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The Reflections of a Puritan Theologian on Regeneration and Conversion

Michael A. G. Haykin

At the heart of the Reformation was one of the most fundamental questions of the Christian faith: How can I be saved from eternal damnation? The answer of all the leading Reformers was one and the same: only by God's free and sovereign grace. As J. I. Packer and O. Raymond Johnston have pointed out, it is wrong to suppose that the doctrine of Justification by faith alone, that storm center of the Reformation, was *the* crucial question in the minds of such theologians as Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Bucer, and John Calvin. This doctrine was important to the Reformers because it helped to express and to safeguard their answer to another, more vital, question, namely,

whether sinners are wholly helpless in their sin, and whether God is to be thought of as saving them by free, unconditional, invincible grace, not only justifying them for Christ's sake when they come to faith, but also raising them from the death of sin by His quickening Spirit in order to bring them to faith.

For all these Reformers this was *the* crucial question: Was Christianity "a religion of utter reliance on God for Salvation and all things necessary to it, or of self-reliance and self-effort"?¹

Loyal to the heritage of the Reformation, the Puritan authors in the last half of the seventeenth century were equally insistent on the vital importance of confessing that salvation is by sovereign, free grace alone. A good example of this loyalty is found in the work of Benjamin Keach (1640-1704), one of the most prolific Puritan authors and a Baptist by conviction. In a recently published history of religion in Britain, Michael Mullett has identified Benjamin Keach as the leading Baptist theologian of his era, similar in

importance for his denomination as Richard Baxter (1615-91) was for the English Presbyterians and John Owen (1616-83) for the Congregationalists.² He argued against the Quakers, those seventeenth-century counterparts of modern-day charismatics; he wrote allegories, now long forgotten, that in his day rivaled those of John Bunyan (1628-88) in popularity and sales; he was a pioneer in the congregational singing of hymns in a day when singing was limited to the Psalter; and he published a number of lengthy collections of sermons, including *A Golden Mine Opened* (1694) and *Gospel Mysteries Unveiled* (1701), which remain invaluable, though largely unused, treasures for the study of seventeenth-century Baptist thought.³

Early Years

Keach was born on February 29, 1640, to John and Fodora Keach, an Anglican couple residing at the time in Stoke Hammond, North Buckinghamshire.⁴ Raised an Anglican, he joined the group known to history as the General Baptists when he was fifteen. The General Baptists were Arminian in theology and had emerged from the womb of Puritanism in the second decade of the seventeenth century. Within three years of his baptism as a believer he was called to preach by the General Baptist congregation that met in Winslow, not far from Stoke Hammond. There is still in existence in Winslow an old Baptist meeting house dating from 1695 which is called Keach's Meeting House. Whether or not Keach ever worshipped in this chapel is not known. Yet, it is an appropriate way to recall the connection of this great Puritan leader with this area of Buckinghamshire.⁵

Around the same time as his call to the ministry of the Word, Keach married Jane Grove (d. 1670), a native of Winslow. During the ten or so years of their marriage the couple had five children, of whom three survived infancy.

One of them, Hannah, later became a Quaker, which undoubtedly would have caused her father some distress.

The 1660s through to the 1680s was a time of great persecution for any who sought to worship outside the Church of England, and Keach 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."⁶ 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 believers baptism and Keach's interpretation of the Book of Revelation.⁷ Put on trial on October 8, 1664, Keach was found guilty, imprisoned for two weeks and fined 20 pounds, a considerable amount in those days for a poor Puritan 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 persons 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 defense 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’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”⁸

On another occasion, when Keach, in the act of preaching, was apprehended by a troop of cavalymen, four of them were so enraged with him that they swore they would trample him to death with their horses. He was accordingly 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.⁹

A Move to London and an Embrace of Calvinism

In 1668 Keach moved to London, where he joined a General Baptist cause meeting on Tooley Street in Southwark, London’s first suburb located on the south

shore of the Thames river. He was soon ordained an elder of this congregation. However, not long after his arrival in London he made the acquaintance of two Calvinists, Hanserd Knollys (1599-1691) and William Kiffin (1616-1701), both of whom were also Baptists and who would become two of Keach’s closest friends. By the time of his second marriage in 1672 to Susannah Partridge (d. 1732) of Rickmansworth, Hertfordshire—Jane, his first wife, had died in 1670—he, too, had become a Calvinist. Of the details of this momentous theological move we know nothing. As the American historian, J. Barry Vaughn, has noted, the “date and circumstances of Benjamin Keach’s acceptance of Calvinism is the greatest puzzle of his life.”¹⁰ However, the fact that Knollys officiated at the marriage of Keach to Susannah Partridge certainly leads one to believe that this influential figure played a role in Keach’s coming over to the Calvinistic Baptists. It is interesting to note that while such a move from the ranks of the General Baptists to those of the Calvinistic Baptists was not uncommon during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there was rarely any traffic the other way.¹¹

In the same year of his marriage, Keach and a few like-minded individuals, possibly former members of the General Baptist cause on Tooley Street, began a Calvinistic Baptist work in Horselydown, Southwark. A meeting house was eventually erected, which, after a number of additions over the years, could hold about a thousand people. Keach was evidently a powerful preacher, whose sermons, his son-in-law later noted, were “full of solid divinity.”¹²

In addition to his labors as a pastor, Keach was also active in employing his pen to elucidate the Scriptures and defend Reformation truth. Of the many subjects upon which he wrote, his defense of the Calvinistic perspective on Salvation would prove to be especially influential. As we have seen, during the 1680s and 90s, at the time when

Keach was being widely published, Calvinism was increasingly a house under attack. The theology of Puritan theologians like Keach and John Owen was coming to be regarded with scorn and disdain as outmoded and old-fashioned. Encouraged by the “middle way” thinking of Richard Baxter, which sought to develop a theological perspective that toned down some key doctrines of traditional Calvinism and embraced some elements of Arminianism, not a few of the heirs of Puritanism, in particular the English Presbyterians, were involved in a wholesale retreat from their Calvinistic heritage. This was not, however, the case with the Calvinistic Baptists and that in large measure because of the writings of Keach.

Calvinist Views on Salvation

Consider, for example, his final major work, *Gospel Mysteries Unveiled*, published only three years before his death in 1704. This work was originally a series of sermons which exhaustively expounded all of Christ’s parables and similitudes. The discussion of the parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:4-7), for instance, ran to sixteen sermons and well over a hundred pages in the four-volume edition that was issued in the 1810s.¹³ In his fifteenth sermon on this parable, Keach presented an understanding of Regeneration and Conversion that was common to most Calvinistic Baptists of his day, and served to distinguish them from other denominational bodies like the Presbyterians who were fast moving out of the Calvinist orbit.

Keach began by observing that this parable clearly taught that “lost sinners cannot go home to God of themselves,” but must be carried to Him on the shoulders of Christ. To Keach this doctrinal conclusion was clear first of all from the reference to the lost sheep being placed on the shoulders of the shepherd. When other passages of Scripture talk of the “finger of God” (Luke 11:20) or the “arm

of the Lord” (Isa. 53:1), these anthropomorphisms are to be understood as references to God’s power. Likewise, Keach reasons, the mention of the shepherd’s shoulders in Luke 15:5 must be a reference to “Christ’s efficacious and effectual power,” especially, given the nature of the parable, as it relates to regenerating and converting.¹⁴

Keach then adduced further scriptural proof that Regeneration was wholly God’s work, a work in which men and women are entirely passive. There was, for example, John 15:5, where Christ informed the apostles, “without Me you can do nothing.” This verse clearly has to do with the living out of the Christian life, but Keach evidently saw principles embedded in it that also apply to entry into that life. Keach understood Christ’s statement “without Me” to be a reference to Christ’s “almighty arm . . . made bare” and His “power exerted.” If it be true, therefore, that Christ’s power is vital for the presence of “acceptable fruit to God” during the Christian life, how much more is it the case that this power is required for “a sinner’s implantation into Christ”?¹⁵ Yet, because the verse has to do with living a fruitful Christian life, which involves effort on part of both the believer and Christ, it does not really substantiate Keach’s assertion that the sinner is passive in Regeneration.

The next verse he cited, John 6:44a, “No man can come to Me, except the Father which hath sent Me draw him,” is much more germane. The drawing involved here, according to Keach, is “the sublime and irresistible influences of the holy God upon the heart, by which he inclines, bows, and subjects the stubborn and rebellious will to believe and receive the Lord Jesus Christ.” Keach rightly links this verse with one later in the same chapter: “No man can come unto Me, except it were given unto him of My Father” (John 6:65). That which is given, Keach emphasized, is what enables a sinner to come to Christ: the gift of the indwelling Spirit, the affections of a new heart, grace, faith,

and divine power.¹⁶

The third text that Keach cited is yet another Johannine one, John 1:13. The children of God, this verse asserts, are born “not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” Regeneration is not based on one’s physical lineage, nor on one’s “legal privileges” (so Keach reads “nor of the will of the flesh”). Nor is the new birth accomplished by any “power of man’s will, for “before a vital principle is infused” into a person, all that he or she can do are “dead works.” The “plain and evident” declaration of this verse is that “God is the efficient or great agent in regeneration.”¹⁷

The Puritan preacher then quoted a series of Pauline verses—Romans 9:16; Titus 3:5-6; 2 Corinthians 3:5; 4:7; Philippians 2:12-13—as further confirmation of his position. With regard to the two texts from 2 Corinthians, Keach especially emphasized that when it came to preaching, it was not the preacher who could effect the change about which he had been talking. It is not “in the power of the most able minister in the world, that the word preached becomes effectual; no, no, . . . it is from God” that preaching receives the power to change the hearts of men and women.¹⁸

In the next section of this sermon Keach provided additional arguments in support of his perspective on Regeneration. These are based on a variety of Scripture texts, most of them drawn from the New Testament. It is in this section of the sermon that Keach defines what he understood Regeneration and Conversion to be. Regeneration he described as “the forming of Christ in the soul,” a new creation or a new birth, which is accomplished by the agency of the Holy Spirit. Keach believed that Regeneration takes place when the Holy Spirit comes to indwell a person, and a new nature, that of Christ, is formed within the heart of that individual.

Like most of his fellow Puritans, Keach regarded this

work of the Holy Spirit as absolutely essential to the salvation of a sinner. “It is this Spirit indeed,” he said in one of his sermons on the parable of the prodigal son, “who is the immediate agent that meets and brings lost sinners home to God: the Father and Son act and work in, and by the Holy Ghost.”¹⁹ By this means the enmity toward God that grips the heart of every unbeliever is taken away, and a love and delight for God as their chiefest good imparted. Moreover, just as an unborn child contributes nothing toward its formation in the womb, so are “sinners wholly passive in regeneration.”²⁰ As Keach said elsewhere:

If God doth not meet a sinner, or move towards a sinner by his Spirit, the sinner can never meet him. . . . Can that which is dead move itself? Sinners are dead, or without a principle of divine life, naturally; and when life is infused, the soul must be influenced by the Holy Spirit.²¹

When Keach defined Conversion he included what he had already said about Regeneration and thus appears to blur the distinction between the two terms. Conversion, he stated, involves a “two-fold act”:

(1) Passive, which is the act of God’s Spirit, by which he infuseth a vital principle, and gracious habits, or divine qualities in the soul: in this act the creature is wholly passive. Christ . . . infuses life in the dead soul, as he did to dead Lazarus. (2) Active, whereby through the power of that grace, the sinner being quickened, is capacitated to believe, and return to God: being acted, we act; for the Holy Spirit . . . so moves the soul, and the soul acts, and moves towards God. . . . First the sinner’s heart is turned, and then the sinner returneth, then, and not till then: if Christ sought us not first, and found us not first, and took not us up first by his arms and shoulders of divine power, we should

never seek, find, nor return to him.²²

Although this passage shows Keach failing to observe a clear distinction between the two terms, his meaning is clear. What he calls the “passive” aspect of this “two-fold act” is what he has already termed “Regeneration.” It is wholly an act of God, to which human beings contribute nothing. The Holy Spirit comes into the soul, and gives it both the power and the desire to turn to God. Thus, it is in Regeneration that “the seed of actual conversion is sown” in a person’s heart.²³ In Conversion, on the other hand, the individual is vitally involved as his newly given capacity to turn to God is now exercised.

As is evident from the content of this sermon, Keach was typically Puritan in the delight that he took in emphasizing the way in which Regeneration is a sovereign work of God. Keach was rightly convinced that the stranglehold of sin over men and women is so great that “only omnipotence can break its bond.”²⁴

Critical of Hyper-Calvinism

Finally, it should be noted that in presenting this solidly Calvinistic perspective on Regeneration and Conversion Keach was careful to guard against High or Hyper-Calvinism, which was becoming more prevalent during the final years of his life. For instance, among the views that this position espoused was that of eternal Justification.²⁵ According to the doctrine of eternal Justification, Christ’s commitment to suffer for the sins of the elect prior to the creation of the world meant that even then they were regarded as being actually justified. The elect can thus be regarded as having been justified from eternity. If this were true, then saving faith is reduced to a realization of what God has already done in the act of eternal Justification.

Keach, however, steadfastly opposed this position dur-

ing the 1690s. In his main work on Justification, *A Medium Betwixt Two Extremes* (1698), Keach pointedly asked:

Do we not all preach to all out of Christ as unto ungodly ones, to such that are under Wrath and Condemnation in their own Persons, and so remain until they believe or have Union with Christ. Our Lord *came not to call the Righteous*, as such, neither self-righteous ones, not such who in a Gospel-sense are righteous Persons, *but Sinners to repentance*; to such that were really lost in the first *Adam*, and under the Bondage of Sin, and the Law.

Men and women become justified only at the point of believing in Christ.²⁶

Keach had made the same point fifteen years earlier in his popular allegory, *Travels of True Godliness* (1683). At one point in his journey, Godliness encounters a man whom Keach described as “a haughty looking person who seemed greatly disposed to dispute about religion” and to whom he gave the name “Antinomian.” In response to Godliness’ query about what Antinomian believed with regard to Justification, the latter stated that he believed “all the elect are personally and actually justified from eternity.” Antinomian was confident that the love which God had for the elect before their conversion was identical to that which He has for them after it. “God sees no sin,” he says, “nor ever did, in his elect.” Godliness’ response to this view was unequivocal: It was “a doctrine Jesus Christ abhors” and which brings reproach upon Calvinism. Godliness goes on to say that the very notion of being justified presupposes that one was formerly in a state of guilt and condemnation. If unbelievers are under God’s wrath (as John 3:18, 36 bear witness) and at the same time also “actually justified,” then the very notion of Justification becomes meaningless.²⁷

As Keach rightly realized, this debate about the nature of

Justification had immensely practical consequences. In the Antinomian schema, that style of preaching where the lost are explicitly urged to turn to Christ becomes quite unnecessary. What is needed in preaching is simply the proclamation of what God has done in Christ. God will use that to awaken the elect and show them what he has already done for them. Keach's pulpit ministry, however, was characterized by vigorous evangelism and regular calls to the unconverted to respond to Christ in faith. According to C. H. Spurgeon, in speaking to the lost Keach was "intensely direct, solemn, and impressive, not flinching to declare the terrors of the Lord, nor veiling the freeness of divine grace."²⁸

Typical of Keach's evangelistic appeals to the unconverted is the following, cited by Spurgeon to illustrate the above statement:

Come, venture your souls on Christ's righteousness; Christ is able to save you though you are ever so great sinners. Come to Him, throw yourselves at the feet of Jesus. *Look to Jesus*, who came to seek and save them that were lost. . . . You may have the water of life freely. Do not say, "I want qualifications or a meekness to come to Christ." Sinner, dost thou thirst? Dost thou see a want of righteousness? 'Tis not a righteousness; but 'tis a sense of the want of righteousness, which is rather the qualification thou shouldst look at. Christ hath righteousness sufficient to clothe you, bread of life to feed you, grace to adorn you. Whatever you want, it is to be had in Him. We tell you there is help in Him, salvation in Him. "Through the propitiation in His blood" you must be justified, and that by faith alone.²⁹

Here we see Puritan evangelism at its best: cleaving to Christ alone for Salvation, and intensely desirous that others might truly know this joy.

Endnotes

- 1 "Historical and Theological Introduction" to Martin Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will* (Westwood, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1957), 58-59.
- 2 "Radical Sects and Dissenting Churches, 1600-1750," Sheridan Gilley and W. J. Sheils, eds., *A History of Religion in Britain. Practice and Belief from Pre-Roman Times to the Present* (Oxford/Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1994), 205.
- 3 James Barry Vaughn, "Benjamin Keach," Timothy George and David S. Dockery, eds., *Baptist Theologians* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1990), 68.
- 4 The major source of information about Keach comes from his son-in-law, the early Baptist historian, Thomas Crosby. See his *The History of the English Baptists* (London: 1740), 4: 268-314. For more recent accounts of his life, see Hugh Martin, *Benjamin Keach (1640-1704): Pioneer of Congregational Hymn Singing* (London: Independent Press Ltd., 1961); James Barry Vaughn, "Public Worship and Practical Theology in the Work of Benjamin Keach (1640-1704)" (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of St. Andrews, 1989), 6-28; *idem*, "Benjamin Keach," George and Dockery, eds., *Baptist Theologians*, 49-76. For a brief sketch of his life, see R. L. Greaves, "Keach (or Keeche), Benjamin" in his and Robert Zaller, eds., *Biographical Dictionary of British Radicals in the Seventeenth Century* (Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1983), 2: 150-51.
- 5 On the history of this meeting house, see Kenneth Dix, *Benjamin Keach and a Monument to Liberty* (Dunstable, Bedfordshire: The Fauconberg Press, 1985).
- 6 Cited Martin, *Benjamin Keach*, 3.
- 7 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 (1995-96), 43-51.
- 8 Crosby, *History*, 2: 204-208.
 - 9 *Ibid.*, 2: 185-86.
 - 10 Public Worship and Practical Theology," 18. For a discussion of possible circumstances, see *ibid.*, 18-22.
 - 11 B. R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* (London: The Baptist Historical Society, 1983), 7-8.
 - 12 Crosby, *History*, 4: 305.
 - 13 *Gospel Mysteries Unveiled: or, An Exposition of All the Parables and Many Similitudes Spoken by Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* (London: L. I. Higham, 1815), 2: 321-428. On the composition of *Gospel Mysteries Unveiled* and its style, see Vaughn, "Public Worship and Practical Theology," 89-127.
 - 14 *Gospel Mysteries Unveiled*, 2: 392-93.
 - 15 *Ibid.*, 2: 394.
 - 16 *Ibid.*, 2: 394-95.
 - 17 *Ibid.*, 395-96.
 - 18 *Ibid.*, 2: 396-97.
 - 19 *Ibid.*, 3: 57-58.
 - 20 *Ibid.*, 2: 400-401, 404-405, 407-408, 412.
 - 21 *Ibid.*, 3: 57.
 - 22 *Ibid.*, 2: 405-406.
 - 23 *Ibid.*, 2: 406.
 - 24 J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness. The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1990), 296.
 - 25 For a discussion of this doctrine, see R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 186-87; Robert William Oliver, "The Emergence of a Strict and Particular Baptist Community Among the English Calvinistic Baptists 1770-1850" (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, London Bible College, 1986), 23-24; Peter Naylor, *Picking Up a Pin for*

- the Lord: English Particular Baptists from 1688 to the Early Nineteenth Century* (London: Grace Publications Trust, 1992), 173-85.
- 26 *A Medium Betwixt Two Extremes* (London: Andrew Bell, 1698), 31.
 - 27 *The Travels of True Godliness*, Charles G. Sommers, William R. Williams and Levi L. Hill, eds., *The Baptist Library* (Prattville, New York: Robert H. Hill, 1843), 3: 43. For further discussion of Keach's perspective on Justification, see Vaughn, "Public Worship and Practical Theology," 208-42, *passim*.
 - 28 *The Metropolitan Tabernacle; Its History and Work* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1876), 31.
 - 29 Cited *ibid.*, 31.

Author

Dr. Michael A. G. Haykin is Professor of Church History at Heritage Baptist Seminary and Bible College in London, Ontario. He is editor of *Baptist Review of Theology* and author of *One Heart and One Soul: John Sutcliff of Olney, His Friends and His Times* (Evangelical Press, 1995) as well as numerous smaller works, including *Revivals: Signs and Wonders* and *The Dungeon Flamed With Light (18th Century Revivals)*. He is a frequent contributor to journals, including *Reformation & Revival Journal*.