



February 2, 2024

Indeed a Very Small Group

Warm hellos once again friends, brethren, fellow laborers, spiritual family, and scattered children of God from here on the Gulf Coast. My wife and I pray and hope this finds you doing well, and that again your week has been blessed.

Ten years ago, back in February of 2014 we had just returned from several days in Queensland, Australia. We had an excellent trip, but it took me a while to recover having crossed over the International Date Line on our way back. Upon our return we were back to our time zone where we pastored in the Carolinas which was 15 hours behind where we had been for the previous week.

While in Australia, I was privileged to speak to one of the smaller congregations in Australia, there in Claremont. We enjoyed our visit with 26 family members and brethren there on the Sabbath.

When viewed from the perspective of the whole Christian professing community, we are indeed a very small group! But the numbers of the true body of believers has been considerably smaller in past centuries.

While reviewing several accounts of early church history in North America written by Richard Nickels, John Ogwyn, and Ian Fletcher, I found some interesting tidbits. They went to great effort to gain as accurate information as they could to support what they wrote. I have respect for their efforts to uncover the facts about the history of the church before my time and theirs. It is an inspiring and also sobering story of those who stood up against false teachings, resisted preachers who tried to gain a following, and were persecuted by some members who turned on them when these false disciples turned away from the Scriptures.

The roots of Sabbath keeping congregations in North America go back to England in the 17th century. Let me quote from Ivor C. Fletcher's book "The Incredible History of God's True Church." Quoting excerpts from Chapter Ten -- The Persecuted Church: During most of the seventeenth century, up to 1687, freedom of religion was available only to those who followed the precepts of mainstream Protestant theology in the form of the established Church of England.

Before these freedoms were granted, the Church of God in England had experienced a time of severe trials. It was not without good reason that these people often called themselves the "Poor" Churches of God. Fines for failure to attend the Sunday services of the established church of 20 pounds a month might seem modest in today's society, but such a sum three centuries ago represented the income of the average employee today for about two years.

Religion dominated the thoughts of many of the nation's scholars during this period; the literature published at this time is full of religious debate and controversy. The Sabbath in particular was the subject of almost endless discussion. Some understood the academic reasons for keeping the seventh day, but only a few were really willing to obey God in the face of strong opposition.

John Trask, one of the most powerful speakers of his day, began to preach. He understood not only the truth of God's Sabbath but also the facts regarding clean and unclean meats.

Trask is said to have founded the Mill Yard Church in London shortly after his arrival in the capital from Salisbury. At least one writer, however, has traced the establishment of this church back to 1580 -- long before the time of Trask. As the records of this church up to 1673 were destroyed in the fire of 1790, it is impossible to know the exact facts with any degree of certainty.

Although most of these persecutions involved fines or imprisonment, at least two of the leaders of God's people at this time suffered direct martyrdom. One of those who gave his life in this manner was John James.

"It was about this time (A. D. 1661), that a congregation of Baptists holding the seventh day as a Sabbath, being assembled at their meeting-house in Bull-Stake Alley, (London) the doors being open, about three o'clock P.M. (October 19), whilst Mr. John James was preaching, one Justice Chard, with Mr. Wood, an headborough, came into the meeting place. Wood commanded him in the King's name to be silent and come down, having spoken treason against the King. But Mr. James, taking little or no notice thereof, proceeded in his work.

John James was arrested and brought to trial, found guilty under the new law against non-conformity. He was sentenced to the barbaric fate of being hung, drawn and quartered.

The Mill Yard Church in London is mentioned in the correspondence with the Sabbath keepers in America. I plan to mention a little more of the history of the Church of God in England next time.

There were several small congregations in the London area. "The historic Mill Yard Church probably dates back to 1607, but one authority (Daland) traces its establishment to 1580. One of its earliest pastors was John Trask (1617-1619). Later ministers included Peter Chamberlen, John James, William Sellers and Henry Soursby.

"In 1646 seven congregations are said to have met in London, but by the time that Francis Bampfield wrote in 1677, persecution had reduced this number to three. The locations of those three congregations were Mill Yard, Bell Lane, and Cripplegate." (Chapter Twelve, Fletcher)

Might we consider some of these leaders and members with those mentioned in Hebrews 11 what many of us call the faith chapter. "*Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. . . of whom the world was not worthy.*" (Hebrews 11:36, 38) Let us ask God for the courage and perseverance to hold to the precious truths of God in the face of increasing opposition to those principles of God's word. I don't think it will be much longer

before we once again will be facing religious persecution in a much greater way for obeying God's truth...to be continued with more next time.

Arms up friends! Our sincere prayers and thoughts are with you daily. Thanks in advance for your heartfelt prayers for us.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'S. Hoefker', written in a cursive style.

Scott Hoefker

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