

‘Bold as a lion’: The spirituality of Benjamin Keach

On 8-9 October 1664, three hundred and forty years ago, a young Christian man appeared before the Lord Chief Justice of England, at the Buckinghamshire Assizes in Aylesbury. The charge against him stated,

Thou art here indicted by the Name of *Benjamin Keach* of the Parish of *Winslow*, in the county of *Bucks*: For that thou 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*, didst’t maliciously and wickedly, on the 1st day of *May*, in the 16th Year¹ of the Reign of our Sovereign Lord the King, write, print and publish, or cause to be written, printed and published one Seditious and Venomous Book, entitled, *The Child’s Instructor; or, A New and Easy Primmer*; wherein are contained, by way of Question and Answer, these Damnable Positions, contrary to the Book of Common Prayer, and the Liturgy of the Church of England.²

This kind of indictment is not surprising. A radical change in religious policy followed once Oliver Cromwell had died and Charles II had returned to England in 1660. The Act of Uniformity was passed. Power was returned to the Church of England and to her bishops and archbishops and it was not long before persecution began. The twenty-four year old Baptist preacher was feeling the gale force winds of a new prejudice on the part of both civil and religious authorities against Dissenters. In 1664 Keach found himself confronted by the zeal of religious authorities like Thomas Disney, his former rector in Stoke Hammond, where Keach had been born and baptised. It was Disney who initiated this particular persecution of Keach by informing the Archbishop of Canterbury of his illegal activities.³ This zeal was equalled among the civil authorities, and the seizure of Keach’s book meant he was summoned to appear before the most powerful judge in England, in the person of the Lord Chief Justice, Sir Robert Hyde. His alleged crime was that in his primer, written for children, he had breached the 1660 Act of Uniformity by teaching that infants ought not to be baptized and that laymen, like himself, were free to preach the gospel.

Keach was undoubtedly on the receiving end of rough justice. His plea of not guilty was in vain. The surviving assize report records browbeating and intimidating words by the Lord Chief Justice directed against Keach, even before the witnesses were sworn in and their evidence received. Keach was not permitted to speak in his defence. The jury existed merely to ‘rubber stamp’ the decision as to his guilt already made by Hyde. Pronouncing sentence, Hyde jailed Keach for two weeks. Bail was denied him and he was in addition subjected to the public shame and humiliation of being placed in the pillory twice for two hours, once in Aylesbury and then again a few days later in Winslow. Winslow was about twenty miles away, and the probable scene of his crimes and so the hangman there was instructed to publicly torch his primer. Before he was jailed Keach was fined twenty pounds and bound over to appear at the next assizes to renounce his doctrine.⁴

The treatment that he received at the hands of the Lord Chief Justice was unjust, unnecessarily malicious, and brutal. The mixture of scorn, derision, and unsubstantiated allegations were all aimed at portraying the defendant in the worst possible light, and establishing his alleged seditious and malicious intent. Despite his youth and inexperience it is evident that Keach was not intimidated by the words and actions of the highest judge in England. Keach was a man of courage even in the midst of punishment and persecution. Once in the pillory, much to the consternation of the jailor and the sheriff, Keach began to confess the Lord Jesus Christ

before men because he wanted others to share his biblical convictions, and come to faith in Christ. The Baptist historian, Thomas Crosby, one of Keach's sons in law, records his confession.

It is no new thing for the servants of the Lord to suffer, and to be made a gazing-stock: and you that are acquainted with the Scriptures, know that that the way to the crown is by the cross.... I do not speak out of prejudice to any person, but do sincerely desire, that the Lord would convert them, and convince them of their errors, that their souls may be saved in the day of the Lord *Jesus. Good people*, the concernment of souls is very great; so great, that Christ died for them: and truly a concernment for souls was that which moved me to write and publish those things, for which I now suffer, and for which I could suffer greater things than these.... Oh! Did you but experience...the great love of God, and the excellencies that are in him; it would make you more willing to go through any sufferings for his sake. And I do account this the greatest honour, that ever the Lord was pleas'd to confer upon me.⁵

This young Baptist preacher was clearly a man of strong conviction and unflinching courage, willing to stand his ground against the highest authorities in the land. What happened that October day in 1664 was not an isolated example of Christian courage. Such concern for the souls of men and women and such boldness characterised him throughout his life and he never shrank back from being willing to suffer for the sake of his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

A brief sketch of his life

Keach was baptized and brought up in the local Anglican Church in Stoke Hammond, in north Buckinghamshire. Around the age of fifteen he was converted to Christ through the ministry of Matthew Mead in the neighbouring parish of Great Brickhill.⁶ Mead was only there for a short time before leaving for London eventually to become an Independent pastor in Stepney. Mead almost certainly held to Calvinistic theology at this time and practiced infant baptism. However, Keach had become convinced of believer's baptism and joined the General Baptists, and became associated with the small market town of Winslow some seven or eight miles from his birthplace. General Baptists were Arminian in their theological sympathies. In 1660, when he was twenty, he married Jane Grove of Winslow. They had five children, three of whom survived Mary, Elias and Hannah. Hannah became a Quaker, much to the grief of her father. Elias went to Philadelphia and following his conversion to Christ in America he founded several Baptist churches in the Philadelphia area, before returning to pastor a church in London. He died a few years before his father in 1699.

Despite his youth Keach's preaching and teaching abilities were soon recognized among the General Baptists. However, as we have seen, he was soon in trouble with the authorities for these activities. These were dramatic days in England. The first decade of his life had been dominated by the civil wars. In 1649, when he was nine, Charles I was executed. As a teenager he was raised in the days of the Commonwealth and the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell. However, in 1660, when he was only twenty years old and still an inexperienced Christian a dark shadow was cast over the cause of Dissent. The death of Oliver Cromwell and the failure of his son, Richard, led to the return of Charles II. Eventually varying degrees of persecution became the common experience of many dissenting congregations and in particular of preachers who preached at these illegal conventicles.

The event we have already described was one of several persecutions he suffered in Buckinghamshire between 1660 and 1668, some of which certainly threatened his life. Keach became a marked man in Buckinghamshire. So in 1668 he decided to move

to London. He came to Southwark, a large parish south of the river Thames, which was recognized as a hotbed of Dissent. Keach joined himself to a General Baptist congregation in Tooley Street, Southwark, and very shortly succeeded William Rider as the pastor. Two years after he arrived in London his wife Jane died, leaving him with the responsibility of caring for a young family alone.

During these early years in London he came to change his theological convictions. This was undoubtedly due to his understanding of God's salvation and the covenant of grace. Whether this was due to his own study of the Bible, his contact with Hanserd Knollys (ca.1599-1691), a prominent London Particular Baptist, or a young widow, Susannah Partridge, is not clear. Susannah became his second wife; Knollys married them in April 1672.

Whatever the precise reasons were Keach became a Particular Baptist. He became persuaded that the eternal covenant of grace was the basis of salvation, that each person of the Trinity was directly involved in the salvation of sinners, with the Lord Jesus Christ being the only Mediator and Surety of this covenant. Armed now with a new perspective he could not have remained a General Baptist. His views of salvation were now decidedly Calvinistic. This is his own account of the change.

Brethren, next unto the grace of God in my conversion, I have often said, I do look upon myself bound to admire the riches of God's love and goodness to me, in opening my eyes to see those Arminian errors, which when I was young, I had from some men of corrupt principles sucked in; nay, and when I was about 23 years old (1663), I wrote a little book for children, in which some of those errors were vindicated; which after my eyes were enlightened, and the book with alterations being again reprinted, I left out, and now do declare my dislike of the first impressions, and do disown what I there asserted: When I was a child, I thought as a child, I understood as a child, as the apostle speaks. And let me intreat you to study the nature of the covenant of grace; for until I had that opened to me, I was ignorant of the mysteries of the Gospel.⁷

It is not clear whether the church meeting in Tooley Street which he pastored split, or whether he was able to persuade them of his new convictions. However, from this group the church began to grow, obtaining a license to build a meetinghouse in nearby Horselydown, at the time of the Indulgence granted by Charles II in 1672. For Keach the die was cast, his new understanding of the covenant of grace was decisive, and for the remainder of his life he remained a firmly persuaded Calvinist, one of the many who signed the 1689 *Confession of Faith* at the Particular Baptist Assembly of that year. By this time he was one of the leading Particular Baptist pastors in London and through his increasing publications their most prominent mouthpiece.

Even as a young Christian Keach displayed clear evidence of ability to preach. Within three years or so of his conversion he was preaching among the General Baptists. In his early twenties he began writing and never stopped. During his life he produced over fifty works – allegorical and poetical, including an epic of over 60,000 words, called *The Divine Lover*, together with some 300 hymns. Polemical works also came from his pen dealing with such matters as the nature and subjects of baptism, the laying on of hands, the teachings of the Quakers, justification by faith, and published sermons on a wide range of subjects, including the covenant of grace and the perseverance of the saints. If the name of Keach is known it is usually associated with his promotion of congregational hymn singing and the controversy that ensued both in his own congregation and among the London Particular Baptists in the 1690s. However Keach deserves to be remembered for far more than his introduction of hymn singing into the regular services of worship. For example, it is a little known fact that

during his lifetime and after his death Keach was as well known as John Bunyan as a writer of allegory and Keach's *War with the Devil* was a 'best seller' along with Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.⁸

Keach was for thirty-six years the pastor of the largest Baptist congregation south of the Thames in Horselydown in Southwark, serving faithfully there until his death at the age of sixty-four in 1704. This congregation was subsequently served by one of Keach's sons-in-law, Benjamin Stinton, (from 1704 until 1718), then the more famous Dr. John Gill (from 1720 until 1771) and Dr. John Rippon (from 1773 until 1836). By 1854 the Southwark congregation had moved its meetinghouse to New Park Street and called a certain young man by the name of Charles Haddon Spurgeon to be their minister. Spurgeon thought highly of his predecessor. Writing a short account of the history of the Metropolitan Tabernacle, he described Keach as "one of the most notable pastors of our church," as "one of the most useful preachers of his time," whose teaching was "sweetly spiritual, intensely scriptural and full of Christ."⁹

Keach's biblical spirituality

Apart from a brief account of his character given by Thomas Crosby very little direct biographical material has survived the passage of time.¹⁰ Personal letters of Keach are virtually non-existent, and autobiographical references in sermons and other writings are extremely scarce. To discover the kind of man he was requires a reading of his works in order to gain an accurate picture of him and to determine, for example, the way he handled the Bible, how he preached, the importance he attached to prayer, to baptism and church membership, how he lived his life especially when he faced persecution, how he dealt with error and those who promoted it. In this way we also gain insights into the man himself during the entirety of his adult life and discover what were his aims and motives as he exercised his ministry first in Buckinghamshire and then in London.

However, it is from his own pen that Keach, unintentionally, provides us with insights into one of the main features of his spirituality, and that we find out what it was that motivated him to live the Christian life and to faithfully use his particular gifts of preaching and writing.

In 1681 Keach published a large volume called *Tropologia, A Key to Open Scripture Metaphors*.¹¹ As part of his treatment of Proverbs 28.1 and Micah 5.8, entitled 'Saints compared to lions,' he makes the point that the saints of God are full of spiritual courage and are not dismayed by the threats of men.¹² Proverbs 28.1 reads, 'The wicked flee when no-one pursues, but the righteous are as bold as a lion.' The proverb depicts a bold man, a man who is sincere because he maintains a clear conscience before God and fears no man. Equipped with this clear conscience the valiant soldier of Christ possesses a well-forged breastplate of Christian boldness. This is the kind of courage that characterised Moses and Aaron before an arrogant Pharaoh, Elijah when he confronted wicked Ahab, Daniel and his three friends in hostile Babylon, the apostle Paul before the accusing Jews and the Roman authorities, Martin Luther defying the emperor and the Pope. This same kind of boldness characterised Benjamin Keach throughout his life and was clearly demonstrated on that October day in 1664 when he appeared before the Lord Chief Justice.

Our insight into Keach's spirituality is taken a step further in his exposition of Proverbs 28.1. Keach explains in what ways this courage must express itself in the life of a godly man. Fundamentally, he says, such a man will be valiant and courageous for the truth of the Word of God, for his cause and for his people. He lists seven ways in which this will be accomplished.

- By speaking for the truth when others speak against it.

- By endeavouring to clear the truth from reproach and infamy.
- By contending earnestly for the faith.
- By visibly professing and publicly owning the truth.
- By suffering for the truth when called to do so.
- By standing for the truth when others turn their backs on it, and,
- By maintaining every truth, more especially that truth which was most opposed in the day in which they live.¹³

These features are clearly and repeatedly demonstrated in Keach's life and ministry. His unflinching stand for God's truth and its implications is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the man and his spirituality. He was a man of faithfulness and boldness.

He was pre-eminently biblical

David Daniell in his recent book *The Bible in English* convincingly argues that English Protestantism of the sixteenth century was biblical.¹⁴ Keach's spirituality is distinctly biblical for Keach's feet were planted very firmly on Protestant ground. Whenever he spoke of the truth he meant biblical truth. He meant that the Bible was God's inspired Word, and "that the Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving Knowledge, Faith and Obedience."¹⁵ Unless Keach's 'biblicism' is recognized our understanding of his spirituality will be distorted. In his sermons he often explained the pivotal function of the Bible in his life and ministry. Preaching on the rich man and Lazarus he affirmed that he "that disowns the Bible to be of Divine authority must prove there is some other way to know the true way to heaven, and the true worship and will of God," concluding,

what a mercy and blessing it is to have the holy Scriptures, or the sacred oracles, and what a loss and dismal judgment it would be should God take the ministration of the Gospel from us, or bring upon us a famine of the Word. The glory of England lies in this, it enjoys the light of God's word, it is a land of vision; but if God should take from it the Gospel, it would soon become a land of darkness.¹⁶

Keach was concerned for the souls of men and women. His adoption of Calvinistic theology only intensified that concern. He was committed to preaching and teaching the Bible and to developing a spiritual life moulded by those scriptural principles and examples. He worked and prayed for the conversion of sinners, for the establishing of his congregation in the truth, working the truth into every fibre of their being so that they possessed an ardent love for the Lord Jesus Christ in their affections.

He set out to accomplish this by preaching the Gospel and the necessity of faith in Jesus Christ for salvation within the context of the eternal covenant of grace. Among those sermons, which clearly display his grasp of the biblical teaching concerning salvation, are *The Everlasting Covenant*, sixteen sermons on John 10.27-28 and the doctrine of perseverance entitled *The Blessedness of Christ's Sheep*, and, fourteen sermons from Isaiah 54.10, *A Display of Glorious Grace*.¹⁷ Not wanting his hearers to be confused he warned them repeatedly against worldly attitudes and the prevailing doctrinal and practical errors of the day, including Socinianism, Arminianism and the new legalism associated with Baxter. Concerned

to establish the next generation in the truth he wrote poetry and books for young people among them *War with the Devil* and *The Travels of True Godliness*.¹⁸

Most of his published sermons were preached first to his own congregation in Horselydown, Southwark and cover the whole range of biblical teaching. These and other works were published because others persuaded him to do so as a means of publicly stating and defending biblical truth.¹⁹ He believed that the *Second London Baptist Confession of Faith* was an accurate summary of what the Bible taught. When he and his son Elias published a shortened version of the Confession in 1697 for their respective churches it was not because they were reducing the truth in any way. They wanted to ensure that their churches knew what they believed and that they could obtain it cheaply. Many in their congregations could not afford to purchase the full version of the *Confession*, which was then priced at 12*d.*, and in addition the full version did not seem to be widely available at that time.²⁰ Keach, furthermore, conscious of his increasing years, was anxious to leave behind, “an account of holy doctrine and order and discipline.” for future generations.²¹

Keach passionately desired his hearers and readers to believe the truth of the gospel and be saved from their sins. Therefore we find Keach as a free-offer preacher urging sinners to come to Christ. The following is typical of his exhortations,

Above all things fly to Jesus Christ, look up to him, and neglect not this Salvation one Hour, but throw down your Arms, fight against God no more, nor fence against the two-edged Sword of his Mouth; but as a poor, lost, and burdened Sinner, come to him, and thou shalt find rest unto thy soul.²²

At the same time Keach sought to cultivate in his converted hearers a sincere love for the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. For example, he sometimes asked why pardoned sinners love Christ so dearly? It is, he replied, because they have been pardoned for their sin and because they have come to taste Christ’s choice love for them. Therefore, he concludes, it is impossible for anyone to have a saving relish of the love of Christ and not love *him*. It is his great love that induces pardoned sinners to love him. This love, he urged, must be sincere and whole-hearted,

Jesus Christ cannot endure that the heart of a professor should be divided, or that a man or woman should have one heart for sin and another for him; he must have the whole heart, or he will have none of it. ...Conscience may be for Christ and his ways, and the judgment may be much enlightened, when the will may be opposite, and the affections set chiefly upon sin, and the vanities of the world.²³

Keach was persuaded that a person who loved Christ in this manner would remain faithful to Christ especially in a time of trial.

He was willing to suffer for the truth

As we have already seen Keach was willing to suffer for the truth even before he left his Arminian errors. Any unwillingness to suffer he regarded as timidity and as a compromise. Keach was a man who stood for the truth when others hesitated or turned away. This is demonstrated in his reaction to the words of John Child. In the 1680s Keach was involved in helping Child whom he had known since his days in Buckinghamshire. Sadly, Child was not a very stable man and tragically he committed suicide, having become severely depressed and convinced that he had committed the

unpardonable sin. Keach was one of several London pastors who had repeatedly tried to help him yet to no avail. Some time before Child became depressed he declared his sympathies for the Church of England and turned against his former dissenting friends, attacking them in writing. What alarmed Keach however more than anything else was that he had heard Child says words to this effect: "I have seriously considered whether there be anything in Religion worth suffering for."²⁴ Such a statement contradicted everything that Keach believed and practiced. For over half his adult life, from the age of twenty until he was almost fifty, Keach endured persecution for holding fast to his convictions regarding God's truth. He did not pull back, and continued to preach. Persecution was never continuous but came in waves. He referred to 'ten hot persecutions,' the hottest of which was the last in the early 1680s.²⁵ However, it is very difficult to detail the extent to which Keach personally suffered, especially once he had moved to London.

Persecution did not take him by surprise; rather he regarded it as normal for a Christian, especially for a Christian who was also a preacher of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Nevertheless he regarded such religious persecution as utterly unlawful, even if men held "grand errors...none ought to impose upon the consciences of men in matters of religion."²⁶ He would not take up arms like some of the Fifth Monarchy men did, nor did he play an active role in the Monmouth rebellion. He preferred to wait on the providence of God for the removal of the threat of Roman Catholicism represented by successive Stuart monarchs, Charles II and James II.

He adopted a positive and biblical attitude towards persecution: it "never does godly Christians any harm; they grow the more, not only in number but in goodness. It refines and purifies them, it purges and makes them white, they grow in faith, in patience."²⁷ Furthermore, he believed that persecution discriminated between the true and false believer and sifted out those who had compromised their position. As a young man Keach had separated from the national church where he had been baptized. In his churchmanship he had become a Baptist Dissenter. Returning to the fold of the Church of England, as John Child and others were advocating, was unthinkable for a man of his convictions; it would have been sinful timidity. The following words may sound harsh at points but they also express his biblical realism as well as his sadness. They show a strong and bold man who accepted suffering and refused to compromise his conscience. Writing some years after persecution of Dissenters officially ceased he made the following observations.

In our former days of liberty, what great numbers flocked to our assemblies, and made a profession of religion; but when that hot persecution arose, how did they fall off, and disown that people which once they seemed to cleave unto: The fan of persecution, fanned them away as chaff, and not only a multitude of professors, but also too many great preachers did basely betray the truth which they professed, and in their pulpits seemed a little before zealously to maintain, particularly that of separation from the national church. This way Christ took to discover the filthy and rotten hearts of some, and slavish fear and weakness of faith in others, who were left to a sinful compliance and conformity, building again that which they had destroyed, and destroying that which they had been a building; and thus it appears as chaff, cannot bear fanning, but is blown away; so chaffy professors cannot bear spiritual fanning, i.e. they cannot stand in an hour of temptation, but fall away. Alas! tho' we have now again multitudes that seem to cleave to our churches and to our assemblies, yet should Christ come with his fan upon us, you will soon see (it is to be feared) the former effects again.²⁸

Benjamin Keach possessed a tender and sensitive heart, one that genuinely grieved over the state of the nation and the persecution of those who refused to conform to the Act of Uniformity. At the same time, he was filled with a desire for the honour of God. Persecution was illegal but it did not make Keach impassive. Rather he poured out his soul in poetry, expressing his deep sorrows for the church. His second book he began while still living in Buckinghamshire. It was called *Sion in Distress: or, the Groans of the Protestant Church*.²⁹ A second and expanded version appeared in 1681 and a sequel *Distressed Zion Relieved*, in 1689, once it became clear that toleration of Dissenters was to become a reality. He recorded her troubles in detail, in particular the hottest time in the 1680s. He spoke as a Christian and as a pastor expressing his own distressed heart as he saw the decline in true religion and the waywardness of his own nation of England. Reading these works it does not take much imagination on the part of the reader to envisage what must have been some of the content of Keach's public and private prayers during the middle years of his life from 1660 until 1689. The following sample taken from one of the prayers in *Sion in Distress* gives some indication of his passionate feelings expressed in prayer to God.

Then hear O Lord, thou see'st my power is gone,
In thee I trust, besides thee there is none,
That can thy *Sion* from her Foes deliver;
O draw some flaming Arrows from thy Quiver,
To quell the pride of this oppressing Crew!
Thy mighty Arm alone can them subdue.
On Thee I fix an absolute Reliance,
Do Thou but help, I'll bid them all defiance.
Hear and consider, for thy Mercy's sake.³⁰

We have already described Keach as a Baptist Dissenter. Some regarded him as being too radical in his Baptist convictions. However, by affirming believer's baptism he was persuaded that he was "witnessing to a truth of Christ that lies as plain in the gospel as any one truth or positive precept of Christ whatsoever."³¹ Baptists frequently suffered reproach for their practice and Keach was no exception, bearing it patiently and wisely. Even in the last year of his life he was falsely accused of immorality in connection with the baptism of women. To those who assailed the integrity of Baptists Keach protested, and with a slight note of sarcasm pointed out,

we provide comely Cloathes for the Administrer, both from Head to Foot; and our Men also that are baptized have Cloathes provided for them; and for the Women, Gowns and Petty-Coats are made on purpose, and they go into the water dressed more decently perhaps, than many Women came into Christian assemblies.³²

Those who reproached them invariably linked Baptists with the Anabaptist excesses of the sixteenth century in Germany and these prejudices continued long into the seventeenth century and beyond. In his attempts to remove this reproach and blot on the integrity of Baptists he wrote a number of books against infant baptism and also engaged in public debate.³³ Keach did not subscribe to the notion of a national church that the Anglicans and men like the Presbyterian Richard Baxter wanted.³⁴ In addition, like other Puritan-Separatists who also became Baptists, Keach was firmly wedded to the conviction

that entrance into church fellowship was through a profession of faith in Christ, the result of divine regeneration, followed by baptism by immersion (with, in his church, the laying on of hands). This was reinforced by a church covenant agreed to by all the members, together with the ongoing ordered and disciplined life of the entire church. He maintained that,

the Church of God under the Gospel dispensation is not national but congregational, it consisteth not of the natural seed of believers as such, but only of those who are the spiritual seed of Abraham, namely believers, or such who obtain that faith of Abraham, and walk in the steps of Abraham.³⁵

Keach's greatest fear was that the practice of infant baptism undermined the purity of the church and tended to fill the church with moral men and women who looked as if they had saving grace but were in fact unregenerate. His deepest concern was to ensure that the professing members of the church of Christ had the image of God stamped on their souls, having had their hearts brought under the power of true godliness. His counsel to parents therefore was,

As to your bringing your Children into the Visible Church, so as to be Members thereof, and to have right to the holy Sacraments, they must come in at the door of Regeneration, not by Generation; even at the same Door you came in at if you are true Members thereof: and O therefore pray for your Children, they are dear to you, bring them up in the Fear of God, command them to seek after the Knowledge of their Natural State, and to know and believe in Jesus Christ, and set them a good Example. I know not what better Counsel to give you concerning your Children.³⁶

He was an ardent defender of the truth

One further aspect of Keach's spiritual boldness must be considered, namely his determination to defend the truth that was most opposed in his own day. In the 1690s that truth was, without doubt, justification by faith. Keach was also involved in the hymn singing controversy in the early 1690s and although that caused him great pain it is quite clear that his opposition to those he called "law and works mongers" is far more important. He believed that the very heart of the Gospel was at stake and that any compromise would effectively undo all the good of the Protestant Reformation and bring a return to Roman Catholic teaching. His strength of feeling and the urgency it produced in his preaching are clearly demonstrated in the following,

And to you, sinners, if you would be found wheat in the day of Christ, then receive Christ's true doctrine, labour to distinguish between truth and error; beware of that strange and new scheme that darkens the free-grace of God, and tends to destroy the covenant of grace; remember to exalt Christ alone in your salvation. How do some turn the gospel of God's free grace into a law, by the performance of which, as the conditions of life and justification, tell thee, thy salvation doth depend. See what subtle opposers (of the clearest gospel) are risen up amongst us, and labour to avoid them; though their tongues should seem to be tipped with silver, yet their doctrine is copper.³⁷

Chief among the silver-tipped tongues was the famous Richard Baxter. Although he died in 1691 the controversy did not die with him and his views continued to be advocated by Dr. Daniel Williams and Samuel Clarke in particular. This controversy focused on the nature of a believer's righteousness. It became known as the Neonomian (or "new law") controversy, and arose out of

Baxter's teaching that obedience to a new law brought in by Christ—an obedience that took the form of saving faith and holy living—was the basis of one's personal saving righteousness.

Keach had been aware of Baxter's teaching in 1683 some years before the controversy erupted in 1690.³⁸ He consistently and constantly opposed this 'obedience-to-new-law' teaching. He stood for the Biblical doctrine of justification by faith based on the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer as it had been recovered by the Reformers, and been expressed in the seventeenth century confessions of faith, notably *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, *The Savoy Declaration* and *The Second London Baptist Confession of Faith*. Keach had signed the latter just prior to the outbreak of the Neonomian controversy. He had come to regard Martin Luther and John Owen as the greatest lights in the church of the last two hundred years. The principal reason for this was their grasp of the importance of justification by faith alone.

Keach was not the only one to speak out against Baxter but he feared that if he and others did not expose this error it represented a very real threat to the future of the Gospel in England. He pointed out that the new doctrine, making faith, repentance and sanctification our justifying righteousness was 'much like Bellarmine,' the sixteenth century Roman Catholic theologian and exponent of the decrees of the Council of Trent.³⁹ The new doctrine confused justification with sanctification, imputed righteousness with infused righteousness. Keach regarded Baxter's views as essentially another gospel and constantly warned his hearers and readers against those who insisted Christ had merited a milder law of sincere faith and obedience for us, and that such was our righteousness.

Keach was more balanced in his teaching, unlike Baxter. He maintained the biblical doctrine but avoided the pitfalls of Antinomianism on the one hand and High Calvinism on the other. He clearly asserted the place of the law of God in promoting biblical holiness and denied eternal justification, a doctrine that some Particular Baptists espoused very soon after Keach's death. In our day when the doctrine of justification by faith is under attack Keach's defence of the biblical doctrine of justification and, in particular, the way he protected his congregation from false teaching, stands as faithful example to be imitated by those who share his biblical convictions.

Keach was outspoken in his opposition to Baxterianism. References are found repeatedly throughout all his sermons from this period of his life. The lion's roar can be heard as the indignant preacher protests,

Oh! What a dishonour indeed would it be to a king, that bids you to the marriage feast of his Son, should any of you bring something of your own, and set it upon his table, in the midst of his dainties! How would he frown upon you, should you do this and say, Who brought this hither? Am I not able to entertain you with my own, but you must bring your paltry stuff? Let those who are tainted with the errors of Arminianism and Baxterianism, think of this, who strive to mix the King's wine with their muddy water, or mix their polluted works with God's free grace. How doth he loathe their notions of free will, and their own righteousness!⁴⁰

This is the measure of the spiritual boldness of Benjamin Keach. Although the Neonomian controversy drew from him some of his strongest and most passionate statements he defended the truth and exposed error throughout his life. In the 1670s he wrote against Quakerism and also defended what he believed to be a biblical teaching - the practice of the laying on of hands on believers. Especially during the period of persecution he opposed the Roman Catholic Church and in keeping with his Puritan contemporaries identified the Pope as the Antichrist. In the 1690s he asserted what he was

persuaded was the divine warrant for singing hymns in the corporate worship of the church, over against those who insisted that it was a human invention. In addition he promoted the observance of the Lord's Day as being a divine command as opposed to the seventh day, a view espoused by several London Baptist churches, and also exposed the teaching of some who denied the immortality of the soul.

No one should conclude that Keach revelled in controversy. He engaged in it because he believed it was his duty to speak for the truth and maintain it even if that involved him in suffering for his faith. On other occasions it led to disagreement with other Christians. In such circumstances Keach did his utmost to uphold unity in truth and love and to promote peace urging,

 speak well of all your brethren who hold the head, or are sound in the faith, in respect of all fundamental principles, though not in every thing of your opinion in some points of religion: for peace among ourselves ought not to be restrained only to members of that church we belong unto, but to all the saints, let them be Presbyterians, Independents, or Baptists. I do not mean that it is your duty to hold church-communion with all; no, that cannot be, unless all were of one judgment in all the essentials of church-constitution: for mutual love is not to be the rule of our church-communion and fellowship, but the word of Christ.⁴¹

This desire for peace is also a measure of Keach's spirituality.

Keach's motivations for boldness

It has been shown that Keach remained a bold man throughout his life and ministry, earnestly contending for the faith. Keach made this a matter of conscience before God. Nevertheless the question remains how did he maintain this bold spirit for nearly fifty years from his conversion around the age of fifteen in 1655 and his death in July 1704? What was the driving force? Was it principally a matter of temperament and an earnest spirit? Or did he draw his motivations from elsewhere?

Keach was certainly aware of weaknesses in his own temperament.⁴² There were occasions when his zeal and outspokenness overtook him. He possessed a quick temper and the evidence suggests that during the hymn singing controversy his conduct was not always above reproach. Yet it was also recognized that Keach was quick to acknowledge his faults and this appears to have been the case in this particular instance.

It was painful for Keach to see men and women who had long been part of the church now in such strong disagreement with him over the introduction of singing into the corporate worship that they withdrew, disrupting the unity of the church at Horselydown. Some of them had shared in the responsibilities of leadership, others been converted to Christ as a result of his preaching. Before 1689 they had stood together during persecution. Keach had married a number of them and buried some of their young children who died in infancy. Yet in Keach's eyes their decision to withdraw was schismatic, something he regarded as a great evil. The matter could not be resolved within the church, a number of books and pamphlets were published by each side and at times a war of words prevailed, especially between Keach and Isaac Marlow and their respective supporters. It became such an issue that the 1692 National Assembly of Particular Baptist churches tried to resolve the matter.

A few weeks after this Assembly had met Keach published a public apology for his own conduct including some harsh expressions, uncharitable and unsavoury censures, reflections and reproaches.⁴³ These referred to what he had put in print during the

exchanges for and against congregational singing, principally with Isaac Marlow. Human weaknesses and sinfulness had got the better of Keach on this occasion but he was not a proud man and was willing to listen and submit to others, especially his brethren in the Assembly.

Keach was essentially a humble man, well aware of his limitations. He was neither self-serving nor self-promoting but rather devoted to serving Christ and promoting his ways.

And when we do thus, even everything our Lord requires of us, we are not to think that we deserve anything of Jesus Christ, but say, we are thine, Lord, our lives are thine, our time is thine, our talents are thine, our service is thine, and we, when we have done all, see cause to be ashamed we have done it no better; we deserve to be blamed rather than commended, much less not think that we deserve wages, or thanks from Jesus Christ for what we have done.⁴⁴

Keach's drive was never simply due to his natural temperament. Rather he was driven by biblical and gospel motives in his boldness. The Bible was crucial in his spirituality whether it defined his duties or the motives behind those duties. In his exposition of Proverbs 28.1 he asks what is it that animates and emboldens a man to stand up for Christ and his ways. There are essentially five motivations. Such men he suggests

- Know the truth and are persuaded that it is God's truth and that it stands as the supreme authority.
- Know they are engaged in a good and righteous cause and remain sincere by maintaining a good conscience. By way of contrast the hypocrite will not stay the course but lose his courage.
- Know that God is present with them. A Christian draws fresh courage when he knows he has an Almighty and terrible God to take his part. They are motivated by such promises as 'Fear not, you worm Jacob...I will help you,' Is. 41.14 and, 'So we may boldly say: The Lord is my helper; I will not fear, What can man do to me?' Heb 13.6.
- Know that they will overcome at last. They possess faith and are assured of victory because they are more than conquerors.
- Know that they will have an exceeding great reward. They are motivated by such promises as Revelation 2.10, 'Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.'

By reading through Keach's sermons and other writings, by piecing together his life from the sources that are available, and, by listening to the little that others have said of him the impression is gained he was bold because he sought to be the very man that he was describing as being 'as bold as a lion.' He was driven to act the way he did by these biblical motives.

Above all he was a sincere man seeking to maintain a good conscience before God and man. Like all good preachers his sermons contain searching application and encouragement. Let all of us who profess the name of Christ receive his closing words about being as bold as lions and let each one of us examine our own courage and our own sincerity before God.

Let Saints show themselves bold and courageous in the cause and interest of God, and their souls. A fearful timorous spirit becomes not a Christian. Have you a good cause? Have you a good call? Have you a good conscience? Have you a good captain? What then do you fear? In the strength of the Lord, be a Bold as a Lion; and in order thereunto, get the truth into your affections, see that you have received the truth in the love of it: and

be sure you approve yourselves to be sincere; for it is sincerity that emboldens a Christian, and makes him valiant.⁴⁵

Austin Walker

Lecture delivered to the Irish Baptist Historical Society, Thursday 23 March 2017.

¹ Calculated from the death of Charles I, so discounting the Commonwealth period.

² Benjamin Stinton, “The Tryall of Mr Benja. Keach who was prosecuted for Wrighting against Infant Baptism with an Account of ye Punishment inflicted upon him for ye same: Anno 1664”. In *A Repository of Divers Historical Matters Relating to the English Antipaedobaptists, Collected from Original Papers of Faithful Extracts*, No. 21, 93-104. (Angus Library, Oxford, Anno 1712).

³ Disney’s letter dated 26 May 1664, *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, 1663-1664*, 116, Public Record Office, The National Archives, Kew, London, SP28/98.

⁴ Stinton, “The Tryall of Mr Benja. Keach.”

⁵ Thomas Crosby, *The History of the English Baptists*, 4 Vols., (London, 1738-1740), 2.205-207. A facsimile copy has been recently published by The Baptist Standard Bearer, Inc., Arkansas, n.d.

⁶ Keach makes only one reference to the man who was “the blessed Instrument of my Conversion.” This was in *A Counter-Antidote to purge out the Malignant Effects of a Late Counterfeit, prepared by Mr. Gyles Shute, an Unskillful Person in Polemical Cures* (London, 1694), 3. Gyles Shute was a member of Matthew Mead’s Stepney congregation. Shute’s name appears in the Stepney Meeting Church Book (1644-1894). See the entries in Mead’s own handwriting for April 13, 1684 and Feb. 17, 1683. These records are held by Tower Hamlets Local History and Archive Library, 277 Bancroft Road, London E1 4DQ.

⁷ Benjamin Keach, “Blessedness of Christ’s Sheep,” *A Golden Mine Opened: or, The Glory of God’s Rich Grace Displayed in the Mediator to Believers: and His Direful Wrath against Impenitent Sinners. Containing the Substance of near Forty Sermons upon several Subjects*, (London, 1694), 314-315.

⁸ Ian Green *Print and Protestantism in Early Modern England*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 590-672.

⁹ C. H. Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle: Its History and Work*, (Pasadena: Pilgrim Publications, 1990), 18,25,26.

¹⁰ Crosby, *History*, 4.304-309.

¹¹ Benjamin Keach, *Tropologia, A Key to Open Scripture Metaphors*, (London, 1681). Thomas Delaune was responsible for Book I on sacred philology. This section was partly translated and partly compiled from Solomon Glassius, *Philologiae Sacrae, qua totius sacrosanctae Veteris et Novi Testamenti Scripturae*, (Jena, 1623). The remaining Books were Keach’s own work on the metaphors, allegories and similitudes of the Old and New Testaments. Quotations used in this lecture will be from the twentieth century reprint of *Tropologia*, Keach, *Preaching from the Types and Metaphors of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1972), and abbreviated to *Types and Metaphors*.

¹² Keach, *Types and Metaphors*, 766-767.

¹³ Keach, *Types and Metaphors*, 766-767.

¹⁴ David Daniell, *The Bible in English: its History and Influence*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 132.

¹⁵ A Confession of Faith put forth by the elders and brethren of many congregations of Christians, (baptized upon profession of faith) in London and the country, (London, 1677), Chapter one. This is commonly known as the 1689 Confession, or the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith. Keach was among the signatories of this confession of faith at the Particular Baptist Assembly that met in 1689.

¹⁶ Keach, “The rich man and Lazarus” *Expositions of the Parables, Series Two*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel 1991), 408,413. This was originally published by Keach as *Gospel Mysteries Unveil’d, or exposition of all the parables, and many express similitudes* (London, 1701). Future references will refer to the Kregel edition, *Parables One/Two*.

¹⁷ Keach, *The Everlasting Covenant: a sweet cordial for a drooping soul: or, The excellent nature of the Covenant of Grace opened: in a sermon preached January the 29th. At the funeral of Mr Henry Forty. An elegy upon death &c.*, (London, 1693).

“The Blessedness of Christ’s Sheep: or No Falling from a State of True Grace,” *A Golden Mine Opened*. The fourteen sermons on perseverance form a part of this volume.

The Display of Glorious Grace: or the Covenant of Peace Opened. In Fourteen sermons lately preached in which the errors of the present day, about reconciliation and justification, are detected., (London, 1698).

¹⁸ Keach, *War with the Devil: or, the Young Man’s Conflict with the Powers of Darkness: in a Dialogue discovering the Corruption and Vanity of Youth, the horrible Nature of Sin, and Deplorable Condition of Fallen Man. With an appendix containing a Dialogue between an Old Apostate and a Young Professor*, (London, 1673), and, *The Travels of True Godliness, from the Beginning of the World to this Present Day, in an apt and pleasant Allegory: shewing the Trouble, Oppositions, Reproaches and Persecutions he hath met with in every age; together with the Danger he seems to be in at present, by Vice, Papists and other grand Enemies also where he make his final Abode*, (London, 1683).

¹⁹ See, for example, Keach, “The Epistle Dedicatory,” *The Marrow of True Justification, or Justification without Works*, (London, 1692).

²⁰ Keach, *The Articles of the Faith of the congregation of Horseley-down [Back Street], as asserted this 10th of the 6th month, 1697*, (London, 1697). See also Elias Keach, *The glory and ornament of a true, gospel-constituted church, being a brief display of the discipline of the church at Tallow-Chandlers Hall*, (London, 1697), iv.

²¹ Keach, “Epistle,” *The Articles of the Faith*, iii.

²² Keach, “The Great Salvation,” *A Golden Mine Opened*, 490.

²³ Keach, “Christ a bridegroom,” *Types and Metaphors*, 327.

²⁴ Keach, “A trumpet blown in Zion,” *A Golden Mine Opened*, 48.

²⁵ Keach, “The sower,” *Parables One*, 140.

²⁶ Keach, “The tares of the field,” *Parables One*, 219.

²⁷ Keach, “Saints compared to palm-trees,” *Types and Metaphors*, 755.

²⁸ Keach, “A trumpet blown in Zion,” *A Golden Mine Opened*, 19.

²⁹ This was published in 1666. No copies have survived.

³⁰ Keach, *Sion in Distress, or the Groans of the Protestant Church*, (London, 1681), 36ff.

³¹ Keach, “Blessedness of Christ’s Sheep,” *A Golden Mine Opened*, 315.

³² Keach, *Light broke forth in Wales, expelling darkness; or the Englishman’s Love to the Ancient Britains. Being an Answer to a Book, Intituled, Children’s Baptism from Heaven; published in the Welsh Tongue, by Mr. James Owen*, (London, 1696), 261.

³³ Among the most important were *Gold Refin’d; or Baptism in its Primitive Purity* (London, 1692); *The Rector Rectified and Corrected: or Infant-Baptism unlawful*, (London 1692); *The ax laid to the root: or, One more blow at the foundation of infant baptism, and church membership*, (London, 1693); *Light broke forth in Wales, expelling darkness; or the Englishman’s Love to the Ancient Britains*. (London, 1696).

³⁴ Baxter rejected the notion of liberty of conscience as a basis for social and religious stability. He did not believe in freedom for any religion but freedom for the true, namely, the Protestant religion that was to be maintained by the power of the civil magistrate. See Carl R. Truman, “Richard Baxter on Christian Unity: A Chapter in the Enlightening of English Reformed Orthodoxy,” *Westminster Theological Journal*, 61 (1999): 57-58.

³⁵ Keach, “Christ the door of the sheep,” *Parables Two*, 432.

³⁶ Keach, *Light broke forth in Wales, expelling darkness*, 124.

³⁷ Keach, “The Fan in his Hand,” *Parables One*, 52.

³⁸ Keach, *The Travels of True Godliness*, (London, 1817), 103-112.

³⁹ Keach, *A Medium betwixt two Extremes. Wherein it is proved that the whole First Adam was condemned, and the whole Second Adam justified*, (London, 1698), 37-38.

⁴⁰ Keach, “The marriage supper,” *Parables Two*, 151.

⁴¹ Keach, “Fire, salt and peace,” *Parables One*, 300.

⁴² Crosby, *History*, 4.307.

⁴³ Keach, *To all the Baptized Churches and faithful Brethren in England and Wales, Christian Salutations*, (London, 1692).

⁴⁴ Keach, “The unprofitable servants,” *Parables Two*, 431.

⁴⁵ Keach, "Saints compared to lions," *Types and Metaphors*, 767.