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## “Sweet for Jesus’ Sake”: The Life of Abraham Cheare

SEVERAL MONTHS BEFORE HIS premature death at the age of forty-one, Abraham Cheare (1626–1668) and his imprisoned friends received an unexpected gift of provisions that brightened their spirits. Though the “costly present” was given anonymously, Cheare and his friends were touched by those “whose hearts have made them willing, under the bounteous influences of the God of Israel, to comfort the hearts of the unworthy prisoners of the Lord in Plymouth Island.”<sup>1</sup> They expressed their gratitude in a letter penned by Cheare for their givers’ “holy liberality” and “expression of your sympathy.”<sup>2</sup> In this letter, Cheare took the opportunity to inscribe a pastoral prayer for these benevolent saints. He prayed that they would obtain even “greater advances toward newness of heart,” “greater approaches in a way of heavenliness and nearness to the Lord,” and “right waitings for, and waitings on the Spirit of promise.”<sup>3</sup> This small incident aptly illustrates Cheare’s ability to draw rich spiritual applications from events in his life of suffering, a recurring practice throughout his life and evidence of his fervent piety.

As noted in the Introduction, English Baptist ministers of the seventeenth century have largely been overlooked in historical research. Yet from this period came men who exemplified a deep piety amidst intense suffering. Such a man was Abraham Cheare, a Baptist minister who labored in the middle part of the seventeenth century.<sup>4</sup> About half of Cheare’s life as a

1. Cheare, *Words in Season*, 287.

2. *Ibid.*, 288, 291.

3. *Ibid.*, 291–92.

4. Various spellings of his name can be found, including Cheere, Chare, Chere, and Chaire. “Cheare” is by far the most common.

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pastor entailed bitter suffering, in which he experienced the consequences of refusing to yield to those who would silence his preaching. Yet despite this fire of suffering, Cheare's life exuded a warm piety, which is still accessible in his extant writings. His writings are permeated by a sweetness that can yield an enriching experience for fellow pilgrims of a later generation. Close scrutiny and reflection on Cheare's life as found in his works provide a model on how to suffer well, embracing "the presence of a gracious God . . . [that] makes the bitter of the rod, be sweet for Jesus' sake."<sup>5</sup>

### The Early Particular Baptists

The formation of the very first Particular Baptist church in Wapping, London, around 1638, when John Spilsbury (1593–1668) led a body of believers out of the Jacob-Lathrop-Jessey church, paved the way for a number of Particular Baptist churches to be established across the British Isles in a relatively brief span of time. The Jacob-Lathrop-Jessey church, established in 1616 by Henry Jacob, thus became the fountain-head of the Particular Baptist heritage. The ecclesiological position of the Jacob-Lathrop-Jessey Church was one of association and cooperation with other Puritan churches, regardless of their ties to the Church of England. While other Separatists felt that partnership with any Puritan church that remained within the Church of England was to disobey biblical commands to separate, the leadership of the Jacob-Lathrop-Jessey Church felt that it was indeed right to continue fellowship with these Puritan churches because they were true churches. It was from within this circle that Spilsbury led a group out in order to establish a church in Wapping after he and those who went with him became convinced that paedobaptism was unbiblical.

By the mid-1640s, there were seven Particular Baptist churches in London. And sixteen years later that number had blossomed to 130 in the British Isles.<sup>6</sup> It is amazing that the British Civil Wars (1642–1651), though devastating to the country, did not disrupt the early growth of the Particular Baptists. Due to the fact that the Particular Baptist churches were the target of criticism and false accusations, Particular Baptist leaders drew up a doctrinal statement of fifty-three articles for the purpose of clarifying their doctrinal position. This *First London Confession of Faith* of 1644, published

5. Cheare and Jessey, *A Looking-Glass for Children*, 41.

6. Haykin, *Kiffin, Knollys and Keach*, 40.

two years later in a second edition, was drafted by Spilsbury, William Kiffin (1616–1701), and Samuel Richardson (1602–1658).<sup>7</sup> The hallmark of early Particular Baptist doctrine, the *Confession* played a significant role in the formation of Baptist doctrine and practice. While this work was intended to be apologetic in nature, since the Particular Baptists had been severely attacked by scathing charges from their opponents concerning doctrine and behavior, it also set the doctrinal parameters for the Baptist movement.

The first set of charges from the critics concerned Particular Baptist soteriology, namely, that they believed in free will, falling from grace, and original sin. Clearly, these critics had mistaken them for the General Baptists, who were Arminian, for Articles V, XXII, and XXIII attested to these Baptists’ conviction with regard to God’s sovereignty, perseverance of the saints, and original sin.<sup>8</sup> Second, it was believed that the Particular Baptists were revolutionaries and rabble-rousers, akin to some of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists on the European continent. The Anabaptists had garnered a reputation for fanaticism and violence due to the Münster incident of 1535 when Anabaptists seized the town and governed it with violence and as a theocracy. This was not the kind of image the English Baptists of the seventeenth century desired to have emblazoned on people’s memories regarding themselves.<sup>9</sup> The authors of the *Confession* responded to this charge by clearly disassociating themselves from the contumacious tendencies of some of the Continental Anabaptists. The third charge was also serious and involved issues of morality. Opponents accused the Particular Baptists of sexual immorality and indecency in the act of baptism including being “stark naked, not only when they flock in great multitudes, men and women together, to their Jordans to be dipped; but also upon other occasions, when the season permits.”<sup>10</sup> Again, this charge was shown to be groundless. In codifying Particular Baptist doctrine and practice, the *Confession* was therefore in part an attempt to demonstrate these

7. *Ibid.*, 33

8. *Ibid.*

9. As late as 1761, the Münster incident was still being associated with the Baptists. John Martin (1741–1820), a High Calvinist minister in London, in *Some Account of the Life and Writings of the Rev. John Martin*, 48–50, admitted that the “frightful tales” of the infamous revolt was a hindrance to his conversion to Baptist doctrine. His memoir gives further credence to the fact that the English Baptists did not see themselves originating from the Anabaptists and their “wild and extravagant notions,” from which they sought to distance themselves.

10. A charge made by Daniel Featley (1582–1645), cited by Haykin, *Kiffin, Knollys and Keach*, 34.

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false accusations “as notoriously untrue” and to quell the brouhaha that had ensued about the presence of their congregations in the city.<sup>11</sup> It is in this turbulent era for the Particular Baptists that the ministry of Abraham Cheare needs to be placed.

### Early Life and Ministry

Born in Plymouth “of mean yet honest parentage,” Abraham Cheare was baptized as an infant on 28 May 1626.<sup>12</sup> The entries in the record books of St. Andrew’s Church indicate that his parents, John Cheare and Joane Norbroncke, were married on 18 January 1617 at St. Andrew’s Church in Plymouth.<sup>13</sup> The younger Cheare had four older siblings: Elizabeth, Joane, John, and John.<sup>14</sup> He was raised by his parents “in the poor yet honest trade of a fuller,” his father also being a fuller.<sup>15</sup> Not much is known of his parents, other than the mention of his father leasing some tucking mills in Plymouth, one of which was the Western Fulling Mill.<sup>16</sup> Cheare’s youth remains obscure, though it is known that he never received a university education, having been confined to Plymouth to work with his father.<sup>17</sup> Nathan Brookes, the publisher of one of his books, noted that his parents were also believers who took care to nurture their son in God’s ways.<sup>18</sup> Cheare rarely left Plymouth with the exception of some brief journeys and his imprisonment.<sup>19</sup> There is no indication that Cheare ever married. Cheare did have some nieces and nephews, as at least one of his two sisters was married.<sup>20</sup>

11. *London Baptist Confession of Faith*, <http://www.spurgeon.org/~phil/creeds/bc1644.htm>.

12. Nicholson, *A History of the Baptist Church Now Meeting in George Street Chapel, Plymouth from 1620*, 17; Foster, “Early Baptist Writers of Verse,” 95. Foster mistakenly identifies this date as Cheare’s actual birth date.

13. Nicholson, *History*, 17. We are indebted to Mr. Thomas Maddock of Plymouth who graciously provided us with a copy of the original entry from the church record books in the Plymouth and West Devon Records Office, Plymouth.

14. Nicholson, *History*, 17. The third child, John, was buried on 17 December 1622 shortly before his second birthday. The cause of death is unknown.

15. Nicholson, *History*, 16.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Cheare, “Post-script” to his *Words in Season*, 293.

18. Cheare, “The Publisher to the Reader” in *Words in Season*, [6].

19. Cheare, “Post-script” to his *Words in Season*, 293.

20. Cheare, *Words in Season*, 186.

During the tense times of the British Civil Wars, Plymouth, with its many formidable forts, became the object of a number of unsuccessful sieges and blockades due to its staunch support of the Parliamentary cause. Charles I (r.1625–1649) arrived at Plymouth with his Royalist troops in 1644 and established his headquarters nearby.<sup>21</sup> Cheare never enlisted in the Parliamentary army, though he did serve for a period of time in the local militia of Plymouth.<sup>22</sup> He also served as a military chaplain against his will for just a few weeks and was able to obtain a discharge from that role.<sup>23</sup> Around 1648, Cheare was baptized as a believer and “joined himself in an holy covenant, to walk in all the ordinances of the Lord blameless, to the best of his light and power, in fellowship with a poor and despised people.”<sup>24</sup> This “poor and despised people” with whom he entered into fellowship was the Calvinistic Baptist church in Plymouth.<sup>25</sup> That same year he was called to minister to this church and was ordained.<sup>26</sup> One hundred and fifty members affixed their signatures to the church record books in approval of their new minister.<sup>27</sup>

## Imprisonment and Exile

Oliver Cromwell’s death in 1658 terminated the short-lived Commonwealth, shattering the dreams of Nonconformist toleration and plunging England again into political turmoil. The Restoration of the Stuart monarchy with the ascension of Charles II (r.1660–1685) to the throne in 1660 began an era of severe persecution for the Nonconformists and their ministers. The

21. Nicholson, *History*, 14.

22. Cheare, “Post-script” to his *Words in Season*, 293.

23. *Ibid.*, 294.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Nicholson, *History*, 14; see a photo of George Street Baptist Chapel, Plymouth at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/plymouthhistory/6003709582/>. The church was established in 1620 according to the church record books, though nothing else is known regarding its formation or any of Cheare’s predecessors, Cheare being the first recorded minister. The church later became George Street Baptist Church. The church was bombed by the Nazi *Luftwaffe* during the Blitz of Plymouth on 21 March 1941. The life of the church continues in the present day at Catherine Street Baptist Church in Plymouth City Centre. We are indebted to Rev. Veronica Campbell, present minister of the church, for confirming these details.

26. Nicholson, *History*, 15.

27. *Ibid.*

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purpose of this persecution was to restore the status of the state church as the only religious body of the land and so maintain its supremacy in all religious affairs of the nation. This situation was exacerbated by Thomas Venner (d.1661), a minister of the Swan Alley congregation in London, who launched a public rebellion in 1661, prompting the monarchy to suppress all Nonconformists.<sup>28</sup> Venner belonged to the Fifth Monarchy movement, which, on the basis of a distinct reading of Daniel 2, believed that Jesus was about to return to establish his millennial kingdom and that its coming could be hastened by military action. Though definitely not of this persuasion, Cheare was arrested in 1661 for “encouraging religious assemblies” and imprisoned for three months in Exeter.<sup>29</sup> Charles II’s coronation on 23 April 1661 brought a temporary respite to nonconformist ministers, including Cheare, who were released from their imprisonment. It was not long, however, until Puritanism within the Church of England was dealt a fatal blow with the passing of the Act of Uniformity on 19 May 1662 and its subsequent execution on 24 August 1662, St. Bartholomew’s Day, leading to the Great Ejection of upwards of two thousand ministers who refused to give “unfeigned assent and consent to all and everything contained and prescribed in and by . . . the Book of Common Prayer.”<sup>30</sup>

Cheare refused to subscribe to the provisions of the Act, including taking the Oath of Allegiance and was imprisoned again in 1662 for holding “unlawful assemblies” and for refusing “to conform to the laws of the Established Church.”<sup>31</sup> His imprisonment in the Exeter jail would last for three grueling years in which he suffered “under very hard circumstances, enduring many inhumanities from merciless goalers.”<sup>32</sup> In the meantime, Cheare’s congregation suffered bitterly at the hands of the Plymouth au-

28. For details of Venner’s Rebellion including his trial and death sentence, see *The last Speech and Prayer with other Passages of Thomas Venner*. For Venner’s thinking, see Bernard Capp, “A Door of Hope Re-opened,” 16–30. Interestingly enough, Cheare did associate with a Fifth Monarchist, Thomas Glasse (d. 1666), who co-signed Cheare’s *Sighs for Sion* and for whom Cheare wrote a lengthy elegy at the time of his death entitled “A Mourner’s Mite” (*Looking-Glass*, 89–93). However, there is no evidence at all that Cheare accepted the beliefs or revolutionary practices of the Fifth Monarchy movement.

29. Ivimey, *A History of English Baptists*, 2:104.

30. Cited in White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, 103. For details of the Act of Uniformity and its consequences upon unlicensed preachers, see F. A. [pseud.], *A Letter from a Gentleman in Grayes-Inn, to a Justice of the Peace in the Country*.

31. Cited in Nicholson, *Authentic Records Relating to the Christian Church*, 16.

32. Cheare, *Words in Season*, 175.

thorities in 1662–1663, with many congregants being imprisoned alongside Cheare.<sup>33</sup> The mayor of Plymouth in these years was William Jennens (1614–c.1687), who was a zealot when it came to the suppression of Non-conformity and Cheare and his fellow Baptists could expect no mercy under his regime.<sup>34</sup> Though permanently hindered from ministering to his congregation, Cheare’s affection for and interest in his people remained unabated. In fact, on his deathbed he admitted that “he had oft, since his sickness, on his bed, beggd of God, that the Lord the God of the spirits of all flesh, would send a man over that church.”<sup>35</sup>

Though his pulpit and on-site pastoral ministry were permanently muzzled, Cheare continued his ministry to his congregation and friends by drafting correspondence to them and composing poetry in his prison cell. These prison writings were compiled posthumously in *Words in Season* and *A Looking-Glass For Children*. What is striking about these writings is their transparency and the acute anguish that Cheare did not hesitate to express. During his time in prison, he was given a couple of opportunities to take the Oath of Allegiance, which would have restored him back to his pulpit in Plymouth, but he rejected these offers.<sup>36</sup> In 1663 at the Midsummer Sessions, Cheare was charged with praemunire—a travesty of the law—and as a result, all of his property was confiscated and he was once again subject to imprisonment.<sup>37</sup> Cheare was permitted to leave his cell in August 1665 and went to Plymouth in order to stay with one of his sisters.<sup>38</sup> His enemies, eager to have him banished for good, reported him to the local magistrates who re-arrested him only a month after his release. He was confined in the Guildhall at Plymouth for the month of September.<sup>39</sup> And on 27 September

33. Nicholson, *History*, 43; Rippon, *The Baptist Annual Register*, 3:276–85. The church at Plymouth endured intense persecution from local authorities for over twenty years. The church was without a minister until 30 November 1687 when they called Robert Brown (d. 1688) to be their pastor. The church membership had dwindled to sixty-six by that time. For details on this period of the church’s history, see Nicholson, *History*, 73–75.

34. Gill, *Plymouth*, 162–63.

35. Cheare, *Words in Season*, 176.

36. Foster, “Early Baptist Writers of Verse,” 98. On Cheare’s own views of accepting offers of deliverance, see *Words in Season*, 56–63. Cheare stated that when believers receive an unconditional offer of deliverance that does not violate the Scriptures, it is “a very high duty incumbent” on them to accept such an offer.

37. Foster, “Early Baptist Writers of Verse,” 98.

38. Rippon, *Baptist Annual Register*, 3:276.

39. For a description of the squalid conditions and dimensions of the Guildhall in

1665, Cheare was transported to exile for life on Drake's Island just off the coast in Plymouth Sound.<sup>40</sup>

Within several days of his arrival on the Island, he contracted a "violent sickness" that took such a toll on his body that his health was permanently shattered.<sup>41</sup> For the next two and a half years he was alone in his cell, suffering both physically and emotionally, yet composing voluminously. As he confessed: "the salt sharp air is manifestly ruinous to my health, exposing me (more than ever I was in my life) to daily distempers."<sup>42</sup> In the main, though, those years were uneventful with the exception of "threatened transportation" to one of England's newly acquired islands in the West Indies in 1666.<sup>43</sup>

This "threatened transportation" had its roots in the Conventicle Act of 1664, which was designed to regulate worship and curb ongoing meetings by Nonconformists.<sup>44</sup> One of the penalties of violating the provisions of the Act was seven years of exile to the West Indies to join African slaves in working on the sugar plantations. These years saw the rise of the sugar trade, with sugar becoming increasingly a staple commodity in England. More workers were needed to assist the African slaves, and sending the recalcitrant Nonconformists was far less expensive than sailing to West Africa to acquire more slaves. No doubt, this was unnerving to Cheare and other Nonconformists, because at least in prison they were able to derive solace from writing letters to their family and friends. In the West Indies, that would no longer be possible. The possibility of transportation appears to have caused much angst for Cheare. The threat never materialized, how-

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Plymouth, see Nicholson, *History*, 49–50.

40. For information on Drake's Island, see "Fortifications: 1600–1699" from Drake's Island Plymouth website: <http://www.drakesislandplymouth.co.uk/#/fortifications/4547113160>. Drake's Island, known as St. Nicholas Island at the time, had been used as a Parliamentarian fort to defend Plymouth from Royalist attack during the English Civil War. It was transformed into a prison in 1661 for Nonconformists and political opponents of the Crown. Cheare is recorded as the last prisoner of Drake's Island. Thereafter, the island resumed its former status as a military fort. See Nicholson, *History*, 51.

Cheare was not the only minister from Plymouth imprisoned on Drake's Island. George Hughes (1603–1667), the Puritan vicar of St. Andrew's Church, and his lecturer, Thomas Martyn, were also prisoners.

41. Cheare, *Words in Season*, 175.

42. *Ibid.*, 265.

43. *Ibid.*, 265; Nicholson, *History*, 54.

44. For information on the Conventicle Act, see White, *English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, 105–7, 109–13; Spence, *The Church of England*, 170.

ever, for reasons that are not known, but judging from Cheare’s other letters around this period, his health was so poor that he would have been hardly fit to labor in West Indian sugar cane fields. Cheare’s health continued to deteriorate and his sister and certain friends were permitted to attend to him in his island cell during his final days.<sup>45</sup> He passed away peacefully from this life on 5 March 1668 at the age of forty-one.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion

Though brief, his life appeared to be one of fervent piety, shaped especially by his sufferings. His robust determination to submit to adverse circumstances in spite of separation from his congregation and the failure of his health was remarkable. To “kiss the rod” of suffering revealed a courageous and humble spirit, not one merely resigned to fate, but one driven by faith to “embrace the sentence of a gibbet, a stake, a rack, an ax, an halter, a transportation into exile” if there is no possible way of escape.<sup>47</sup> It was an act of a “poor captive” to “abandon other lords [and] to Jesus bow,” because, in the end, he was bound not to Parliament, but to the “most glorious Sovereign” to whom he vowed, “here am I, let him do with me what seemeth good in his sight.”<sup>48</sup>

45. Cheare, *Words in Season*, 175–217. Cheare’s sister was unidentified in his final words. She was apparently married with children. She evidently broke down in tears several times in grief to see Cheare in his dying state. At one occasion there were five others in the cell with him: a fellow believer, a maid, a nurse, a friend, and his own sister.

46. *Ibid.*, 217; Nicholson, *History*, 59; Foster, “Early Baptist Writers of Verse,” 95. Brookes, in *Words in Season*, records “the 5th day of the first Month, 1668.” Up to 1752, the calendar year in England began in March. Foster states that his death was “5 March, 1667–8.” The year was certainly not 1667, because Cheare composed some letters in the latter part of 1667.

47. Cheare, *Words in Season*, 101.

48. Cheare, *Looking-Glass*, 87–88; *idem*, *Words in Season*, 47.