

“The spirit of glory & of God rests on me”



THE EXPERIENCE OF FOUR SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY BAPTISTS IN THE FIRES OF PERSECUTION

Persecution and martyrdom are perennial features of the church’s existence in this world. Numerous New Testament passages bear out this fact. Consider 1 Peter 4:12-19, for example. Some of Peter’s readers were being mocked and ridiculed for being Christians. And so Peter encourages them not to be ashamed of being associated with Christ. To be reviled for the sake of His name is evidence that living in them is Christ’s Spirit, the Spirit of glory, the greatest blessing a man or woman can experience in this life.

Or ponder Acts 14:19-22. After having survived an attempt on the part of certain Jews to kill him and so silence his preaching the gospel of a crucified and risen Lord, the Apostle Paul told the disciples in various congregations that he had planted in what is now Turkey that “we must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.”

Or what about these words of the Lord Jesus in John 15:18-21. To be a Christian is to follow the path that our

Lord Jesus trod. If the world hated Him and put Him to death—as it did—Christians ought not to be surprised that the world hates them and persecutes them and puts some of them to death.

The historical experience of the church down through the centuries has indeed been one of persecution and its concomitant, martyrdom. And although my focus is going to be on one

specific period of this history, we need to recognize that this is not merely an issue of the past, as other articles in this issue make clear. In fact, currently it is estimated that there are tens of thousands of martyrs every year around the world!¹

Now, the period that I wish to look at is the era of Baptist origins in the seventeenth century. The Baptist movement had emerged from the womb of British Puritanism in the early to mid-seventeenth century. In the 1640s and 1650s that strand of Baptist witness called the Particular Baptists—from which the vast majority of Baptists in the English-speaking world are descended—grew from seven congregations in London in 1644 to roughly 130 in 1660. This was the era of the English Civil War and the Commonwealth—when England was ruled by Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) and when there was a real measure of religious freedom for those who did not worship at the local Church of England parish.

With the death of Cromwell in 1658, however, there was the growing fear of anarchy by the army generals who had fought beside him. In desperation, they committed themselves to the restoration of the monarchy in the person of Charles II (1660-1685), the so-called “Merry Monarch.” Those who came to power with Charles were determined to destroy the power of the Puritans and all of their offspring, including the Baptists.

To achieve their end they passed an extensive piece of legislation known as the Clarendon Code (1661-1670) that sought to effectively nullify all of the church communities outside of the Established Church, the Church of England. The result was that the Particular Baptists and others like the Presbyterians and Congregationalists—all of whom col-



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lectively became known as Dissenters—became second-class citizens. Between 1660 and 1688 Baptists—together with these other Dissenters—who refused to go along with these laws often ended up paying substantial fines or experiencing life-threatening imprisonment.

Let us look at four Baptists who experienced persecution in this period.

1. JOHN BUNYAN (1628-1688)

Bunyan was one of the first Baptists arrested for preaching. On November 12, 1660, he was scheduled to speak to a small group at a farmhouse in the hamlet called Lower Samsell, near Harlington, Bedfordshire. Even though a warrant had been issued for his arrest, he decided to go ahead and preach, for he was convinced that in preaching he was doing nothing wrong. The state, though, thought otherwise, and he was arrested just after he had opened God's Word to read the text on which he was going to preach.

When Bunyan was put on trial he was accused of having broken the Elizabethan Conventicle Act of 1593 which specified that anyone who “devilishly and perniciously abstained from coming to Church [i.e. the Church of England] to hear Divine Service” and who was an “upholder of...unlawful meetings and conventicles” could be held without bail until he or she agreed to submit the authorities of the Anglican Church.² In the eyes of the authorities Bunyan was an uneducated, unordained common “mechanic.” And so it was made clear to Bunyan that he would be released if he promised to desist from preaching.

Bunyan, though, had a higher loyalty than obedience to an earthly monarch—obedience to King Jesus. Bunyan, like the majority of his fellow Baptists, believed in obedience to the laws of the state and he emphasized that he looked upon it as his duty to behave himself under the King's government both as becomes a man and a Christian. But Bunyan knew that the Spirit of God had given him a gift for preaching, a gift that been confirmed by the congregation of which he was a member. In Bunyan's own words: “The Holy Ghost never intended that men who have gifts and abilities should bury them in the earth.”³ For Bunyan those imbued with the gifts of the Holy Spirit to preach had no choice but to exercise the gifts that God had given them.

During his trial, Bunyan defended his right to preach by quoting 1 Peter 4:10-11. Those judging his case maintained that only those ordained by the Church of England could lawfully preach. Bunyan's disagreement was rooted in the fact that for him the ultimate authority in religious matters was not human tradition or human laws, but the Scriptures and their author, God. Bunyan had to obey his God, otherwise on the day of judgement he would be counted a traitor to Christ.

Excellent insight into Bunyan's convictions comes from the record of an appeal that his wife—his second wife,



Elizabeth Bunyan (d.1692), whom he married in 1659 and who showed tremendous reserves of courage during her husband's imprisonment—made on his behalf in August 1661. It is a text that also tells us much about her own spiritual stature.

There were at least three judges present who heard Elizabeth's appeal: Matthew Hale, a Christian who clearly sympathized with Elizabeth, but who disagreed with her husband's dogged determination to preach; Thomas Twisden, a harsh man and very opposed to the gospel; and Henry Chester.

Justice Chester: My Lord, Bunyan is a pestilent fellow; there is not another such fellow in the country.

Judge Twisden (to Elizabeth): What! will your husband leave preaching? If he will do so, then send for him.

Elizabeth: My lord, he dares not leave preaching so long as he can speak.

Judge Twisden: See here! what should we talk any more about such a fellow! Must he do what he lists? He is a breaker of the peace.

Elizabeth: He desires to live peaceably and to follow his calling, that his family may be maintained. Moreover, my Lord, I have four small children that cannot help themselves, one of which is blind, and we have nothing to live upon but the charity of good people.

Judge Hale: Hast thou four children? thou art but a young woman to have four children.

Elizabeth: I am but mother-in-law to them, having not been married to my husband yet full two years. Indeed I was with child when my husband was first apprehended; but being young and unaccustomed to such things, I being swayed [i.e. dismayed] at the news, fell into labour, and so continued for eight days, and then was delivered, but my child died.

Judge Hale: Alas! poor woman!

Judge Twisden: You make poverty your cloak. I understand that your husband is maintained better by running up and down a-preaching than by following his calling.

Judge Hale: What is his calling?

A stander-by: A tinker, my lord.

Elizabeth: Yes, and because he is a tinker and a poor man, therefore he is despised and cannot have justice.

Judge Hale: I tell thee, woman, seeing it is so that they have taken what thy husband said for a conviction, thou must either apply thyself to the king, or sue out his pardon, or get a writ of error.

Justice Chester: My lord, he will preach and do what he lists.

Elizabeth: He preacheth nothing but the Word of God.

Judge Twisden: He preach the Word of God! He runneth up and down, and doeth harm.

Elizabeth: No, my lord, no! it is not so; God hath owned him, and done much good by him.

Judge Twisden (with an oath): His doctrine is the doctrine of the Devil.

Elizabeth: My lord, when the righteous Judge shall appear, it will be known that his doctrine is not the doctrine of the Devil.⁴

All told Bunyan spent twelve years in prison. “Oft I was as if I was on the Ladder, with the rope about my neck.”⁵ So John Bunyan later recalled his possible demise by hanging as he sat in prison during the 1660s. He was not set at full liberty until 1672.

2. WILLIAM MITCHEL (1662-1705)

As his imprisonment wore on year after year, Bunyan sought a deeper meaning for the suffering that he was going through. He eventually came to the conviction that “the church in the fire of persecution is like Esther in the perfuming chamber” [see Esther 2:12-13], being made “fit for the presence of the king.”

A good example of this understanding of persecution is Bunyan’s fellow Baptist, William Mitchel, a tireless evangelist in the Pennines from the Rossendale Valley in Lancashire to Rawdon in neighbouring West Yorkshire. Mitchel was born in 1662 at Heptonstall, not far from Hebden Bridge in Yorkshire. Nothing is really known about

his upbringing. His conversion came at the age of nineteen after the death of a brother. Although he was genuinely converted, Mitchel played what he later regarded as the part of a Jonah as he sought to go into business as a clothier and become wealthy.

But God frustrated his worldly ambitions and drew him out as a preacher of the gospel. Within four years of his conversion, he began to preach as an itinerant evangelist. His cousin, David Crosley (1669-1744), a stonemason turned preacher, tells us that Mitchel’s aim in his preaching was to “chiefly set forth the exceeding rich and free grace of the gospel, which toward him had been made so exceeding

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abundant.” At the same time, we are told that his Christian life was one of unwearied diligence in “reading, meditation, and prayer.”

Mitchel would travel with Crosley and others over the Pennines, often during the night so as to reach preaching venues in towns and villages by early morning. Crosley remembered the toil it took to walk “many miles in dark nights and over dismal mountains.” But he also never forgot Mitchel’s “savoury and edifying” preaching that took place anywhere Mitchel could get an audience, “on mountains, and in fields and woods.” Though Mitchel was not a polished speaker, crowds would press to hear him. Many merely came out of curiosity, some came to scoff. But, later when their hearts and consciences had been impacted by Mitchel’s gospel preaching, they confessed, “the Lord is with him of a truth.”

According to the Second Conventicle Act (1670), part of the Clarendon Code designed to break the spirit of the Dissenters, what Mitchel was doing was illegal. This act forbade any one over the age of sixteen from taking part in a religious assembly of more than five people, apart from those sanctioned by the Church of England. The act gave wide powers to local magistrates and judges to “suppresse [sic] and dissolve” such “unlawfull [sic] meetings” and arrest whomsoever they saw fit to achieve this end.

Mitchel was twice arrested under this law during the reign of James II (r.1685-1688), who succeeded Charles II

in 1685. On the first occasion he was treated with deliberate roughness and spent three months in jail at Goodshaw. On the second occasion he was arrested near Bradford and imprisoned for six months in York Castle.

The enemies of the gospel who imprisoned Mitchel might have thought they were shutting him up in a dismal dungeon. To Mitchel, though, as he told his friends in a letter written from York in the spring of 1687, the dungeon was a veritable “paradise, because the glorious presence of God is with me, & the Spirit of glory & of God rests on me.” He is, of course, quoting from 1 Peter 4:14. He had been given such a “glorious sight of [God’s] countenance, [and] bright splendour of his love,” that he was quite willing to “suffer afflictions with the people of God, & for his glorious Truth.”

In another letter, written to a Daniel Moore during this same imprisonment, Mitchel told him he had heard that James II had issued a Declaration of Indulgence, which pardoned all who had been imprisoned under the penal laws of the Clarendon Code. But he had yet to see it. Whatever the outcome, he told Moore, “the Lord’s will be done, let Him order things as may stand with His glory.”

This sentence speaks volumes about the frame of mind in which Mitchel had approached his time of imprisonment. He was God’s servant. God would do with him as He sovereignly thought best. And Mitchel was quite content with that, for, in his heart, he longed for his life to reflect above all God’s glory.⁶

3. BENJAMIN KEACH (1640-1704)

Benjamin Keach, the most important Baptist theologian of the late seventeenth century,⁷ found himself in trouble with the state on more than one occasion. For instance, in 1664 Keach was arrested on a charge of being “a seditious, heretical and schismatical person, evilly and maliciously disposed and disaffected to his Majesty’s government and the government of the Church of England.” It appears that a children’s primer which Keach had written containing reading lessons, simple instruction in punctuation and arithmetic, and lists of words of one, two, or three syllables had been read by the Anglican Rector of Stoke Hammond, Thomas Disney, and reported to the government authorities as not only unfit for children, but positively seditious. No copies of this primer exist today. At the time of his trial all copies of it were destroyed; though we are told Keach rewrote it later from memory and published it as *The Child’s Delight: or Instructions for Children and Youth*. The original primer was deemed heretical especially because of references to believer’s baptism and Keach’s interpretation of the Book of Revelation.⁸ Put on trial on October 8, 1664, Keach was found guilty, imprisoned for two weeks and fined £20, a considerable amount in those days for a poor Baptist preacher.

In addition to these punishments, Keach had to stand for

two periods of two hours each in the pillory, a wooden framework that had holes for the head and hands of the person being punished. Generally the pillory would be placed in the town or village square where the offender could also be subjected to various forms of public ridicule. On this occasion, however, Keach took the opportunity to preach to the crowd that gathered around. “Good people,” he began during his first time in the pillory, “I am not ashamed to stand here this day, ... my Lord Jesus was not ashamed to suffer on the cross for me; and it is for His cause that I am made a gazing-stock. Take notice, it is not for any wickedness that I stand here; but for writing and publishing His truths, which the Holy Spirit hath revealed in the Holy Scriptures.”

At this point a Church of England clergyman, possibly the local minister, sought to silence Keach by telling him that he was in the pillory for “writing and publishing errors.” Keach, recognizing a golden opportunity for public debate and witness, quickly replied, “Sir, can you prove them errors?” But before the clergyman could respond, he was rounded on by others in the crowd, who knew him to be a drunk. Keach proceeded to speak in defence of his convictions despite a couple of further attempts by the authorities to silence him. Eventually he was told that if he would not be silent, he would have to be gagged. After this he was silent except for his quoting of Matthew 5:10: “Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’s sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

On another occasion, when Keach was apprehended in the act of preaching by a troop of cavalrymen, four of them were so enraged with him that they swore that they would trample him to death with their horses. He was accordingly

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bound and forced to lie on the ground. But just as they were about to spur their horses down upon their victim, their commanding officer arrived and prevented them from harming Keach, who almost certainly would have been killed.

4. ABRAHAM CHEARE (d.1668)⁹

The early years of Abraham Cheare are obscure. One recent writer names his father as a John Cheare, who leased a couple of fulling mills built by the Elizabethan naval cap-

tain Sir Francis Drake at Plymouth.¹⁰ Cheare himself described his parents as “mean,” that is lowly in social standing, “yet honest.”¹¹ Nathan Brookes, the publisher of one of his books, notes that his parents were also believers who took care to nurture their son in God’s holy ways.¹²

Apart from a journey to London in the 1650s, Cheare appears to have spent the entirety of his life in the vicinity of Plymouth where he was born and raised. During the tumult and turbulence of the civil wars in the British Isles during the 1640s and 1650s he was able to avoid fighting

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with any of the armies, but he did serve for a time in the local militia at Plymouth.¹³ This was possibly during the long siege of Plymouth by the Royalist armies in 1643, a siege that failed to drive the Parliamentary troops out of the town or bring about its fall. At one point he also served as an army chaplain, but he was able to obtain a discharge after a few weeks.¹⁴

Around 1648, Cheare says that he was convinced “of his Duty to the Lord, by evidence of Scriptural Light” and he “joynd 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.”¹⁵ This “poor and despised People” were the Plymouth Calvinistic Baptists. If this congregation had a preacher before Cheare, his name has not come down to us. Cheare is the first known pastor of this congregation.

In the wake of the early 1660s reaction against the Puritans, though, he was arrested, cruelly treated and imprisoned on Drake’s Island, a small island in Plymouth Sound. Fearful that some of his flock might compromise their Baptist convictions to avoid persecution, he wrote a number of letters to his church during the course of his imprisonment.


In one of them he cites with approval a statement from the *Irenicum* (1646) of “holy Burroughs,” that is, the Puritan author Jeremiah Burroughs (c.1599-1646). “I desire to be a faithful Minister of Christ and His Church, if I cannot be a Prudent one,” Cheare quotes from Burroughs’ “Epistle to

the Reader,” “standing in the gap is more dangerous and troublsome [*sic*] than getting behind the hedge, there you may be more secure and under the wind; but it’s best to be there where God looks for a man.”¹⁶

Cheare himself was one who “stood in the gap,” for he died in 1668 while a prisoner for his Baptist convictions.

CONCLUSION

At the end of this period of persecution, this Baptist community had doubled in size, surely an indication that God honoured the witness and sufferings of these brothers—and those of many others—mentioned above. As the early Christian author Tertullian (fl.190-215) had rightly said: “the blood of the martyrs is seed,” that is, the seed of the Church.

May God give His people in our day a like tenacity of faith and boldness in witness. And so may we know that the “Spirit of glory and of God” rests on us! 

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1 David B. Barrett, “Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission: 1991”, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 15 (January, 1991), 24-25.

2 W.R. Owens, ed., *John Bunyan: Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1987), 127, n.137.

3 *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 270.

4 “Elizabeth Bunyan pleads with Judge Matthew Hale”, *The Bible League Quarterly*, 342 (July-September 1985), 345-346.

5 *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 335.

6 For access to these letters, I am indebted to the Local Studies Unit Archives, Manchester Central Library. The letters are kept in the Papers of Dr. William Farrer. Thanks are also due to David J. Woodruff of the Strict Baptist Historical Society who kindly provided me with a copy of the letters.

7 For the definitive life of Keach, see Austin Walker, *The Excellent Benjamin Keach* (Dundas, Ontario: Joshua Press, 2004), from which some of the following details of Keach’s life are taken..

8 On Keach’s eschatology, see Kenneth G.C. Newport, “Benjamin Keach, William of Orange and the Book of Revelation: A Study in English Prophetical Exegesis”, *The Baptist Quarterly*, 36 (1995-1996), 43-51.

9 On Cheare, see Joseph Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists* (London, 1814), II, 103-116.

10 C.E. Whiting, *Studies in English Puritanism from the Restoration to the Revolution, 1660-1688* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1968), 568-569.

11 “Post-script” to his *Words in Season* (London: Nathan Brookes, 1668), 293.

12 “The Publisher to the Reader” in *Words in Season*, (6).

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

14 “Post-script” to his *Words in Season*, 293-294.

15 “Post-script” to his *Words in Season*, 294.

16 *Words in Season*, 250.