “I believed unto righteousness.” The chief problem that he strove so long to solve was that his sinful heart produced immoral actions that alienated him from a holy, just, and righteous God, and the greatness of that alienation earned him nothing but God’s eternal wrath. After recognizing this problem, he left behind his former life and replaced it with one of penitence and piety in an effort to reconcile himself to God. To his disappointment, he realized two things. First, God in his justice had to punish his sin. Second, the only thing that could justify him before God is if he acquired perfect righteousness. Only the accomplishment of those two things would achieve the desired reconciliation with his maker.

Ireland then concluded that the solution was actually outside of himself. Christ clothed himself in the sins of people and received the entirety of God’s wrath for those sins when he died on the cross, thereby making full payment and restitution for their wrongdoing. Simultaneously, his perfect righteousness, earned during a life in which he met all the requirements of the law, became available to clothe sinful people. When this exchange of sin and righteousness occurred during the process of regeneration, or new birth, God would then see converted sinners not as

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<sup>305</sup> Ibid., 94.



rebellious enemies deserving his wrath but instead as completely justified people worthy of adoption into his divine family.

The one requirement for this supernatural exchange to take place was that they put their trust in him and believe that he alone had achieved the solution needed to reconcile sinful people to God. After Ireland grasped these ideas, his struggle transformed into an effort to conjure up enough faith to convince himself that he had received the gift of salvation purchased by Christ's death. Yet this faith, too, he realized, was a gift from God that he could not earn or achieve by his own emotional or intellectual willpower. Instead, God sovereignly had to bestow it upon him. Only after months of languishing under the burden of not knowing whether he was saved did he finally receive the gift of faith for which he longed so fiercely. Then, having experienced the joy of believing God had rescued him from his sins and achieved reconciliation, Ireland faced his Virginian world with a radically new set of priorities.

### CHAPTER III

#### *Ireland's Ministry and Persecution*

Ideas inherent to evangelical Christianity entered James Ireland's life in the late-1760s and radically transformed his priorities. Following a brief period of personal growth and training under the tutelage of experienced Separate ministers, he commenced his thirty-five year career as a Baptist preacher. He faced various forms of persecution in the 1770s, but perhaps none surpassed the trials he experienced during the first year of his ministry. Culpeper County's ruling authorities arrested Ireland for preaching without an official license and kept him in prison for five months during the winter of 1769-1770. Ireland's perseverance through persecution caused paradoxical changes in some of the people who witnessed his sufferings. Ultimately, the ideas derived from the Christian scriptures that catalyzed the thoughts leading to Ireland's conversion also provided him sustaining power to endure persecution and, combined with his conspicuous perseverance, are exemplary of the foundational causes that produced transformations in other Virginians during the colony's Great Awakening.

Separates Baptists entered Virginia from North Carolina in the late 1750s. During the 1760s, Separate churches grew in southern Virginia and then spread throughout the rest of the colony. Their aggressive tactics and enthusiastic teachings sparked a conflict with their Anglican and planter counterparts in the colony. While their Presbyterian and Regular Baptist predecessors defended a moderate form of evangelicalism, the Separates embraced a radicalism that stood in stark contrast to the colony's established church.

While Separates enjoyed the freedoms secured by the foregoing work of moderate evangelicals, they also made several significant departures from the practices of Presbyterians and Regular Baptists. Separates brazenly insulted Anglican parsons for their moralistic teachings and their willingness to participate openly in immoral activities. Rather than keeping

to themselves as earlier dissenters had, Separates were aggressive in their evangelistic efforts. They sought to spread their message to everyone from planters to slaves. While Presbyterians and Regular Baptists typically insisted on having educated ministers trained for church duty, the Separates believed that anyone who experienced conversion should spread the gospel.<sup>306</sup> Their ministers were often unlettered, and most of them saw no need to obtain the customary licenses required by law.<sup>307</sup> Baptists believed their commission came from God, “and no earthly authority could prevent them from their duties.”<sup>308</sup> An illiterate tradesman called by God to preach felt free to wander from county to county as an itinerant pastor speaking for hours in fields, homes, or taverns.<sup>309</sup> After a church became large enough, new churches would “spin off from the original congregations in rapid succession.”<sup>310</sup> The Baptists became adept at training preachers quickly and sending them out to seek new converts.<sup>311</sup> Many of these preachers seemed indefatigable. They traveled “far and wide wherever an occasion to preach was within reach.”<sup>312</sup>

One fundamental difference between Baptists and Anglicans was how they viewed conversion. Typical Anglican conversions to Christianity were much less emotional and socially jarring than evangelical conversion could be. Edward Bond points out that Anglicans did not write about “the rapturous joy of sinners admitted to redemption.”<sup>313</sup> They might express feelings of uneasiness when thinking about their sins, but they usually did not have “dramatic

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<sup>306</sup> Heinemann et al, *Old Dominion*, 86. Also see Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations*, 109.

<sup>307</sup> Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 106; Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations*, 110. Whereas previous evangelicals tried to operate within existing religious structures in Virginia, the Baptists more openly “flaunted the Act of Toleration” by not making the effort to acquire these customary licenses. Kidd, *Great Awakening*, 248.

<sup>308</sup> Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 124.

<sup>309</sup> Heinemann et al, *Old Dominion*, 86.

<sup>310</sup> Spangler, *Virginians Reborn*, 77.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

<sup>312</sup> Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 117-118.

<sup>313</sup> Bond, *Damned Souls*, 245.

events” like the Baptist conversion experience.<sup>314</sup> Instead, they practiced a “low-key piety, deeply felt and involving the ‘whole individual,’ but given to order rather than to passion or ecstasy.”<sup>315</sup> Anglicans maintained that emotional extremes would harm the spiritual life. The Baptists, on the other hand, and the Separates in particular, demonstrated enthusiasm and emotional mannerisms when they practiced their religion. This hinted at anarchy and inclined the Anglicans to think they were fanatical and unruly.<sup>316</sup>

Virginians also regarded Separate teachings and methods “as grievously subversive” to the preferred Virginian pastimes.<sup>317</sup> Separates openly condemned public entertainments like horseracing, drinking, card playing, dancing, and cockfighting, all of which were chief enjoyments of genteel Virginian society.<sup>318</sup> The journal of Philip Fithian records a conversation in which a man described how Baptists in a nearby county were growing more numerous and increasing in influence. The practices cultivated by the Separates were “destroying pleasure in the Country,” for they encouraged ardent prayer, a strong and constant faith, and the “Banishment of Gaming, Dancing, & Sabbath-Day Diversions.”<sup>319</sup> Separates preached “a counter-culture” that criticized Virginians’ proclivity toward “display, gambling, and horse-racing.”<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid.

<sup>316</sup> Kidd, *Great Awakening*, 248.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid., 246.

<sup>318</sup> Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 170. Kidd, *Great Awakening*, 248; Kenneth P. Minkema, “Spiritual Awakenings,” in *Converging Worlds: Communities and Cultures in Colonial America*, edited by Louise A. Breen (New York: Routledge, 2012), 479.

<sup>319</sup> Philip Vickers Fithian, *Philip Vickers Fithian: Journal and Letters, 1767-1774, Student at Princeton College, 1770-72, Tutor at Nomini Hall in Virginia, 1773-74*, ed. by John Rogers Williams for the Princeton Historical Association (Princeton: The University Library, 1900), 117, 118; Fea, *The Way of Improvement*, 114.

<sup>320</sup> Minkema, “Spiritual Awakenings,” 479.

Perhaps most disturbing to Virginians was the Separates' "disregard for the colony's conventional hierarchies of race and gender."<sup>321</sup> Baptists gave serious attention to the lower orders of society, including slaves.<sup>322</sup> They even welcomed baptized slaves as "brothers" and "sisters." Separates allowed women to pray in public, and any man could preach. Even Indians could share pulpits with white pastors. Black men itinerated and served as deacons, "and some may have held office as elders in mixed congregations."<sup>323</sup> The Baptists threatened to turn Virginian elites' entire world upside down.<sup>324</sup> Teaching slaves a gospel that contained leveling ideas sowed the seeds for undermining the whole substructure that supported the pillars of planter society.<sup>325</sup> The spread of Separate influence mortified planters like Landon Carter. Rhys Isaac notes that the increasing number of slaves and tenant farmers who were breaking out of the Anglican Church to join dissenting congregations inspired Carter to condemn the movement vociferously, writing, "I believe it is from some inculcated doctrine of those rascals that the slaves of this Colony are grown so much worse."<sup>326</sup> In response to this perceived danger, the House of Burgesses passed a bill that "threatened dissenters with imprisonment should they encourage slaves to disobey their masters, agitate against slavery," or baptize a slave without his master's consent.<sup>327</sup>

The Anglican clergy and planter elites quickly articulated arguments against the Separates. Anglican parsons tried to cultivate disagreements with the Baptists at the grassroots level. They tried to convince their congregants that Separates were self-appointed preachers and lacked the education and credentials needed to interpret and teach the scriptures properly. They

<sup>321</sup> Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 114. Also see Heinemann et al, *Old Dominion*, 85-86; Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations*, 112; Kidd, *Great Awakening*, 249.

<sup>322</sup> Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 171. Kidd, *Great Awakening*, 249.

<sup>323</sup> Kidd, *Great Awakening*, 250.

<sup>324</sup> Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 253; Heinemann et al, *Old Dominion*, 86-87; Fea, *The Way of Improvement*, 114.

<sup>325</sup> Kidd, *Great Awakening*, 239-240.

<sup>326</sup> Isaac, *Uneasy Kingdom*, 209.

<sup>327</sup> Kidd, *Great Awakening*, 250.

admonished Virginians to regard Baptists as “wolves in sheep’s clothing.”<sup>328</sup> Fithian noted that he heard one Anglican parson labor to convince his congregation that Baptist teachings were “only whimsical Fancies or at most Religion grown to Wildness & Enthusiasm!”<sup>329</sup> The clergy also taught that Baptist piety was a sham and that Baptist doctrines were actually subversive of morality. They claimed that Baptists were “antinomian,” which meant that they encouraged people to believe Christ’s sacrifice gave them the freedom to disregard the law and live as they please. Separate preaching, they cautioned, might eventually erode society’s moral pillars by drawing wives away from husbands, children from parents, and slaves from their masters.<sup>330</sup> In response, Virginian men sometimes prevented members of their families from hearing Baptists or from being baptized.<sup>331</sup> Lewis Peyton Little offers an example of the public ridicule assigned to Separates in an October 31, 1771 addition to the *Virginia Gazette* entitled “A Recipe to Make an Annabaptist [referring to the Baptists] Preacher in Two Days Time”:

Take the Herbs of Hypocrisy and Ambition, of each an Handful, of the Spirit of Pride two Drams, of the Seed of Dissention and Discord one Ounce, of the Flower of Formality three Scruples, of the Roots of Stubbornness and Obstinacy four Pounds; and bruise them altogether in the Mortar of Vain-Glory, with the Pestle of Contradiction, putting amongst them one Pint of the Spirit of Self-conceitedness. When it is luke-warm let the Dissenting Brother take two or three Spoonfuls of it, Morning and Evening before Exercise; and whilst his Mouth is full of the Elestuary he will make a wry Face, wink with his Eyes, and squeeze out some Tears of Dissimulation. Then let him speak as the Spirit of Giddiness gives him Utterance. This will make the Schismatick endeavor to maintain his Doctrine, wound the Church, delude the People, justify their Proceedings of Illusions, forment Rebellion, and call it by the Name of Liberty of Conscience.”<sup>332</sup>

Despite such accusations (which had at least a grain of truth in them), the Separates remained undeterred. Their poor reputation inspired popular persecutions to break out against

<sup>328</sup> Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 165. Also see Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 121, 132.

<sup>329</sup> Fithian, *Journal and Letters*, 118.

<sup>330</sup> Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 167-168. Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 128-131.

<sup>331</sup> Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 121; Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations*, 88.

<sup>332</sup> Lewis Peyton Little, *Imprisoned Preachers and Religious Liberty in Virginia: A Narrative Drawn Largely from the Official Records of Virginia Counties, Unpublished Manuscripts, Letters, and Other Original Sources* (Lynchburg, VA: J.P. Bell Co, 1938), 233-234.

them in the mid-1760s, mostly in the older Tidewater and Piedmont regions. For the first several years, persecutions came primarily from grassroots sources rather than the government. Angry mobs disrupted Baptists with shouts, curses, and silly antics. If the preachers persisted, they might receive harsher treatment. Mobs threw stones at them, tore them from their stages for beatings, and plunged them into mud puddles in mockery of baptism “until they were nearly drowned.”<sup>333</sup>

Popular malcontent, however, failed to stem the Separates’ determination to preach evangelical religion. This compelled Anglican clergymen and planter elites to execute a more rigorous opposition. Legal prosecutions began in 1768 and continued until the outbreak of the American Revolution.<sup>334</sup> When popular sentiment shifted in favor of the Separates, the establishment launched “a campaign to put Baptist preachers out of circulation until the religious enthusiasm they had engendered should die down.”<sup>335</sup> Local authorities could not technically arrest Separate Baptists for religious dissent, officially protected under the 1689 Act of Toleration, so they detained preachers “for disturbing the peace.”<sup>336</sup> They also accused Baptists of causing such a ruckus that people shirked their employment on farms and plantations, thereby bringing them “into habits of idleness and neglect.”<sup>337</sup> The authorities often gave Baptists alternatives to imprisonment if they would promise good behavior. A few of them agreed to these conditions, but most preferred imprisonment.<sup>338</sup> The attention this gained from the general populace ultimately led to the vindication of the evangelical cause and a more widespread acceptance of their teachings.

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<sup>333</sup> Heinemann et al, *Old Dominion*, 87. Also see Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 119-120; Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations*, 107.

<sup>334</sup> Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 119, 122; Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations*, 88, 109.

<sup>335</sup> Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations*, 109.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>337</sup> Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 123.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

One example of the growing acceptance of Baptist teachings among people who originally opposed the evangelicals is when “Swearing Jack Waller” received baptism in 1767 after his encounter with Lewis Craig led to his conversion. Soon after his conversion and the repayment of his debts, Waller “began to preach that men ought everywhere to repent.”<sup>339</sup> Drawn “out of the hierarchical, rough-and-tumble world of gentry manliness, Waller himself began to encounter sharp persecution for his criticism of the traditional world he once enjoyed.”<sup>340</sup>

Meanwhile, Joseph Craig, a minister who itinerated with Waller for a year, described several of Waller’s experiences preaching in the Blue Ridge Mountains as well as recorded two poems that Waller composed while on the trail. He wrote that he and Waller joined Samuel Harriss on the bank of the Shenandoah to administer the Lord’s Supper to about one hundred Baptist communicants. Afterwards, they traveled thirty miles to another location for preaching.<sup>341</sup> When they reached a high point in the trail that afforded them a nice view of the surrounding area, Waller paused to compose a “spiritual song.”<sup>342</sup>

The content in the poem illustrates some of the concepts that motivated Waller to endure the physical rigors accompanying the life of an itinerant Baptist minister. He yearned to comfort the “lovely spouse” of his savior, referring to the church.<sup>343</sup> He longed to “feed” the “flock of Jesus” so that they might learn to depend upon their Shepherd.<sup>344</sup> He believed that the greatest privilege he had in life was “to serve the Lord and Master ‘Till I’m committed to my grave.”<sup>345</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> Taylor, *Virginia Baptist Ministers*, 80.

<sup>340</sup> Kidd, *Great Awakening*, 246.

<sup>341</sup> Joseph Craig, *The History of Reverend Joseph Craig*, in *Esteemed Reproach: The Lives of Reverend James Ireland and Reverend Joseph Craig*, edited by Keith Harper and C. Martin Jacumin (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005), 184.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*



Waller clearly desired to steward his responsibilities as a preacher commissioned by God to minister to the needs of the church.

After Craig and Waller travelled to another location where they preached and “washed feet,” Waller sat by the fire and “composed another spiritual song.”<sup>346</sup> This one focused on worshiping Christ for his sufferings. In a way, this poem was a preview of Waller’s forthcoming persecutions as a Separate. He called his audience to “take a humble view of Jesus Christ,” who “brought poor sinners with his most precious blood.”<sup>347</sup> Similar to Ireland after his conversion, Waller adored Christ for willfully resolving “to pay our dreadful debt, and take on Him the curse of sinner’s law.”<sup>348</sup> Even though Christ’s persecutors placed a crown of thorns on his head, beat him severely, and mocked him derisively, “His cross up Calvary’s Mount He bore, then being stript [*sic*], thereon was laid; His hands and feet were nailed through, and fastened to that fatal wood.”<sup>349</sup> Waller then pointed out that Christ’s physical sufferings “were trifling when compar’d to... the hiding of His Father’s face.”<sup>350</sup> He finished the poem with the following stanza:

Sinners, behold your sacrifice,  
See all your sins upon the cross:  
Believe and sing redeeming love,  
And give the Lord of life your praise.  
Hosannah to the loving Lamb of God,  
Who brought poor sinners with His most  
precious blood.<sup>351</sup>

Just as Ireland contemplated deeply on Christ’s redemptive work, it is clear that Waller also sank intellectual and emotional roots into the chief ideas that formed the gospel message. Jesus bore

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<sup>346</sup> Ibid., 185-186.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid., 187-188.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid.

his sins upon the cross and thereby purchased a chronic gambler like Waller with his “precious blood.”<sup>352</sup>

Waller’s itinerancy bore fruit, producing enough conversions to draw the attention of Anglicans and planters who increasingly worried about the growing influence of the unruly Separates. The first instance of persecution for Waller began on June 4, 1768, when local authorities arrested him and four other Baptists for preaching. The court offered to release him “if he promised to desist from preaching for a year and a day; this he refused.”<sup>353</sup> They immediately put him in jail, where he and several of his companions remained for 43 days. During the imprisonment, people gathered around the jail windows to hear the ministers preach. Edward Morgan writes that this teaching “made very serious impressions on the minds of eleven heads of families and many of their domestics, and others.”<sup>354</sup> The people who congregated outside the jail met opposition. A mob of Virginians “did every thing in their power to drive the people away, singing obscene songs, breeding riots, beating drums, pelting the ministers through the bars, but all in vain.”<sup>355</sup> At last, the authorities released the ministers simply to get rid of them.

Another instance in which Waller suffered persecution occurred in the spring of 1771. By this time, he had been ordained a minister in the Baptist faith. Waller introduced worship in Caroline County by singing a psalm. Meanwhile, the Anglican minister of the local parish, the minister’s clerk, and the local sheriff arrived at the Baptist meeting place. The Anglican clergyman rode up to Waller’s stage and tried to close the Bible that Waller was using to lead his

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<sup>352</sup> Ibid.

<sup>353</sup> Morgan, *Materials*, 74.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid.

audience in the hymn.<sup>356</sup> Waller continued singing until he finished the psalm. When he began to pray, the clergyman rammed “the butt end of the whip into Waller’s mouth, and so silenced him.”<sup>357</sup> The clerk then pulled Waller off the stage and dragged him to the sheriff, who “immediately received him and whipped him in so violent a manner (without the ceremony of a trial) that poor Waller was presently in a gore of blood and will carry the scars to his grave.”<sup>358</sup> One record states that Waller received “not much less than twenty lashes.”<sup>359</sup> Remarkably, Waller “remounted his stage and preached a most extraordinary sermon.”<sup>360</sup>

In another instance of violence, while Waller was preaching in Hannover County, a large man “pulled him down and dragged him about by the hair of the head.”<sup>361</sup> This time, however, a stout friend ran to Waller’s rescue and took hold of his arm, so that “between friend and foe poor Waller was like to lose both arms.”<sup>362</sup> Such physical afflictions taxed Waller’s body, especially as he aged. Rhys Isaac remarks on the physical abuse inflicted on Waller by acknowledging that not all Anglican clergy or country gentlemen responded to the Baptists this way, but the extreme responses of some of them demonstrated “the anxieties to which all were subject.”<sup>363</sup>

A letter that Waller wrote from prison provides an example of what imprisonment could be like for a Separate Baptist in colonial Virginia. Waller received ordination as a Baptist pastor on June 20, 1770. Soon after, he traveled to Middlesex County, in lower Virginia, where his

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<sup>356</sup> Little, *Imprisoned Preachers*, 230. Little records an account by “Elder John Williams,” who encountered Waller on May 10, 1771 in Louisa County two weeks after this worship service in Caroline County. Williams on his way to the first Separate Baptist Association meeting in Virginia to be held at Elijah Craig’s meeting house. While discussing things “pertaining to the kingdom of God” with several other ministers who had met in Louisa County on the way to Craig’s meetinghouse, he heard Waller’s account of his persecution and subsequently wrote it down because of the strong impressions it had upon him. Little, *Imprisoned Preachers*, 230.

<sup>357</sup> Morgan, *Materials*, 75.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid.

<sup>359</sup> Little, *Imprisoned Preachers*, 230.

<sup>360</sup> Morgan, *Materials*, 76.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid.

<sup>363</sup> Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 177.

preaching “was attended by a Divine power, turning many to righteousness.”<sup>364</sup> The authorities there imprisoned him for forty-six days. James Barnett Taylor’s 1838 history of Virginia’s Baptists includes two letters that Waller wrote during that imprisonment. The first, dated August 12, 1771, is addressed to an anonymous “brother in the Lord.” Waller first described the occasion that led to his imprisonment. While attending a meeting at the house of a fellow believer, another minister named William Webber was preaching from James 2:18. Sometime during the sermon, Waller writes, “there came running toward him, in a most furious rage, Captain James Montague, a magistrate of the country, followed by the parson of the parish and several others who seemed greatly exasperated.”<sup>365</sup> The magistrate and one of his companions seized Webber and dragged him from the stage. They arrested Waller, Webber, and four other men and placed them into custody to await a trial. Meanwhile, one of the Baptists under arrest “was severely scourged.”<sup>366</sup> The lashings would have proceeded further, but some of the men who arrested them put a stop to it. The men searched the Baptists for firearms, charging them “with carrying on a mutiny against the authority of the land.”<sup>367</sup> Finding none, the men then asked the Baptists if they had a license to preach in that county. When the Baptists responded that they did not have one, their accusers required them to promise not to preach any more in the county, “which,” Waller recollects, “we modestly refused to do.”<sup>368</sup>

The authorities dismissed the man they had scourged as well as one other Baptist. They charged these two men to leave the county by noon the next day “on pain of imprisonment.” The remaining four men, including Waller, “were delivered to the sheriff and sent to close jail, with a

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<sup>364</sup> Taylor, *Virginia Baptist Ministers*, 80.

<sup>365</sup> John Waller in James Barnett Taylor’s *Virginia Baptist Ministers*, 81.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>367</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*

charge not to allow us to walk in the air until court day.”<sup>369</sup> Fortunately, Waller writes, the sheriff and jailer treated them with great kindness. He wrote thankfully, “May the Lord reward them for it!”<sup>370</sup>

Waller and his companions then had the opportunity to preach to crowds gathered outside their jail cell. He wrote, “Yesterday we had a large number of people to hear us preach,” including “many of the great ones of the land, who behaved well while one of us discoursed on the new birth.”<sup>371</sup> Waller finished his letter by writing of another persecution occurring in Caroline County. He listed the names of six other ministers, including Lewis Craig, who has been imprisoned there. He also warned that the “most dreadful threatenings are raised in the neighboring counties against the Lord’s faithful and humble followers.”<sup>372</sup>

On August 26, Waller and his companions were brought to court again. When they refused to promise not to preach in the county for twelve months, they returned to prison. The court gave orders “that they be fed on bread and water.”<sup>373</sup> Several weeks later, William Webber fell ill. Waller composed another letter, dated September 26 and preserved in Garnett Ryland’s *The Baptists of Virginia* (1955). He sent it to one of the justices who had convicted them.<sup>374</sup> He remarked on Webber’s poor health and acknowledged that the young man did not want to promise not to preach “for fear of sinning against God.”<sup>375</sup> Since Webber was the leader of a church in a different county, Waller asked the justice to let him go so that he could return home. The letter, joined with a petition drawn up by their friends as well as a general understanding that persecuting Baptists would only lead to their multiplication, led to the

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<sup>369</sup> Ibid., 81-82.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid.

<sup>373</sup> Ryland, *The Baptists of Virginia*, 72.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid., 72-73.

<sup>375</sup> John Waller in Garnett Ryland’s *The Baptists of Virginia*, 73.

liberation of the prisoners. Ryland notes that they “had been thirty days in close confinement and sixteen days in the bounds.”<sup>376</sup>

In the course of his ministry, Waller spent time in four different jails for a total of 113 days, baptized more than 2,000 communicants in Virginia, and assisted in the ordination of 27 ministers and the planting of 18 churches.<sup>377</sup> What provided the mental endurance to continue his work among Virginian opposition? Even when he was in jail, Waller appears to have been exceedingly grateful. He described the source of his gratitude: “We find the Lord gracious and kind to us beyond expression in our afflictions.”<sup>378</sup> Sincerely believing that the strength to remain faithful came from God rather than his own devices, Waller implored the recipient of his letter as well as his church to pray “night and day for us, our benefactors, and our persecutors.”<sup>379</sup> After the county sheriff whipped Waller in Caroline County, a friend asked if his “nature” did not interfere with his preaching. Waller “answered that the Lord stood by him of a truth and poured his love into his soul without measure.”<sup>380</sup> Furthermore, the singing of his evangelical brothers and sisters later in the meeting encouraged him so much “that he could scarcely feel the stripes for the love of God, rejoicing with Paul that he was worthy to suffer for his dear Lord and Master.”<sup>381</sup> Such extraordinary affections for the God whose love he preached provided sustaining power to persecuted ministers like Waller.

Ireland also describes similar sources of inspiration for enduring persecution. His first years of ministry as a Separate Baptist in Virginia are exemplary of the general experience of other Separates. Exploring the detailed narrative of his training, preaching, arrest, trial, and

<sup>376</sup> Ryland, *Baptists of Virginia*, 74

<sup>377</sup> Taylor, *Virginia Baptist Ministers*, 85.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>380</sup> Little, *Imprisoned Preachers*, 230.

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*

imprisonment, however, offers a deeper understanding of the colony's persecution of evangelicals than most historians construct. Excavating the ideological sources that motivated the Baptists to continue preaching despite threats and harassments provides another dimension to the existing historical literature that seeks to explain why the Great Awakening occurred in Virginia.

After Ireland several of his friends came under awakening convictions and converted to evangelical religion, they felt compelled to choose a denomination. They examined several criteria to make their choice. Although Ireland grew up a Presbyterian, he eventually became convinced of the importance of immersion after professing a faith in Christ. Thus, they decided to become Baptists. Both the Regular Baptists and Separate Baptists were Calvinistic in their sentiments, which further disposed Ireland and his companions to join one or the other.<sup>382</sup> As they tried to decide between the two, they examined both to see which “had the warmest preachers and the most fire among them.”<sup>383</sup> Although “warm and zealous men” served both Baptist sects, they eventually chose the Separates because of their greater apparent evangelistic zeal.<sup>384</sup>

Ireland and his friends soon had to shoulder a burden that fell upon those who left the established church for a dissenting congregation. He recalled that dissenters in the pre-Revolution years had to pay a tithe for the construction and upkeep of Anglican churches. They also had to pay a certain weight in tobacco annually for the support of Anglican clergymen. Meanwhile, they also had to pay for their own houses of worship and the support of their own ministers. Ireland recalls, “this galling yoke continued on the necks of dissenters until some time

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<sup>382</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 104-105.

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*

after our glorious revolution took place.”<sup>385</sup> The state-mandated financial discouragement from becoming a Baptist, however, did not prevent Ireland from proceeding with his new commitment.

Ireland’s growth in the evangelical faith quickly led to opportunities for preaching. His conversion experience and subsequent acquisition of knowledge about the Christian scriptures inflamed within him an evangelical zeal that motivated him to make others aware of the things he had learned in his experience of Christ. He recalled making very rapid progress in his new faith.<sup>386</sup> When John Pickett failed to arrive on time to speak at a Baptist meeting, the people present chose Ireland to preach. As he spoke from a text in the gospel of John, he felt his “heart was greatly enlarged,” and he zealously desired to save souls.<sup>387</sup> Ireland’s friends encouraged him to pursue more opportunities for preaching, which he found when members of his local congregation invited him to preach in their homes.

Before he launched into his career as a minister, however, Ireland engaged in his first bout with an Anglican minister at a Baptist meeting at the house of a Captain Thomas McClanahan in nearby Culpeper County. The Anglican clergyman in Culpeper, Parson Meldrum, attended the meeting to see if he might humiliate the chosen speaker, John Pickett. The cleric sat only a few yards from the pulpit. A number of his parishioners also attended, and they appeared elated that their clergyman was poised to baffle the Baptist. Ireland recalled that Pickett “preached the truth,” despite the Anglican’s intimidating presence.<sup>388</sup> When Pickett finished his sermon, the parson accused him of being “a schismatick, a broacher of false

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<sup>385</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid., 101.



doctrines,” and one who “held up damnable errors.”<sup>389</sup> Pickett responded with candor and supported the doctrines he preached, but he was slow in making his arguments. Meldrum, meanwhile, was quick. He continually took notes on a piece of paper and speedily devised his arguments.

Ireland observed that the cleric repeatedly misrepresented Pickett’s position, so he abruptly stood and accused him of distorting the Baptist minister’s words. The parson wheeled about on his chair and verbally lambasted Ireland, “with an expectation, no doubt, that he would confound me with the first fire.”<sup>390</sup> The gentlemen and ladies who had accompanied Meldrum to the meeting looked at Ireland with contempt for being presumptuous enough “to enter into an argument with the teacher of the County.”<sup>391</sup> Ireland calmly took hold of a nearby chair, sat down beside the cleric, and used both scripture and his knowledge of Anglican teachings to argue him point by point.<sup>392</sup> Ireland presented such an argument that Meldrum “would appear considerably chagrined,” but at times he also “appeared tolerably well pleased.”<sup>393</sup> The argument ended when Pickett entered the conversation again and accused the parson of previously calling one thing an error that he now confessed to be the truth. At the end of the dispute, Ireland stood and addressed one of the gentlemen who attended to help the parson. The man was a magistrate who would later send Ireland to prison. Rather than engage Ireland, the man held out his arm and told Ireland not to come one step closer.<sup>394</sup>

The following Sunday, another altercation took place in Culpeper. A large crowd formed to listen Pickett preach at the residence of a Colonel Easom. Among the crowd was an

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<sup>389</sup> Ibid.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>391</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid., 102-103.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid., 103.

“abundance of Negroes.”<sup>395</sup> Sometime during the service, “the patrollers were let loose upon them.”<sup>396</sup> The scene dumbfounded Ireland, “to see the poor Negroes flying in every direction, the patrollers seizing and whipping them, whilst others were carrying them off [as] prisoners, in order, perhaps, to subject them to a more severe punishment.”<sup>397</sup> African Americans were increasingly interested in Baptist religion, but some Virginians clearly perceived their interest as a threat to the existing social order.

Despite the sharp opposition to Baptist religion posed by many in Ireland’s world, he maintained his desire to become a minister. He heard that a Baptist Association meeting was to gather in Sandy Creek, North Carolina at Shubal Stearns’ church sometime in the warmer months of 1769. The purpose of the meeting was to seek the union of Regular and Separate Baptists from the Carolinas and Virginia. Ireland decided to join the Separate delegation from Virginia to see if he might gain some ministry credentials.

A brief instance of persecution transpired on the journey. One morning, the troop of ministers encountered three “very dissipated men,” who had been at certain race paths in the vicinity to try out the speed of their horses. They rode up to the porch of the house where Ireland and the ministers were staying. One of the men dismounted and “most insultingly abused one of the ministers.”<sup>398</sup> When another preacher reproved the man for swearing, “the ruffian instantly flew at him, seized him by the throat, and choked him till he was black in the face.”<sup>399</sup> Ireland and another man interfered and pried the man’s hands from the minister’s throat.<sup>400</sup> Ireland now had experienced forms of persecution from two sources, both of which would become more

<sup>395</sup> Ibid. Also see Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 173.

<sup>396</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 103.

<sup>397</sup> Ibid., 103-104. Garnett Ryland notes that the “patrollers” were a mounted highway guard that arrested and punished negroes found away from their plantations and homes without written passes from their owners. Ryland, *Baptists of Virginia*, 57.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid., 108-109.

<sup>400</sup> Ibid., 109.

familiar to him in the future: an elite, gentry-supported Anglican clergyman, and a “dissipated,” horseracing ruffian.

On his way to the Association meeting in North Carolina, Ireland received a crash course in being a Baptist minister. He conversed extensively with veteran pastors, who shared their experiences with him and gave him opportunities to preach. Although he initially desired to refrain from speaking because he was young and unproven, the other ministers insisted that it would be good experience.<sup>401</sup> While preaching, Ireland again felt warm “and under the impressions of my first love,” and his listeners “appeared to have their hearts filled with the same sweet sensations that my own was enlarged with.”<sup>402</sup> In another instance, an old pastor told Ireland, who was probably only twenty-one at the time, to take the pulpit when he expected only to be a listener. The pastor admonished him to be prepared “in season and out of season” to “act like young Timothy, and reprove, rebuke and exhort, with all long suffering and doctrine.”<sup>403</sup> He went forward and preached extempore, the fashion in which many Baptist ministers in the south delivered their sermons.<sup>404</sup> The ministers at the Association in North Carolina concluded that Ireland had the gifting required for the ministry. Samuel Harriss, by then a popular Virginian minister with a reputation for integrity and courage, baptized Ireland. The Association also awarded him credentials, signed by eleven ministers, to become an itinerant pastor in Virginia.<sup>405</sup>

Shortly after returning to Virginia, Ireland received his first preaching assignment, and the beginning of his persecution followed soon afterwards. Samuel Harriss sent for his help in

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<sup>401</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid., 114. This is one reason why so few of the sermons delivered by Baptist ministers in the southern colonies are available for perusal today.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid., 115, 116-117, 118.

forming a church in Fauquier County, adjacent to Culpeper County in northern Virginia.<sup>406</sup>

Ireland agreed to assist. By the time they finished their work in Fauquier, there were “between twenty and thirty then received and baptized.”<sup>407</sup> They named the new congregation Carter’s Run, and it became the first Separate church established in northern Virginia.<sup>408</sup> When Ireland began his journey home, he decided to pass through Culpeper County.

Culpeper had a reputation for staunch resistance to evangelical encroachments. In 1763, a Culpeper evangelical named Allen Wyley invited Regular Baptist minister David Thomas to preach. Opposition there was so vigorous, however, that Thomas departed and settled in Orange County.<sup>409</sup> Wyley continued searching for help. When he heard of a group of Separate Baptists in Pittsylvania County, he traveled there in 1765 to ask for their help. He met with Samuel Harriss and convinced him to travel to Culpeper for a preaching tour.<sup>410</sup> Harriss’ first sermon at Wyley’s house went without interruption. On his second day in Culpeper, however, his preaching inspired a mob armed with sticks, whips, and clubs to drive him out.<sup>411</sup> Like Thomas, he fled into Orange County, where he preached with great success.<sup>412</sup> Elijah Craig, Lewis Craig’s brother, also tried to preach in Culpeper in the mid-1760s and met stiff opposition. The Culpeper court imprisoned him for one month and relegated his rations to bread and water.<sup>413</sup> Thus, it came as a serious warning when Ireland arrived at Captain McClanahan’s and received

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<sup>406</sup> See the map of Virginia at the beginning of this work for a clearer picture of where Ireland’s persecution took place.

<sup>407</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 120.

<sup>408</sup> Ryland, *Baptists of Virginia*, 49.

<sup>409</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>410</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>411</sup> Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 119.

<sup>412</sup> Ryland, *Baptists of Virginia*, 44.

<sup>413</sup> Taylor, *Virginia Baptist Ministers*, 65-66. Ryland also compiles a series of additional Culpeper imprisonments that he found scattered throughout Robert Semple’s *History of the Baptists in Virginia*. He notes that “Semple records without dates the imprisonments in Culpeper of John Corbley, ‘for a considerable time,’ of Thomas Ammon, a ministerial son of Crooked Run... of Thomas Maxfield for exhorting, of Adam Banks, for praying in the private house of John Delaney, and of Delaney, who was not a Baptist, for permitting it.” Ryland, *The Baptists of Virginia*, 83. It is clear that Culpeper was a stalwart opponent of evangelical religion.

information that the authorities would arrest him and throw him in jail if he preached while traveling through the county.<sup>414</sup> Ireland “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.”<sup>415</sup>

Later in his autobiography, Ireland described another motivation for preaching that helped him overcome numerous obstacles. When he itinerated, he often had to travel long distances, face inclement weather, and experience physical hardships that battered his body. His friends warned him not to destroy his body “before my services could be completed.”<sup>416</sup> Nonetheless, he obstinately pressed into his work because he believed it was vital and urgent. He recalled, “the salvation of precious souls possessed the leading faculties of my soul, and strongly influenced my heart.”<sup>417</sup> During his conversion, Ireland came to understand the preciousness of his own soul, and this surely motivated him to seek the well-being of other people who, he believed, would live forever under God’s wrath or God’s blessing, and the one thing that would make the latter possible is if someone delivered the gospel message to them.<sup>418</sup>

Ireland departed from Captain McClanahan’s residence and arrived at the house of another Culpeper resident named Mr. Manifa, who invited him to preach the next day. Manifa

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<sup>414</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 121.

<sup>415</sup> Ibid., 120. The idea of “counting the cost” comes from Luke 14:28, where Jesus challenges his disciples to consider the cost of following him: “If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it?” (Luke 14:26-28).

The principle established in this passage is that great sacrifice would be required from those who chose to follow Jesus. It is clear from other places in the scriptures that Jesus did not refer to these sacrifices as a prerequisite to being justified before God. Nonetheless, he warned his disciples to realize that nothing short of total commitment would befit a life set apart for God.

<sup>416</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 140.

<sup>417</sup> Ibid.

<sup>418</sup> Ireland’s urgency likens to Paul’s earnestness in Romans 10, where he explains the need for the gospel to be preached: “For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? and how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!” (Romans 10:13-15).

repeated the warning of arrest to his guest and added that the local magistrates would impose a fine of twenty pounds on anyone who hosted Ireland for preaching. Furthermore, everyone who came to hear him preach would receive a fine. Yet the warning did not faze Manifa, who, “being a man under awakening impressions, told me not to flinch from my duty, if I thought it a duty, to go on.”<sup>419</sup>

The next morning, a crowd gathered to hear him speak. He stood on a table on Manifa’s property and preached without disturbance. Ireland does not expound on the content of his preaching in Culpeper, but he does describe later in his autobiography the general substance of what he typically preached as a Baptist minister. He tried to convince people of “our awful apostacy [*sic*] by the fall; the necessity of repentance unto life, and of faith in the Lord Jesus.”<sup>420</sup> He openly taught his listeners that people are dead in their sins and incapable of extricating themselves from slavery to sin. He encouraged them to work for their salvation but not to trust in even their best works for ultimate justification before God. Instead, they should trust “the Lord Jesus Christ alone, and His precious merits.”<sup>421</sup> Ireland believed that trusting Christ was the only way a person could find acceptance in God’s eyes. He explained that Christ’s obedience to the law and sufferings on the cross “answered the requisitions of law and justice,” thereby establishing a perfect righteousness that every sinner needs in order to be justified before God.<sup>422</sup> The only way a sinner can access that righteousness is “by a divine faith” given to the person by “the operation of God in the heart.”<sup>423</sup> Ireland believed the Bible supported this understanding of salvation in Ephesians 2:8, where he quoted Paul’s instruction, “For by grace

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<sup>419</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 121.

<sup>420</sup> Ibid, 140.

<sup>421</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>422</sup> Ibid.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid.

are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves it is the gift of God.”<sup>424</sup> It was God’s sovereign act to pardon sin and receive a sinner into his favor, “whereby he stood in a state of acceptance before Him.”<sup>425</sup> Ireland also quoted Romans 5:1-2 as the triumphant conclusion of the process of justification: “Being justified by faith, we have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ. By whom also we have access by faith into His grace, wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”<sup>426</sup> Such ideas likely animated Ireland’s preaching in Culpeper.

After Ireland finished his sermon on the table at Manifa’s residence, he closed his eyes for prayer. Hearing a rustling noise in the woods behind him, he was suddenly “seized by the collar by two men.”<sup>427</sup> He stepped off the table and beheld a number angry men gathering around him. A local magistrate demanded an explanation of what he was doing with the people gathered on Manifa’s property. Ireland explained that he “was preaching the gospel of Christ.”<sup>428</sup> They responded by asking who had given him the authority to do so. With archetypal Separate logic, he replied, “He that was the Author of the gospel, had a right to send forth whom He had qualified to dispense it.”<sup>429</sup> Ireland also produced the credentials awarded to him by the Association in North Carolina. The magistrates ignored them, claiming they were useless if not sanctioned and commissioned by the Bishop of London.<sup>430</sup>

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<sup>424</sup> Ibid.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid.

<sup>427</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>428</sup> Ibid.

<sup>429</sup> Ibid.

<sup>430</sup> The English Act of Toleration technically prohibited Virginia’s authorities from arresting dissenters. Nonetheless, they found other grounds for incarceration. For example, accusing the Baptists of disturbing the peace or distracting laborers from their work were reasons for arresting them. In this case, however, it appears that the magistrates arrested Ireland simply because he was preaching without proper ordination into the Anglican priesthood. His subsequent conviction in the Culpeper court also appears to be rooted in the court’s prejudice against dissenters. Although the eastern parts of Virginia might have been under greater scrutiny across the Atlantic, communities in the interior, such as Culpeper, perhaps remained insulated from British oversight, thus giving them freedom to determine the extent to which they implemented Parliament’s laws.

The magistrates then gave Ireland a choice: he could promise not to preach for a year or go to jail – “I chose the last alternative.”<sup>431</sup> The people at the meeting angrily rebuked their magistrates and claimed that Ireland had only been preaching the gospel. They also declared that they would willingly go to jail with him if they did not have the money to pay their fines. The magistrates “were much mortified at seeing the ill will they had got from their neighbours.”<sup>432</sup> Such popular displays of affinity for Baptist teachers and Baptist teachings certainly troubled the ruling authorities, who saw that their control of society became increasingly tenuous as Baptist preaching proliferated and found greater acceptance.

The magistrates called together the county court a few days later. Ireland quickly realized that “there was no liberty for me.”<sup>433</sup> His accusers insulted him and refused to listen to his defense. They ordered him to hold his tongue so that they might avoid hearing more of his “vile, pernicious, abhorrible, detestable, abominable, diabolical doctrines.”<sup>434</sup> Ireland concluded that defending himself further was useless. The authorities intended to make him an example to discourage evangelical religion in Culpeper. The local sheriffs escorted Ireland from the courthouse to the jail. Along the way, “a considerable parade of people” accosted him “with such volleys of oaths and abuse as if I were a being unfit to exist on the earth.”<sup>435</sup> In November 1769, the twenty-one year old James Ireland began his imprisonment in the Culpeper jail.

Lewis Peyton Little provides a description of a Virginian jail in nearby Fauquier County. The jail is likely the one in which Ireland’s mentor, John Pickett, spent three months as a prisoner in 1769. The structure consisted of thick logs around a space eighteen feet long and sixteen feet wide and underpinned with at least eighteen inches of bricks. The builders also

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<sup>431</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid.

<sup>433</sup> Ibid.

<sup>434</sup> Ibid.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid.



constructed two doors secured with strong bolts, hinges, and locks. They cut two windows that were twelve square inches and covered them with iron bars. A brick fireplace protected by an iron grate provided warmth.<sup>436</sup> It is possible that Ireland's five-month confinement occurred in such a structure.

Ireland's initial exposure to prison life almost broke him of the will to endure, but several passages from scripture strengthened his motivation to persevere. Although it is often uncertain who was heaping abuses on him during his imprisonment, it is clear that they harbored a great hatred for the Baptist minister. During his first night in the jail, people threw sticks and stones at him. This caused him to begin doubting. He questioned whether Christ had really called him to preach, and he entertained the possibility of asking his friends to pay the bond required for his liberation.<sup>437</sup> For several days and nights, he wrestled with this option and prayed for strength. In the midst of his frustration, he opened the Bible that he had with him in the jail and read John 8:31-32, "If you continue in my word, you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."<sup>438</sup> This encouraged Ireland tremendously, so that it felt "that my chains in an instant dropped off, my heart bounded with comfort."<sup>439</sup> Ireland also read Acts 26:6, in which the Apostle Paul testifies before an acrimonious court that Jesus appeared to him and designated him to be "a minister and a witness, both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in which I will appear to thee."<sup>440</sup> Just as Paul refers to his conversion as evidence of his divine commission as an apostle, Ireland likely recalled his own conversion experience and thereby took a view of "these things which thou hast seen" in order to remember why it was so important

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<sup>436</sup> Little, *Imprisoned Preachers*, 194.

<sup>437</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 122, 123.

<sup>438</sup> *Ibid.*, 124. Ireland refers to a text in which Jesus describes the spiritual freedom that comes from trusting in him and walking in obedience to his teachings. He applies this idea to his physical imprisonment and derives from it encouragement that God will eventually deliver him from his bondage.

<sup>439</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>440</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

for him to be a faithful witness to Christ's character and achievements on behalf of sinners. His memory of the relief and joy he experienced when he received assurance probably encouraged him to remain steadfast in the work he believed Christ commissioned him to do. Having taken comfort from these passages, Ireland concluded that it was his duty to continue preaching.

Aspects of Ireland's imprisonment were not as difficult as he initially expected them to be. His friends supplied him with plenty of wood to keep a fire going. The jailer had to provide him food, and he received additional victuals from his friends. As the winter progressed, and the temperature dropped, Ireland rented a bed for five dollars a month so that he might avoid having to sleep on the cold ground of his jail cell.<sup>441</sup> Nonetheless, Ireland's physical condition and the treatment he received from his captors put his resolve to the test. He recalled that the winter months of 1769-1770 were extremely cold, and for a time he had to contend with a "scorching fever, which attended me in the night."<sup>442</sup> The jailer, who was also the local tavern-keeper, noticed that Ireland's Baptist friends frequently visited him to offer encouragement. He began demanding that each pay a fee for admittance to the jail. He also threw unruly people from the tavern into Ireland's cell.

In several instances, Ireland's persecutors attempted to kill him. In the first case, they tried to blow him up with gunpowder. They failed to procure enough, however, and "it went off with a considerable noise, forcing up a small plank, from which I received no damage. I was singing a hymn at the time the explosion went off, and continued singing until I finished it."<sup>443</sup> The next scheme caused Ireland more trouble. They combined pods of Indian pepper with brimstone, which they set on fire, "so that the whole jail would be filled with the killing

<sup>441</sup> Ibid., 126, 127, 131-132.

<sup>442</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>443</sup> Ibid., 127.

smoke.”<sup>444</sup> This forced Ireland to put his mouth to cracks in his cell to prevent suffocation. Afterwards, a local doctor conspired with Ireland’s jailer to poison him. Someone informed Ireland of the plot, however, so he avoided ingesting the lethal dose. In addition to these death threats, Ireland frequently expected the court to bring him out to a whipping post and inflict suffering on him publicly.

Ireland’s faith continually offered him solace during his trials. He recalled that when discouragements assailed him, he again “counted the cost, believing through Christ’s strengthening me, I could suffer all things for His sake.”<sup>445</sup> Adding to his comfort, Baptist ministers and churches sent letters to Ireland to encourage him and request a word from him about his experiences. The letters he wrote in return to churches and ministers caused “the conversion of a number of souls, who were anxiously led to enquire into the cause for which I [suffered], as well as the grounds of that fortitude which bore me up under these sufferings.”<sup>446</sup> He explained to them that his prison had become a place in which he “enjoyed much of the divine Presence.”<sup>447</sup> Almost every day, he recalled, he perceived God’s goodness manifested

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<sup>444</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>445</sup> Ibid., 128. Ireland refers to Philippians 4:13, which states, “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.” Paul wrote this verse in the context of explaining to the Philippian church that he had “learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content” (Philippians 4:11). In plenty and in want, Paul found an unworldly satisfaction in his knowledge of Christ that enabled him to suffer extraordinary trials. Ireland’s resilience likens to Paul’s attitude. Even in prison, Ireland was able to access a paradoxical source of contentment that supplied him with an unusual satisfaction and joy.

In a different letter to the Corinthian church, Paul describes his sufferings in greater detail. He writes, “Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness” (2 Corinthians 11:25-27). Yet, Paul explains, in all of the weakness that he experienced because of these sufferings, he found great encouragement from these words from Christ: “My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). Ireland drew from a similar assurance that Christ would provide an other-worldly strength in the midst of the weaknesses caused by his imprisonment.

<sup>446</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 129.

<sup>447</sup> Ibid.

toward him in some way. For this reason, he generally signed his letters, “From my Palace in Culpeper.”<sup>448</sup>

Ireland included in his manuscript a copy of a letter written to him in prison by David Thomas. Six or seven years after Thomas’ attempt to preach in Culpeper, he must have remembered his desire to bring the gospel there and consequently felt great compassion for the young minister, despite hailing from a different Baptist sect. His letter to Ireland offers a glimpse at some of the sources of strength that sustained him. Thomas wrote, “I am told that you are honoured with a prison, if it is for Christ, it is an honour indeed.”<sup>449</sup> He then declared his love for Ireland for being a fellow laborer who preaches the whole gospel and hoped that Ireland was “not without a bible.”<sup>450</sup> He continued with something profound and paradoxical:

O brother, if you can, by bearing the charming, lovely cross of Jesus Christ, win one of the strongest of Satan’s strong holds, no matter then how soon you die, and if you thus die for Him, how would the glorious armies of the Martyrs above, shout to see Ireland coming from a prison to reign with them in glory.<sup>451</sup>

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<sup>448</sup> Ibid.

<sup>449</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, Ibid., 130. The book of Acts offers some clarity on such an unusual statement. When several of the apostles, including Peter, were beaten for preaching the gospel in Jerusalem, “they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name” (Acts 5:41). The New Testament followers of Christ frequently demonstrated a paradoxical joy in having what they considered a privilege to suffer for their leader. Suffering allowed them to experience a level of relational intimacy with Christ that was not possible otherwise.

Paul explains in his letter to the Philippian church that he considered all worldly gain as rubbish compared to “the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things” (Philippians 3:8). Furthermore, he expressed his yearning to know Christ more deeply, including “the fellowship of his sufferings,” which referred to a deep companionship with Christ in being able to follow so closely in his footsteps that he suffered just as Christ suffered during his earthly ministry (Philippians 3:10).

<sup>450</sup> Ireland, *The Life* 130.

<sup>451</sup> Ibid. Interestingly, Thomas wrote a letter to another minister, Nathaniel Saunders, imprisoned in Culpeper in 1772. Thomas wrote the letter just six days after Saunders’ incarceration began. Thomas encouraged him to see his imprisonment as a great honor, a special opportunity to suffer for the sake of their Master. “Hold out, my dear brother!” he wrote. “Remember your Master - your royal, heavenly, divine Master – was nailed to a cursed tree for us. O, to suffer for Him is glory in the bud! O, let it never be said that a Baptist minister of Virginia ever wronged his conscience to get liberty, not to please God, but himself! O, your imprisonment... is not a punishment, but a glory! ‘If you suffer with Him you shall also reign with him.’” Little, *Imprisoned Preachers*, 373. Thomas there referred to Romans 8:17b, in which the Apostle Paul encouraged the Romans to remember that as co-heirs with Christ of an eternal kingdom, they should expect to suffer with Christ. In doing so, however, they could look forward to their final glorification at the end of time. Paul continues in verse 18, writing, “For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.”

Thomas clearly believed so deeply in the ideas offered to Christians in the Bible that he genuinely considered suffering for the sake of Christ to be an honor and a source of future glory. In taking up and carrying the “charming, lovely cross,” the instrument used to torture and kill Christ, Ireland stood in a special position to put Christ on display and demonstrate to Virginians the depth of his satisfaction in Jesus – even in Culpeper.<sup>452</sup>

In addition to influencing people in Baptist congregations who heard about his imprisonment, Ireland also affected people directly from his jail. Similar to John Waller’s imprisonments, Ireland preached through the window to people gathered outside. This effort to evangelize did not go without disturbance. He recalled that his enemies, mounted on horses, would charge his listeners and trample some of them under their horses’ hooves. A number of African slaves apparently attended Ireland’s teaching as well. Ireland remembered that some of them were “stripped and subjected to stripes” for coming to hear him preach.<sup>453</sup> He also recalled that some of his persecutors set up a table in front of his cell while he was preaching and urinated on him.

Ireland’s ministry also affected people thrown into his cell with him. In one instance, the jailer threw in several drunks who had caused a disturbance at the tavern. When Ireland began to speak to them about the gospel of Christ, they tried to feign being religious, but he concluded that they had no real knowledge of Christianity. After they sobered, he “helped them see the need to mortify their sin, convicting them.”<sup>454</sup> They thanked him for his kindness the next morning and took their leave.

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<sup>452</sup> Although Ireland’s imprisonment was fraught with difficulty, he and Thomas believed that his sufferings might be the avenue by which other people were freed from their slavery to sin. In taking up his cross and bearing the pains of persecution, Ireland would be following in the footsteps of Christ, whose sufferings on the cross were the ultimate vessel by which new life became available to humanity.

<sup>453</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 127.

<sup>454</sup> *Ibid.*, 128-129.

Ireland expounded more fully on a similar occurrence. Early during his imprisonment, the jailer put an Irish Roman Catholic into Ireland's prison cell. The man was enormous in size and "by look and aspect possessed every appearance as if he could with ease, and without the least remorse... put a heretick to death."<sup>455</sup> The mixture of a bold Baptist pastor with a heavysset Irish Catholic perhaps had more explosive potential than the insufficient dose of gunpowder intended for Ireland's demise. Yet events transpired quite differently. The Irishman remained in the cell for the rest of Ireland's imprisonment. Although a European, the man was a runaway who "had experienced severe treatment, as his back testified to me."<sup>456</sup> Ireland desired to be of service to the man, but the new cellmate "imbibed the same prejudices against me within jail, as the persecuting mob did without."<sup>457</sup> He also threatened to kill Ireland when Ireland attempted to keep him from making a foolhardy escape.

Eventually, however, Ireland won his confidence. He offered to share his bed with his cellmate and gave him access to the food he received from friends. The man enjoyed both gifts exceedingly. He then agreed to sing, read scripture, and pray with Ireland, who carefully instructed him in order to "make him sensible of his sinful and guilty state by nature."<sup>458</sup> The Irishman initially prayed in Latin, not understanding what he was saying. Ireland told him not to do that, so the man asked how he should pray. Ireland explained that "he should give up his heart to God in it."<sup>459</sup> He discovered that his companion could not read, write, or even recognize a letter of the alphabet, so he purchased a Bible from outside the jail and began to instruct him. Through the rest of the winter and into the spring of 1770, his student acquired a capacity to read

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<sup>455</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>456</sup> Ibid.

<sup>457</sup> Ibid.

<sup>458</sup> Ibid., 132. Ireland's willingness to risk the man's displeasure by discussing his sin and guilt probably derived from the frequency in the Bible in which "repentance" is preached along with the gospel. There is a sense that a person must first awake to his or her sinful state before being capable of understanding and receive the good news of the gospel. See Luke 5:32 and 24:47, Acts 5:31, and 2 Corinthians 7:10.

<sup>459</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 132.

both the Old and New Testaments, “and could quote passages from either, in support of a point of doctrine, in a very pertinent manner.”<sup>460</sup> The man also sensed his guilt as a sinner and came under increasing conviction. When Ireland was asleep, he felt the man get up privately and “heard him imploring, on his bare knees, for mercy from God to his soul, through a Redeemer.”<sup>461</sup> Ireland also recalled that his companion demonstrated a much greater humility and kindness by the end of their time together. Although the two men never met again after Ireland’s imprisonment ended, he was convinced “that there was a real change wrought in his heart, by the Spirit and grace of God.”<sup>462</sup>

Ireland also made a positive impression on his captors. One of the men who trampled the people gathered around the jail to hear Ireland preach and who helped design the schemes to blow up and poison Ireland was the jailer. One day, when the jailer and several of his friends were “going on with their abusive language” toward Ireland, the jailer asked one of his friends for 10 shillings to purchase supplies for the tavern.<sup>463</sup> Ireland stepped to the window of his jail with the money in his hand. He explained to the jailer that he was willing to lend it to him, trusting that he would pay it back when it suited him. The man accepted the money, and, “struck with apparent astonishment and confusion, he made a kind of bow and retired.”<sup>464</sup> Ireland gained the man’s friendship. The jailer refused to allow others to insult him anymore. Eventually, the jailer and his companions began visiting Ireland in his cell, “at which times we often spent many hours together in friendly conversation.”<sup>465</sup>

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<sup>460</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid.

<sup>462</sup> Ibid.

<sup>463</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>464</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>465</sup> Ibid.

Ireland's trials in prison eventually ended. After approximately five months in jail, he secured the help of Lewis Craig's brother, Elijah Craig, to pay bond so that he could travel to Williamsburg in April 1770 before the court conducted a final hearing in May. While in the capital, he attained the favor of the Governor of Virginia and received an official license to preach.<sup>466</sup> In the final showdown with his accusers in Culpeper, Ireland hired a lawyer who derided the court for prosecuting Ireland "upon laws that had no existence these seventy years." Those laws "were repealed at the accession of William the Third to the throne of England," when Parliament passed the English Act of Toleration, which overturned laws that persecuted dissenters. This fact, combined with Ireland's license to preach, meant that the Culpeper Court was unable to contend the matter further and acknowledged that they had no power to keep Ireland in prison any longer.<sup>467</sup>

Using his newly won freedom, Ireland helped plant and shepherd three churches in Frederick and Shenandoah Counties in northern Virginia. He continued to endure persecutions for the next several years before the outbreak of the American Revolution, especially when he itinerated into the colony's eastern counties. He even experienced what he called a "ducking" when a group of sailors hoisted him from their ship and dumped him into a river.<sup>468</sup> Despite such opposition, he continued as an evangelical Baptist for the next thirty-five years until his death in June 1806.<sup>469</sup>

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<sup>466</sup> Although clergymen in Williamsburg were obstinately opposed to Ireland's mission, the governor was quite favorable (Ireland, *The Life*, 136). Despite the Anglican establishment's continued dominance in the east, dissenters there seem to have been under greater official toleration. Ireland promised the governor that he would conform "to the rules prescribed for Protestant dissenters," and the governor readily granted Ireland's requests (Ireland, *The Life*, 135).

<sup>467</sup> Ibid., 136-137.

<sup>468</sup> Ibid., 139. This perhaps likened in its design to the "dunking" pictured in the prefatory pages.

<sup>469</sup> Lewis Peyton Little provides an illuminating excerpt from a 1902 work by Samuel Kercheval, *A History of the Valley of Virginia*. Kercheval claimed to have had "the satisfaction of an intimate personal acquaintance with Mr. Ireland, and lived a near neighbor for several years before his death." Little, *Imprisoned Preachers*, 183. He describes Ireland as a Scotchman who maintained some of his accent even in his later years. He recalled that Ireland



As Ireland's story indicates, the Separates thrived on persecution. Although it took several years to dispel popular prejudices, the Baptists' willingness to suffer, combined with their integrity, gave them a reputation for martyrdom.<sup>470</sup> This gradually transformed how common Virginians perceived them and their message, so that the Separates "even made converts of the mob."<sup>471</sup> The authorities languished over what to do with the Baptists. Imprisonment did not stop their preaching. In one case in Chesterfield County, the authorities jailed some itinerating Baptists who continued their work from their prison cell, "prompting the authorities to build a brick wall around the prison to discourage meetings."<sup>472</sup> Such attempts to constrain the Baptists only seemed to cause their numbers to increase. In a way, these Baptists were living paradoxes.<sup>473</sup> Mobs, prisons, death threats, hunger, and insults simply failed to silence them or check their popularity. Not surprisingly, the authorities often released Separate preachers just to get rid of them.

The persistent work of Separate Baptists made evangelical religion a permanent feature in Virginia. In 1768, there were five Separate Baptist congregations in Virginia. Six years later, there were fifty-three.<sup>474</sup> By the outbreak of the Revolution, the Baptists counted ten thousand members.<sup>475</sup> Imprisonments generally ended by 1775, but Baptists determined to take advantage of the growing fervor for liberty in the colonies. For more than a decade, Ireland recalled,

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"had a fine commanding voice, easy delivery, with beautiful natural elocution in his sermonizing." Little, *Imprisoned Preachers*, 183). Although his language as "not as purely classical" as some of Ireland's contemporaries, Kercheval noted that his speaking abilities were so powerful, "particularly on the subject of the crucifixion and sufferings of our Saviour, that he never failed to cause a flood of tears to flow from the eyes of his audience, whenever he touched that theme." Little, *Imprisoned Preachers*, 183.

<sup>470</sup> Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations*, 113.

<sup>471</sup> Ibid., 107. Also see Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 117.

<sup>472</sup> Kidd, *Great Awakening*, 247.

<sup>473</sup> Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 122, 125-126. Anglican parson James Craig wrote to one of his superiors, "They pray for persecution, and therefore if you fall upon any severe method of suppressing them, it will tend to strengthen their cause." Thus, when persecution came, it appeared to be an answer to prayer. Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 126.

<sup>474</sup> Ryland, *Baptists of Virginia*, 85.

<sup>475</sup> Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 106.

Baptists had “groaned under the tyranny of a rigorous religious intolerance.”<sup>476</sup> In 1775, representatives from 60 Baptist churches agreed that an independent America might mean an independent Baptist church in Virginia. They became the first religious group to support the Revolutionary cause.<sup>477</sup> At the war’s end, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison worked with the Separates to pass the Statute for Establishing Religious Freedom, which officially separated church and state in Virginia.<sup>478</sup> Ireland joyfully wrote that the Revolution “burst asunder the bands of tyranny,” which permitted him “to enjoy that entire freedom of conscience, in the exercise of my ministry.”<sup>479</sup>

Ironically, the great fear that inspired planters to persecute evangelicals never materialized on a widespread scale. Evangelical Separate Baptists initially preached a “leveling” religion indiscriminately to all people, regardless of race, social class, and gender. Planters therefore viewed them as a devious threat that might deconstruct the institutions that buttressed Virginian hierarchy. A possible consequence of that social change would be a loss of their control of labor, which would undermine their ability to grow the tobacco that accumulated the wealth that sustained their consumption of pleasure. Separates permitted women, Indians, and African Americans more recognition and influence than planters were used to giving them. Eventually, however, Separate Baptists joined moderate evangelical denominations by conforming to Virginia’s social standards.<sup>480</sup> A bill passed in the House of Burgesses before the Revolution “threatened dissenters with imprisonment should they encourage slaves to disobey their masters, agitate against slavery,” or baptize a slave without his master’s consent.<sup>481</sup> Official

<sup>476</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 36.

<sup>477</sup> Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations*, 113-114.

<sup>478</sup> *Ibid.*, 114; Heinemann et al, *Old Dominion*, 134-136.

<sup>479</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 36.

<sup>480</sup> Kidd, *Great Awakening*, 250-251.

<sup>481</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

hindrances such as this bill gradually caused Baptist churches to limit African Americans' ability to preach freely. "Ironically," Kidd adds, "as more blacks flocked to Separate Baptist churches, white leaders increasingly consolidated their power over slaves."<sup>482</sup> Although some Separates "saw slavery as a grievous sin," others, including Ireland and Waller, chose to own slaves.<sup>483</sup> Evangelicalism "certainly held egalitarian potential," but it often "went unrealized for African Americans."<sup>484</sup>

Nonetheless, by the early nineteenth century, the southern interior, particularly the backcountry, proved to be remarkably fertile ground for Baptist and Methodist circuit riders and revival camps.<sup>485</sup> Although many various causes contributed to the transformation of Virginia's religious atmosphere, the foundational factors that produced the changes were powerful ideas inherent to evangelical Christian teaching. Those ideas gave Baptist ministers the motivation to endure persecution and continue to propagate the message that brought the Great Awakening to Virginia.

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<sup>482</sup> Ibid., 250-251.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid., 251. Also see Ireland, *The Life*, 150-157.

<sup>484</sup> Kidd, *Great Awakening*, 251.

<sup>485</sup> Minkema, "Spiritual Awakenings," 479.

## CONCLUSION

### *An Active Religion*

Paradoxical conversions attended the Great Awakening in colonial Virginia. An unnamed colonist described his low opinion of Baptists by declaring that he would rather go to hell than have to hear a Baptist preacher in order to go to heaven. Soon afterwards, he heard the preaching of a Baptist named Dutton Lane, fell under a deep conviction, and converted.<sup>486</sup>

Robert Carter III, one of the wealthiest planters in Virginia and the nephew of Landon Carter, who loathed the Baptists, converted under the influence of Baptist teaching and eventually manumitted more than 450 slaves because of his religious convictions.<sup>487</sup> Samuel Harriss was a wealthy Virginian gentleman who enjoyed the benefits of being a successful businessmen, government official, and military commander. Yet, he relinquished his positions of power and nearly all of his wealth, including his spacious new house, in order to support the growth of the Baptist movement and engage in itinerant preaching. John Pickett was a member of a respectable family and enjoyed the privilege of earning his living as a dance teacher. When he heard the preaching of an evangelical Baptist, however, his lifestyle altered so radically that it caused a substantial shock to his family. John Waller was a devoted gambler who disdained Baptists and sought to bring them to court. Nonetheless, he converted because of the testimony of Lewis Craig and later became a Baptist preacher willing to suffer violent physical abuse in order to proclaim the gospel message in Virginia. James Ireland fell in love with Virginia's pastimes and pleasures after he immigrated to the colony from Scotland. His subsequent conversion to evangelical Christianity, however, inspired him to turn from his former ways and

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<sup>486</sup> Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 114.

<sup>487</sup> Kidd, *Great Awakening*, 250. Freeing slaves was certainly not always a byproduct of becoming a Baptist. Despite the "leveling" teachings within evangelicalism in the colonial era, southern evangelicals eventually softened those teachings enough to prevent the rest of society from perceiving evangelical churches as a threat to the social order in Virginia.

even relinquish the possibility of a tremendously advantageous marriage. He became a Baptist minister and somehow experienced a deep joy in his religion that empowered him to endure suffering for preaching the gospel. Something caused Ireland to convert, and it afterwards provided him such strong sustaining power that, in the midst of his imprisonment through an entire winter in colonial Virginia, he felt content enough to sign his letters, “From my Palace in Culpeper.”

It is clear that a radical religious transformation occurred among thousands of Virginians before the American Revolution. Scholars describe multiple factors that contributed to causing that transformation. One possibility is an idea purported by Janet Lindman. She suggests that evangelicals convinced Virginians like Ireland to embrace “the Christian ideal of suffering as a means to define a new manliness.”<sup>488</sup> While the idea of “manhood” for most Virginians typically revolved around a public culture of drinking, gambling, racing, dancing, fornicating, and amassing wealth from Virginia’s tobacco, evangelicals encouraged piety, humility, service, and restraint.<sup>489</sup> Lindman accurately asserts that a radical redefinition of manhood occurred in Virginia because of evangelical inroads. It is paradoxical, however, that men were finding meekness and sacrifice to be manlier than pride and the acquisition of wealth and pleasure. Although Lindman’s description of the newly defined manhood in Virginia explains why the evangelical worldview provoked a violent response from colonists who maintained the traditional Virginian worldview, it does not sufficiently explain why that transformation took place in most individuals.

<sup>488</sup> Lindman, “Acting the Manly Christian,” 394, 405.

<sup>489</sup> Ibid., 407. Spangler echoes Lindman’s argument by pointing out that a redefinition of manhood had to occur when a Virginian male became a Baptist. They “withdrew from public pleasures such as racing and dancing,” and they thereby “distinguished themselves from ‘the world’ to a significant degree – acts of nonconformity that were no doubt somewhat emotionally and socially costly to them.” Spangler, *Virginians Reborn*, 142.

Rhys Isaac offers another explanation. In his seminal 1982 work, *The Transformation of Virginia*, Isaac explains the phenomenon of conversion by arguing that it was a reaction to a growing sense of “disorder” in the colony. Virginians started viewing unbridled pursuits of pleasure as dangerous, and they perceived a need to build a “tighter, more effective system of values,” especially among the common folk.<sup>490</sup> Disorder in society “came now to be articulated in the metaphor of ‘sin.’”<sup>491</sup> Thus, when Baptists railed against sin and tried to convict their listeners of wrongdoing, conversions occurred because people were consciously or subconsciously yearning to find a more orderly way of life in Virginia.

Although Isaac successfully highlights the remarkable moral dichotomy that existed between a Virginian lifestyle characterized by pursuits of pleasure and a carefully regulated and orderly Baptist community, his explanation of why a person would leave the former to join the latter depends on evidence that is simply too scarce. The accounts of Pickett, Harriss, Waller, Ireland, and other converts to evangelical religion generally do not exhibit a growing anxiety about Virginian excesses before their conversions. They do not evince a sense of apprehension about disorder before they come under conviction. Instead, they appear much like the proud Virginian who rode to Ireland’s schoolhouse to “convert” him to the dance. Ireland describes the man as confident, bold, and daring. It was not until his friend heard Ireland’s explanation for his conviction that he demonstrated the first signs of a conversion experience. Of course, the man might have been struggling privately with a feeling that his Virginian world was disorderly, or perhaps Ireland simply exaggerated the extreme change that subsequently occurred in the man’s

<sup>490</sup> Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 168.

<sup>491</sup> Ibid., 169. Spangler joins Isaac by articulating a similar assumption. She notes that the Baptists arose at a time when a demand for stricter social mores was on the rise in Virginia just before the Revolution. She describes a “disorder” in which *non*-Baptists were actually expressing “increasing concern about excesses of revelry and interpersonal violence,” which inclined them to resist “the extremes of Cavalier culture in the 1760s and 1770s.” Spangler, *Virginians Reborn*, 143.

life when he became an evangelical. Without explicit evidence of those possibilities, however, it seems unnecessary to construct a thought-provoking but otherwise unsubstantiated explanation for evangelical conversions in Virginia.

Historians offer other helpful but incomplete explanations for why Virginians embraced evangelical religion. To some extent, the Baptists succeeded because the Anglican Church failed. Baptists often bore fruit in areas that suffered from a lack of Anglican presence.<sup>492</sup> Parsons sometimes neglected their flock or were incompetent. Priests generally read their sermons in an emotionless manner.<sup>493</sup> There was a demand for spiritual vitality in Virginia that the Anglicans could not supply. The Baptists, on the other hand, offered a unique worship experience characterized by open expression of emotion, which attracted some Virginians because it “was importantly different than that of the established church or even Presbyterian dissent.”<sup>494</sup> Furthermore, while Anglican priests often associated with the planter elites, many Separate Baptist ministers lacked extensive education and did not bear the outward adornment of the wealthy. This made them more effective because it placed them on the same social plane as many of those to whom they preached, “and a strong bond of sympathy developed between the two.”<sup>495</sup>

Ultimately, some historians contend, the established church simply failed to satisfy a deep yearning among many Virginians for a more intense spirituality.<sup>496</sup> In a mid-eighteenth century Virginian world often characterized by disease, Indian wars, lack of upward mobility,

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<sup>492</sup> Spangler, *Virginians Reborn*, 117.

<sup>493</sup> Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 37-38. One of the great exceptions was Devereux Jarratt (who began in the Anglican Church and late became a Methodist), whose “great success was due to his evangelical preaching which appealed directly to the hearts of his hearers and made them sensible to their sinful state. Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 38-39.

<sup>494</sup> Spangler, *Virginians Reborn*, 117.

<sup>495</sup> Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 164. Also see Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 109, 113, 135.

<sup>496</sup> Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 97-98.

and the instability of a life that revolved around cash crops, people desired sources of comfort and hope. Virginians who joined the Separates found “a new, satisfying source of spiritual expression and comfort.”<sup>497</sup> They entered into a rich community life that surely offered much-needed traction in an incredibly volatile world.<sup>498</sup> Baptists “offered potential converts the unique experience of social bonding,” and this attracted people to join Separate communities.<sup>499</sup> Perhaps many converted because they chafed against their position near the bottom of the social order. Women, African Americans, and Native Americans initially found roles within Separate Baptist churches that offered them empowerment unavailable to them elsewhere in Virginian society.

Despite the validity and usefulness of these explanations, none are comprehensive, and several pieces of evidence beckon further explanation. The Separate movement did not occur exclusively among the lower orders of Virginian society. A significant number of privileged Virginians, including the ones examined in this study, came under deep convictions that led to drastic and oftentimes paradoxical life changes. Bruce Hindmarsh, speaking of conversion narratives in England during the eighteenth century, notes that few other forms of writing in that period “included authors from such a variety of backgrounds in terms of gender, age, class, and... race.”<sup>500</sup> Although wealthy Virginians generally might have been the exception, their conversion to evangelical religion necessitates a more complex explanation.

Additionally, while becoming a Baptist might have offered social empowerment and the comfort of an affirming church community, it also required sacrifices, at least in the decade

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<sup>497</sup> Kidd, *Great Awakening*, 250-252.

<sup>498</sup> Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 164.

<sup>499</sup> Spangler, *Virginians Reborn*, 227.

<sup>500</sup> Hindmarsh, *Evangelical Conversion*, 324. Hindmarsh also comments on the remarkable similarity of the conversion narratives produced by different groups of evangelicals from various social classes and backgrounds. Although a number of differences in chronology, literary form, theology, and social conditions are evident, “the similarities among the conversion narratives of this period remain the most striking feature of the genre as a whole.” Hindmarsh, *Evangelical Conversion*, 325.



preceding the Revolution. It possibly invited the shame of the wider community or even friends and family members. Attending a dissenting church often meant having to pay twice as many tithes: a portion to the dissenting church one attended and another government-mandated portion to the county parish.<sup>501</sup> Moreover, Baptists railed against the pleasures and entertainments of Virginian society. Joining an evangelical community often meant entering a life of relative deprivation. Becoming a Baptist meant the relinquishing of one's freedom to gamble, play cards, dance, swear, drink, and break the Sabbath.

Furthermore, although many historians believe that Virginians were yearning for spiritual experiences, the reality often seemed to be quite different. Ireland's autobiography testifies to the opposite: people generally did not describe spiritual longings until they encountered the ideas presented to them by the evangelical message.<sup>502</sup> Instead, spiritual negligence and complacency were usually the norm until the evangelical message "awakened" them. Devereux Jarratt, who was to become a famous Methodist preacher in Virginia, remembered not seeing or hearing anything of a religious nature and neglected eternal matters entirely until he came in touch with evangelical Presbyterians.<sup>503</sup>

Ultimately, then, a more intricate interpretation of these events will help fill some of the gaps in the religious historiography of eighteenth-century Virginia. Ireland's description of his pre-conversion life, conversion experience, and post-conversion ministry offers a matchlessly detailed view of the ideological content that formed the fundamental cause of the religious

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<sup>501</sup> Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 136. Ireland's autobiography testifies to the frustration this caused to dissenters. He remembered that dissenters had to pay their assigned tithes for the construction of Anglican churches. They also had to pay a certain weight in tobacco annually for the support of Anglican clergymen. Meanwhile, they also had to pay for their own Baptist meetinghouses as well as the support of their own ministers. Ireland recalled, "this galling yoke continued on the necks of dissenters until some time after our glorious revolution took place." Ireland, *The Life*, 101.

<sup>502</sup> Spiritual complacency was also the major problem in Jonathan Edwards' Northampton community before the 1734 revival began under his preaching.

<sup>503</sup> Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 33-34.

transformation engendered by the Separate Baptists in Virginia. Although Ireland's account should not be monolithically superimposed onto every Virginian conversion or onto every Baptist minister who suffered for preaching the gospel, it does extensively describe the ideas that likely caused many conversions and motivated the Baptist leaders to persevere through persecution. Waller's experience offers supporting evidence for this.

Comprehending ten major ideas inherent to evangelical Christianity and evident in Ireland's story is essential to understanding the Great Awakening in Virginia. Each of the ten concepts clearly shaped Ireland's experience and radically transformed his worldview. The first of the major ideas is the belief that every person's soul is eternal: everyone will continue to experience conscious and ceaseless existence after death. The second idea is an understanding that a creator-God made the earth and designed humanity for special and intimate communion with himself. This relationship enabled people to experience and enjoy paradise. The third concept is a conviction that the first humans willfully rebelled against God. Their disobedience consequently separated humanity from its special relationship with God and bequeathed to all their descendants a sinful nature perpetually inclined toward breaking God's commands. The fourth idea is the terrifying belief that a person's separation from God caused by sin means that he or she is under God's righteous condemnation and will receive justice after death when God consigns that person to eternal punishment in hell.

The mental angst produced by such weighty and somber considerations was immense. In the poem that instigated the beginning of Ireland's conversion experience, he wrote that sinners were destined to pass into "eternal fire, / Where you with devils there shall roar / And burn in flames for evermore, / And never die, / But gnash and cry, / Through everlasting ages."<sup>504</sup> This prospect inspired Ireland to relinquish worldly pleasures in order to find the solution. He

<sup>504</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 52.

declared that he came to value his eternal soul so much that even if he “possessed ten thousand worlds all at my disposal... there would not have been the least hesitation in me, to give them all in exchange for one small ray of hope.”<sup>505</sup> When his companion questioned why his life had changed so drastically, Ireland responded, “My dear friend I possess a soul that will be either happy or miserable in the world to come... I plainly see that if my soul is not converted, regenerated and born again, I will be damned.” That terrifying thought produced the overwhelming anxieties that led to Ireland’s retreat from society and decline in health.

The fifth concept essential to comprehending Virginia’s evangelical revivals is an understanding that the only solution to the aforementioned problem is a complete restoration of relationship with God. They believed that a vast chasm exists between humans and their maker because of their rebellion, and something needs to bridge that chasm in order to reverse the awful effects of sin. The sixth idea is a conviction that people are incapable of achieving reconciliation with God by performing good works in accordance with God’s law. For all their effort, their avoidance of wrongdoing and accomplishment of good deeds are insufficient to appease God’s anger towards human insubordination.

Ireland spent a long time learning this complicated idea. At first, he decided that he must strive with all his might to conform his life to the law of God. He hoped that by confessing, praying, and changing his ways, “God would be satisfied.”<sup>506</sup> Despite this hope, however, Ireland started to see the futility of his endeavors. He discovered that his outward, visible sins were not the source of his corruption. The source of the problem was in Ireland’s heart, and “it was from thence my outbreaking practices flowed.”<sup>507</sup> His view of his own sin deepened as he

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<sup>505</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>506</sup> Ibid. 60.

<sup>507</sup> Ibid., 61.

gradually “discovered God to be a just God.”<sup>508</sup> Although he retained his view that God was merciful, he understood his sin to be heinous enough to separate him from his maker so completely “that if God had cut the thread of my life, and sent me to hell, I must have said, He dealt justly and righteously by me.”<sup>509</sup> He felt utterly unable to endear himself to God by his own efforts. His plan to achieve reconciliation with God by works was defunct because “salvation was not by the law in part or in whole; for by the deeds of the law no living flesh could be justified.”<sup>510</sup>

The seventh idea that inspired spiritual transformations is the “good news” of the evangelical Christian gospel, which states that God chose to achieve the solution himself. He did so by coming to earth in the form of a human in order to live a perfect life in accordance with his own mandates and laws. Having done so, he accomplished the task of reconciling humanity to himself by bearing his own punishment for sin while dying on the cross. The eighth concept is that a person must place his or her trust in Jesus, believing that he is God’s ordained solution to the problem of sin. Doing so is more than just intellectual assent or emotional attachment. It means that God enters the person’s life in the form of the Holy Spirit, who gives the person a new heart and dwells with that person in intimate communion. The ninth idea is that faith itself is a miraculous gift from God that a person cannot create on command. Instead, “regeneration” and “new birth” must occur. Ireland read in the scriptures that salvation came when a person had faith in Christ. Yet he found it impossible for him to believe. He recalled, “for a poor sinner, enveloped in darkness, and loaded with guilt and sin, to... venture upon an unseen Christ, for eternal happiness, was a work and act beyond myself to accomplish.”<sup>511</sup>

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<sup>508</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>509</sup> Ibid.

<sup>510</sup> Ibid.

<sup>511</sup> Ibid., 70.

The tenth idea is that people who do experience that miraculous, God-ordained conversion, not only receive the faith needed to trust in Jesus, but they also immediately receive adoption into God's divine family and stand before him completely justified because they are covered in the righteousness of Christ. Ireland described Romans 5:1-2 as the triumphant conclusion of the process of justification: "Being justified by faith, we have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ. By whom also we have access by faith into His grace, wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God."<sup>512</sup> Such a realization could produce an overwhelming joy. That assurance of faith and salvation came to Ireland while praying with several of his friends. Suddenly, he wrote, it "pleased God to shed abroad His rich love and grace in my heart... I can say from my heart I believed unto righteousness... God converted my soul, removed my burden of sin and guilt, giving me to possess that peace which was beyond understanding."<sup>513</sup> The joy resulting from a restored relationship with God because of Christ appears to have been overwhelming.

The joy from this realization produced in Ireland that evangelical impulse that David Bebbington describes as "activism."<sup>514</sup> Although converted people still dwell in sinful flesh, which continues to produce sinful acts throughout the remainder of their lives, the change of heart and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit signify the beginning of a journey in which that person will grow in conformity to God's law and the character of Jesus. One of the products of that growth is an increased willingness to carry the good news of the gospel to other people. The combination of the ten ideas inherent to evangelical Christianity transformed Ireland's priorities, lifestyle, and ambitions so deeply that he subsequently demonstrated a great willingness and

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<sup>512</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>513</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>514</sup> Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 1-17.

desire to be a vessel for carrying the gospel message to other people, even when doing so required him to suffer persecutions.

These ideas that influenced the Great Awakening were not the creative works of the ministers. Although the character of the audiences, educational backgrounds of the ministers, and general tenor of eighteenth-century society certainly shaped the messages preached from evangelical pulpits, the ideas within those messages were not novelties. They ultimately came from a text. Passages in the Bible informed the ministers, who typically desired to preach faithfully the messages they read on its pages. That is the definitive observable source of causation. Although biblical texts were not independent of the people who read and preached them, they nonetheless remained the authoritative seat of ideas that shaped and moved people during the Great Awakening. The American Constitution offers an illustration of this relationship between text and people. Since America's founding, Congress has made new laws, the judiciary has interpreted those laws, and government officials have carried out those laws, but the foundational source of authority for the entire system and its gyrations is the Constitution penned by American leaders at the end of the eighteenth century.

Nearly all of the ideas that operated on Ireland during his conversion came directly from specific biblical texts. He wrote that he truly believed the biblical scriptures were "the word of God."<sup>515</sup> The teachings in those scriptures "came home with such authority as bore evidence to me of their divine authority and origin."<sup>516</sup> Ireland's trust in the ideas that he read in the Bible and heard preached from scripture passages shaped the trajectory of his conversion, growth, and ministry in the evangelical faith. A crucial scripture that he found during one of the gravest moments of hopelessness before receiving assurance of faith came from Acts 16:31. He quoted,

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<sup>515</sup> Ibid. 61.

<sup>516</sup> Ibid.

“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.”<sup>517</sup> This helped him remember that salvation was possible, but a he had to trust in Christ’s atoning sacrifice in order to access the righteousness that brought reconciliation with God and salvation from eternal punishment. Later, at the critical moment when Ireland nearly chose to pay bond and surrender his willingness to preach in Culpeper so that he might acquire freedom from jail, he opened a Bible and read John 8:31-32, “If you continue in my word, you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” This encouraged Ireland so much that it felt as though “my chains in an instant dropped off, [and] my heart bounded with comfort.”<sup>518</sup> Ireland concluded that it was his duty to continue preaching and that God would take care of him, even in prison. The ultimate source acting on Ireland to bring about his transformation and subsequently inspire him to perseverance was the Bible.

In reading Ireland’s account of his conversion, one begins to understand why so many people in the Atlantic world experienced intense emotions in the First Great Awakening. The miserable agonies of perceiving the sin and guilt causing one’s separation from God gave way to joyous ecstasy at beholding the extraordinary cosmic occurrence to which the Christian scriptures testify: out of love, Jesus willingly adorns himself in the guilt of the sinner and fully absorbs the wrath and punishment of God for that person’s sin. Simultaneously, he takes his own unspoiled righteousness and clothes the naked sinner with it, so that God only sees one who is spotlessly perfect and totally qualified to be adopted into his divine family. The joys derived from that realization were powerful enough to produce the emotional enthusiasms that characterized the Awakening, including the evangelical stirs that occurred in Virginia. Those

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<sup>517</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>518</sup> Ibid., 124-125.

joys also provided so deep a satisfaction for Ireland that he readily relinquished many of the societal enjoyments he had grown to adore in Virginia before his conversion.

Additionally, those joys were strong enough to produce a resolve that had sustaining power for the ministers who presented “vital” Christianity in a place where doing so could earn imprisonment and ridicule. We must avoid exaggerating Ireland’s travails. He was not tortured profusely. He had basic material comforts readily at hand. He could receive visitors as well as send and receive letters. He had a Bible in his possession. Conversely, however, we must not understate the magnitude of his sufferings. The insults of the court, the ridicule of common Virginians, the abuses at the hands of his jailer, the death threats that occasionally manifested into real attempts on Ireland’s life, the coldness of the winter, and the nighttime bouts with fever forced Ireland to consider his reasons for persisting in jail. It could be that an unstated vanity inspired Ireland to endure. Or perhaps he persevered simply out of spite for his persecutors. Taking the evidence at face value, however, it appears that Ireland’s ability to endure persecution came primarily from his thoughts about the person of Christ, which empowered Ireland “to suffer all for Him.”<sup>519</sup> He described Christ as his “adorable redeemer,” “precious redeemer,” “glorious redeemer.”<sup>520</sup> This perception of Jesus appears to have been his primary motivation for obeying the biblical injunction to go into all the world and preach, regardless of how audiences and authorities would treat him. The fullest understanding of Ireland’s perseverance as well as the rise of an active evangelicalism in Virginia is impossible apart from that observation.

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<sup>519</sup> Ibid., 120. Lewis Craig stated when undergoing persecution, “I take joyfully the despoiling of my goods for Christ’s sake.” Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 125. This testimony is one of the things that caused John Waller to become a Baptist.

<sup>520</sup> Ireland, *The Life*, 60, 68, 95.



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