

James Renwick (1662-1688)

In the seventeenth century, Scotland endured twenty eight years of violent persecution, during which around eighteen thousand people died or suffered greatly for the simple reason of their faith. These men and women were known as Covenanters. The last Covenanter to be publicly martyred was a young man called James Renwick.

Early Years

Renwick was born in a village close to Dumfries on 15th February 1662, and from his earliest years, his parents could see that he was a remarkable boy. They said later that “as soon as he learned to speak, he learned to pray”¹ and that by the time he was six years old, he could read much of the Bible.²

Before long, James went to university in the city of Edinburgh, where he came into contact with the persecuted Covenanters. He attended their meetings; met with their ministers; and studied what they stood for. While he was still only nineteen years old, Renwick saw several Covenanters martyred in Edinburgh. He was among those who lifted the mutilated bodies, taking down heads, hands and other body parts from the city gates, and burying them. He even witnessed the martyrdom of Donald Cargill. It was that event that persuaded Renwick to join the Covenanters.

Ministry

Shortly after throwing his lot in with the Covenanters, Renwick was sent to Holland with several other men to study for the ministry, and on 10th May 1683, he was ordained as a minister of the Gospel.

Returning to Scotland in September 1683, he began travelling around preaching and ministering to societies of Covenanters. However, his ministry was to be very short. Renwick spent only five years ministering, yet it was said that “each year was worth seven”³. He was extremely busy, “pastoring upwards of eighty societies with a very widely scattered membership of seven thousand men, besides women and children.”⁴ It is said that within a few months he baptized more than six hundred children!⁵ Frequent mention is made by those who heard him of his abilities to preach and teach. One historian speaks of the “silvery tones of his voice, which reached and penetrated their hearts with a wonderfully persuasive power”. He very quickly became a favourite preacher among many of the persecuted Covenanters. As Carslaw states, “What lay at the root of Renwick’s character, both as a man and a preacher, was his passionate love for Christ and the souls of men. This appeared in his preaching, which often succeeded in moving the multitude to tears.”

We shouldn’t forget that the conditions were not easy. Renwick regularly preached in the open air, and often at night, subject to all changes of the weather. Not least, there was the fear of persecution. However, he was extremely brave, and even after most people had stopped holding their field meetings, “one individual alone continued to outbrave the government by persevering in the practice. This was Mr. James Renwick.”⁶

Throughout his entire ministry, Renwick was intensely persecuted. In fact no other Covenanter was so hotly and cruelly pursued. At one time the persecution against him was so furious that, in less than five months, fifteen searches were made for him.⁷ However, “he made so many hairbreadth escapes that he seemed to bear a charmed life.”⁸ Such was the demand for Renwick’s life that on October 18th, 1687, the Government offered a reward of £100 to anyone who would bring him in, dead or alive.

Trial and Execution

It wasn't long before the reward was paid. On January 31st 1688, while staying in the house of a friend, an officer on the watch for smuggled goods heard family prayer in the house, and suspected the voice was that of Renwick. Before long, the house was surrounded by soldiers. Renwick attempted to escape but was badly injured, preventing him from running away as he had done so often before. He was arrested and brought to trial where those who arrested him were surprised at his youthful appearance. In fact one of them said, "Is this the boy Renwick, that the whole nation is so troubled with?" – to which Renwick replied with only a quiet smile.⁹

Renwick was sentenced to be hanged in the Grassmarket, Edinburgh on the 17th February 1688, just a few days after his twenty-sixth birthday. When asked if he desired longer time he replied, "It is all one to me; if the time is protracted, it is welcome; if it is shortened, it is welcome too. My Master's time is the best."¹⁰ While he waited for the date, many attempts were made to shake his faith and resolve. "Several petitions were written for him, but he refused to sign any of them. It was at one time proposed to him, that his dropping a few drops of ink on paper would be sufficient: this however, he promptly refused, alleging that it would be so far an owning of wicked authority, and a renunciation of his whole testimony."¹¹

On the morning of his execution he was allowed to be with his mother and sisters for a short time. (His father had died before James was fourteen years of age.) During this time, we get a glimpse of his comprehension of the hope and joy that were set before him. Giving thanks for the food in their presence, he said, "O Lord, thou hast brought me within two hours of eternity, and this is no matter of terror to me, more than if I were to lie down in a bed of roses; nay, through grace, to thy praise, I may say I never had the fear of death, since I came to this prison; but from the place where I was taken, I could have gone very composedly to the scaffold. O how can I contain this, to be within two hours of the crown of glory."¹²

Hearing the drums beating for his execution he smiled, shouting in triumphant joy, "Yonder is my welcome call to the marriage. The Bridegroom is coming. I am ready."¹³ On the scaffold he sang from Psalm 103 and read from Revelation 19, and prayed. Having been led up the ladder he spoke his last words: "Lord, into Thy hand I commend my spirit, for Thou hast redeemed me, Lord God of truth."¹⁴

He was the last Covenanter to be publicly put to death for his faith.

Conclusion

James Renwick died before he saw his prayers answered. Only a few months after his death, the principles for which he had laid down his life were recognised as the foundation of the revolution settlement. Not even before he had been dead a year, the despised and persecuted Covenanters were given the distinguished honour of being called to Edinburgh to protect the Parliament whilst deliberating on the transfer of the Scottish crown.

James Renwick was only ever a young man, but his legacy lives on. In every way his exceptional life and career from first to last were remarkable. We would do well to follow the inspired advice from the writer to the Hebrews: "*Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith*" (Heb. 13:7).

References

¹ John H. Thompson, *A Cloud of Witnesses*, p. 473

² John H. Thompson, *A Cloud of Witnesses*, p. 473

³ Jock Purves, *Fair Sunshine – Character Studies of the Scottish Covenanters*, p. 90

⁴ Jock Purves, *Fair Sunshine – Character Studies of the Scottish Covenanters*, p. 90

⁵ W. H. Carshaw, *Heroes of the Covenant – Life and Times of James Renwick*, p. 27

⁶ Thomas McCrie, *The Story of the Scottish Church*, p. 376

⁷ John Howie, *The Scots Worthies*, p. 538

⁸ James Taylor, *The Scottish Covenanters*, p. 179

⁹ Thomas Houston, *The Life of James Renwick*, p. 40

¹⁰ Thomas Houston, *The Life of James Renwick*, p. 42

¹¹ Thomas Houston, *The Life of James Renwick*, p. 42

¹² Jock Purves, *Fair Sunshine – Character Studies of the Scottish Covenanters*, p. 102

¹³ Thomas Houston, *The Life of James Renwick*, p. 44

¹⁴ Jock Purves, *Fair Sunshine – Character Studies of the Scottish Covenanters*, p. 105