Introduction

The history of the Baptists' reception of their own past is a fascinating one in its own right. Most of the Baptist works of the seventeenth century were never reprinted and consequently a significant amount of their thought was obscure to their eighteenth-century heirs. To be sure, there was a certain amount of reflection on the past by eighteenth-century authors like Thomas Crosby (1683–c. 1751) and Joseph Ivimey (1773–1834), both of whom wrote important histories of the English Baptists. But it was the Victorian Baptists who really began to delve into Baptist history and that for a variety of reasons. First, the Victorians in general were fascinated by the past—a fascination that is quite foreign to the modern mindset. Then, in England the exploration of Baptist history was linked to the realization in the 1850s of the strength of the Nonconformist cause and became a vehicle to express Baptist pride. In America, on the other hand, Baptist interest in the past was used by many to prove (or disprove) the theology of Landmarkism and to counteract Campbellism. Then came the twentieth century, which was probably the worst of all centuries for remembering the past. After World War I the ambience in the West was increasingly one in which the past was seen as old lumber to be discarded to make way for new perspectives, in the very same way that Victorian Gothic buildings were being leveled to make way for Art Deco and postmodernist structures. The past fifty years, though, have witnessed a renaissance of interest in the Puritans, both in regard to academic scholarship and popular literature, but this renaissance seems to have bypassed the Baptists. Nearly all of the Puritan figures who are being studied or read are either Presbyterians or Congregationalists. With the exception of the celebrated John Bunyan (1628–1688), rediscovered to a great extent by the Victorians, and to a lesser degree, Hanserd Knollys (1599–1691), William Kiffin (1616–1701) and Benjamin Keach (1640–1704), the Baptists of the seventeenth century have been largely forgotten. Thankfully this is changing, however, as Baptist

scholars are rediscovering their forebears. And among these forebears is the subject of this small book, Abraham Cheare (1626–1668).

Why should an early twenty-first-century Christian take the time to learn about Abraham Cheare and read the portions of his writings contained in this small book? Well, first of all, suffering in prison for religious beliefs, as he did for eight years until it killed him, is not foreign to the modern world. Around the world, there are numerous contexts where religious toleration is all but non-existent and men and woman have to seriously count the cost if they wish to be public about their convictions. Even in the west an increasingly intolerant cultural elite are targeting the church and seeking to muzzle Christian witness. Here then, Cheare can help us enormously, for Cheare was a Puritan and after 1660, when the Anglican state church sought to extirpate Puritanism, Cheare and many others knew firsthand what it was to suffer for Christ's sake. His example and writings in this regard are tremendously helpful in forging a theology of suffering for Christians undergoing the same today.

Then, Cheare, above all things, sought to be guided by the Scriptures, not simply when it came to church polity but in all of his life. His life and writings exemplify what "being biblical" looks like. In this regard, then, he is a quintessential Puritan, for Puritanism was above all things a movement that sought to be Word-centered. Modern-day Christians would not cross every "t" and dot every "i" the way Cheare does; but his passion to be found living in accord with the Scriptures is certainly worthy of imitation. There is also a transparency about Cheare that is very refreshing: witness his account of the healing of a Captain Langdon and his hesitancy to baptize him in his letter that is found in chapter 4.

And simply reading the past for its own sake is important, for there we see God at work in the hurly-burly of life. To quote Richard Baxter (1615–1691), the Puritan contemporary of Cheare who also suffered for the sake of the gospel: "[T]he writing of church-history is the duty of all ages, because God's works are to be known, as well as his Word . . . He that knoweth not what state the church and world is in, and hath been in, in former ages, and what God hath been doing in the world, and how error and sin have been resisting him, and with what success, doth want much to the completing of his knowledge."[1] When the name of Abraham Cheare was recently mentioned to a close friend who is no stranger to the history of Christianity, he admitted he had never heard of Cheare and thought a study

1. Baxter, *The Life of Faith*, 364.

of his life might be somewhat "esoteric." Well, here is his life, some aspects of his theology, and especially his thinking about what it means to suffer for the sake of Christ: you, the reader, can judge whether the relative obscurity of this man and his thought lessens his importance as a witness (*martys*) for the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Note: In our citations from Cheare's writings, we have modernized archaic spellings and we've brought biblical citations into accord with the modern use of Arabic numerals.