

“AN HONOURABLE ESTEEME OF THE HOLY WORDS OF GOD”:
PARTICULAR BAPTIST WORSHIP IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

“I value not the Practice of all Mankind in any thing in
God’s Worship, if the Word of God doth not bear witness to it”
*Benjamin Keach*¹

In the mid-1630s, a teenager of Welsh descent by the name of William Kiffin (1616-1701), who had been orphaned as a young boy and subsequently apprenticed to a glover in London, became so depressed about his future prospects that he decided to run away from his master. It was a Sunday when he made good his escape, and in the providence of God, he happened to pass by St. Antholin’s Church, a hotbed of Puritan radicalism, where the Puritan preacher Thomas Foxley was speaking that day on “the duty of servants to masters.” Seeing a crowd of people going into the church, Kiffin decided to join them. Never having heard the plain preaching of a Puritan before, he was deeply convicted by what he heard and was convinced that Foxley’s sermon was intentionally aimed at him. Kiffin decided to go back to his master with the resolve to hear regularly “some of them they called Puritan Ministers.”²

¹ *The Breach Repaired in God’s Worship: or, Singing of Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs, proved to be an Holy Ordinance of Jesus Christ* (London, 1691), p.69.

² William Orme, *Remarkable Passages in the Life of William Kiffin* (London: Burton and Smith, 1823), p.3. In the words of one writer, St. Antholin’s at this period of time was well known as “the grand nursery” for training “seditious preachers.” See Swapan Chakravorty, *Society and Politics in the Plays of Thomas Middleton* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p.63.

On William Kiffin, see, in addition to Orme: Joseph Ivimey, *The Life of Mr. William Kiffin* (London, 1833); Barrie R. White, “William Kiffin—Baptist Pioneer and Citizen of London”, *Baptist History and Heritage*, 2 (1967), pp.91-103, 126; B.A. Ramsbottom, *Stranger Than Fiction. The Life of William Kiffin* (Harpenden, Hertfordshire: Gospel Standard Trust Publications, 1989); Michael A.G. Haykin, *Kiffin, Knollys and Keach: Rediscovering Our English Baptist Heritage* (Leeds: Reformation Today Trust, 1996), pp.42-52; *idem*, “Kiffin, Wiliam (1616-1701)” in

Over the course of the next few years Kiffin was soundly converted and, becoming disenchanted with the worship of the established church, the Church of England, he became a seeker for a purer form of church. Years later, when he recalled this period of his life, what stuck out in his memory was his seeking guidance from fellow believers and his diligent examination of the Bible to find what he called “the right way of worship.”³ By the fall of 1642 he had arrived at a decidedly Baptist position. As he wrote in 1681:

After some time [I] concluded that the safest way was to follow the footsteps of the flock (namely that order laid down by Christ and His Apostles, and practised by the primitive Christians in their times) which I found to be that after conversion they were baptised, added to the church, and continued in the apostles’ doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer; according to which I thought myself bound to be conformable.⁴

In so many ways, Kiffin is typical of the men and women who became Baptists during this era of religious and political turmoil as the Puritans found themselves on a collision course with their monarch that would lead to the maelstrom of bloody civil war. They were Christians drawn from the lower middle class—tailors and glovers, confectioners and

H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, eds., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 31:538-42.

³ *A Sober Discourse of Right to Church Communion* (London: Enoch Prosser, 1681), “To the Christian Reader”, [p.i].

⁴ *Sober Discourse*, “To the Christian Reader”, [pp.i-ii].

button-makers⁵—heirs to the theology of the Reformation and Puritanism, and zealous to know how that theology should define their worship.

The central question that led to their becoming known as Baptists, namely, who should be baptized and how, was only one of a number of questions—albeit a very important one—that they had relating to worship. Others included such general questions as “Given the fact that God had given explicit directions about how worship was to take place in the old covenant, should we not expect to find a similar blueprint for worship in the new covenant?” and “If the Holy Spirit is utterly vital for truly efficacious worship to happen, what does that worship look like that he is pleased to energize?” More specific questions focused on certain aspects of worship that were controversial in the seventeenth century. For example: “What type of prayers should be used to address God—written prayers or extemporaneous or a combination of both?” “When should worship take place—on the Lord’s Day or the old covenant Sabbath?” “Can we use uninspired texts, like hymns, to worship God?”

⁵ See the broadside print “These Tradesmen are Preachers in the City of London, 1647”, which depicts these and other tradesmen, reproduced in J.R. Green, *A Short History of the English People* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1893), III, 1179

“An honourable esteeme of the Holy Words of God”

At the heart of all of these questions was a major concern that had been central to both the Reformation heritage of these early Baptists and the Puritan matrix from which they had emerged, namely, the necessity of having explicit Scripture warrant for all that was done in worship.⁶ A significant number of the sixteenth-century Reformers, for instance, had sought to effect the renewal of the late medieval church by going back to Scripture alone to provide authoritative guidance for not only what to preach and believe, but also how to worship. John Calvin (1509-1564) spoke for these fellow Reformers when he declared with regard to the worship of the church, “nothing pleases God but what he himself has commanded us in his Word”⁷ and that “a part of the reverence” we owe to God “consists simply in worshipping him as he commands, mingling no inventions of our own.”⁸ This biblicistic approach to worship was also followed by the Puritans for, as Richard Land has noted in his dissertation on the West Country Baptist Thomas Collier (d.1691), “Puritanism was first and foremost a movement centred in Scripture.”⁹ And the Particular Baptists, faithful children of the Puritans in this

⁶ For the identification of this concern, see Christopher J. Ellis, *Gathering: A Theology and Spirituality of Worship in Free Church Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 2004), pp.74-81. Ellis’ book has been a tremendous help in thinking through issues relating to Baptist worship in the period covered by this paper.

⁷ *Daniel I (Chapters 1-6)*, trans. T.H.L. Parker (Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries, vol. 20; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co./Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 1993), p.130. Cp., though, the remarks of Douglas Kelly, “The Puritan Regulative Principle and Contemporary Worship” in J. Ligon Duncan, III, ed., *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century. Essays in Remembrance of the 350th Anniversary of the Westminster Assembly* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2004), pp.71-2.

⁸ *Institutes* 4.10.23 [trans. Ford Lewis Battles in John T. McNeill, ed., *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2:1202].

⁹ “Doctrinal Controversies of English Particular Baptists (1644-1691) as Illustrated by the Career and Writings of Thomas Collier” (Unpublished D. Phil. Thesis, Regent’s Park College, Oxford University, 1979), p.205.

regard,¹⁰ partook of the same genes and found in the Scriptures alone the determinative criterion for shaping worship.¹¹

When William Kiffin, for example, and three other London pastors drew up a response to the hymn-singing controversy raging in London Baptist circles in the 1690s, they emphasized that it “is a great truth, that as we are not to omit any thing in the Solemn Worship of God that is of his Appointment; so we are not to admit any thing that is not of his institution, under any pretence whatsoever to be intruded upon us.”¹² Similar remarks had been made by Kiffin sixteen or so years earlier in 1676 at the funeral of a fellow Baptist pastor, John Norcott (1621-1676), when he held Norcott up as an example of faithful biblical ministry:

He steered his whole course by the compass of the word, making Scripture precept or example his constant rule in matters of religion. Other men’s opinions or interpretations were not the standard by which he went; but, through the assistance of the Holy Spirit, he laboured to find out what the Lord himself had said in his word.¹³

¹⁰ For the full story of the emergence of the Baptists from the matrix of Puritanism, see especially B.R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* (Rev. ed.; London: The Baptist Historical Society, 1996); Kenneth R. Manley, “Origins of the Baptists: The Case For Development from Puritanism-Separatism” in William H. Brackney with Ruby J. Burke, eds., *Faith, Life and Witness. The Papers of the Study and Research Division of The Baptist World Alliance 1986-1990* (Birmingham, Alabama: Sanford University Press, 1990), pp.56-69; Gordon L. Belyea, “Origins of the Particular Baptists”, *Themelios*, 32, No.3 (May 2007), 40-67.

¹¹ See the discussion of the Puritans in this regard by Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England. I. From Cranmer to Hooker, 1534-1603* (1970 ed.; repr. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1996), pp.258-61.

¹² William Kiffin, Robert Steed, George Barrett, and Edward Man, *A Serious Answer to a Late Book, stiled, A Reply to Mr. Robert Steed’s Epistle concerning Singing* (London, 1692), p.3. On the hymn-singing controversy, see below.

¹³ Cited Joseph Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: B. J. Holdsworth, 1823), III, 300. For further discussion of this point, see James M. Renihan, “The Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists, 1675-

Kiffin's close friend, Benjamin Keach (1640-1704), the most significant Particular Baptist theologian of the late seventeenth century,¹⁴ could likewise assert in 1681, in a direct allusion to the Quakers, who dispensed with the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper:

Many are confident they have the Spirit, Light, and Power, when 'tis all meer Delusion. ...Some Men boast of the Spirit, and conclude they have the Spirit, and none but they, and yet at the same time cry down and villify his blessed Ordinances and Institutions, which he hath left in his Word, carefully to be observed and kept, till he comes the second time without Sin unto Salvation. ...The Spirit hath its proper Bounds, and always tuns in its spiritual Chanel, viz. The Word and Ordinances, God's publick and private Worship...¹⁵

Twenty-five years before this statement, in the summer of 1656, a congregation of Irish Baptists in Dublin—pastored at the time by an Englishman, Thomas Patient (d.1666), and later known as the Swift's Alley Baptist Church—had written to a Welsh Baptist cause at Ilston, Glamorgan. They urged their Welsh brethren, among other things, to “labour to keep up in one another's heart an honourable esteeme of the

1705: The Doctrine of the Church in the Second London Confession as implemented in the Subscribing Churches” (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1997), pp.241-6.

¹⁴ Murdina D. MacDonald has rightly described Keach as “the single most important apologist for Particular Baptist views” in the final decade of the seventeenth century [“London Particular Baptists 1689-1727: Tensions Within a Dissenting Community under Toleration” (Unpublished D. Phil. Thesis, Regent's Park College, University of Oxford, 1982), p.77]. For a similar conviction, see Michael Mullett, “Radical Sects and Dissenting Churches, 1600-1750” in 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), p.205.

The major primary 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), IV, 268-314. The definitive life of Keach is now Austin Walker, *The Excellent Benjamin Keach* (Dundas, Ontario: Joshua Press, 2004).

¹⁵ ΤΡΟΠΟΛΟΓΙΑ: *A Key to Open Scripture-Metaphors* (London: Enoch Prosser, 1681), II, 312, 314.

Holy Words of God in opposition to the present delutions of the times.”¹⁶ It is noteworthy that the Irish Baptists did not consider intellectual assent to the authority of Scripture as sufficient. The Irish longed for their Welsh co-religionists to have a heart-felt “esteem” of God’s Word. In other words, the biblicism promoted by the early Baptist movement had to shape affections as well as thought. Piety, that is, one’s walk with God and one’s worship of him, had to be rigorously Word-centred.

There is a note of urgency in the Irish Baptist appeal. What are described as “the present delutions of the times” make it imperative that the Word be pre-eminent in determining deed, doctrine, and worship. The Particular Baptists initially stressed fidelity to the Scriptures in the early 1640s in relation to their arguments for believer’s baptism and congregational polity over against those—many of them fellow Puritans—who supported paedobaptism and either episcopal or Presbyterian polity. In the late 1640s and throughout the 1650s, though, there emerged a number of other groups, the most prominent of which were the Quakers, who had little regard for the Puritan emphasis on the Word.

¹⁶ *The Ilston Book: Earliest Register of Welsh Baptists*, transcribed and ed. B.G. Owens (Aberystwyth: The National Library of Wales, 1996), pp.75-6, original spelling.

Consider, for example, a letter written by the Quaker leader Isaac Penington the Younger (1616-1679), who “remains a prime example of the intellectual sophistication” of early Quaker converts.¹⁷ Writing to fellow Quaker Nathanael Stonar in 1670, Penington told his correspondent that one of the main differences between themselves and other “professors,” namely, the Puritans, was “concerning *the rule*.” While the latter asserted that the Scriptures were the rule by which men and women ought to direct their lives and worship, Penington was convinced that the indwelling Spirit of life is “nearer and more powerful, than the words, or outward relations concerning those things in the Scriptures.” As Penington argued:

The Lord, in the gospel state, hath promised to be present with his people; not as a wayfaring man, for a night, but to *dwell in them and walk in them*. Yea, if they be tempted and in danger of erring, they shall hear a voice behind them, saying, “This is the way, walk in it.” Will they not grant this to be a rule, as well as the Scriptures? Nay, is not this a more full direction to the heart, in that state, than it can pick to itself out of the Scriptures? ...the Spirit, which gave forth the words, is greater than the words; therefore we cannot but prize Him himself, and set Him higher in our heart and thoughts, than the words which testify of Him, though they also are very sweet and precious to our taste.¹⁸

¹⁷ J.W. Frost, “Penington, Isaac (the Younger)” in Richard L. Greaves and Robert Zaller, eds., *Biographical Dictionary of British Radicals in the Seventeenth Century* (Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1984), III, 23.

¹⁸ *Letters of Isaac Penington* (2nd ed.; repr. London: Holdsworth and Ball, 1829), pp.202-3. For access to these letters I am indebted to Heinz G. Dschankilic of Cambridge, Ontario.

Penington here affirmed that the Quakers esteemed the Scriptures as “sweet and precious,” but he was equally adamant that the indwelling Spirit was to be regarded as the supreme authority when it came to direction for Christian living and worshipping.¹⁹

The Baptists strongly disagreed. Their experiences of the Spirit were to be tried by the Scriptures and not vice versa. As Hercules Collins (1646/7-1702), the pastor of Wapping Baptist Church, London, from 1676 till his death, declared:

Whenever a Word comes from God, if it be not the very words of the Holy Scripture,...and if it do not agree therewith but seems to be another thing and another doctrine, then we are to try the Spirits by the rule, standard, and touchstone of the holy Word of God, the Law and Testimony. And if it speak not according to this Word, it is because they are words of darkness, and not of light.²⁰

¹⁹ See also the remarks by Land, “Doctrinal Controversies of English Particular Baptists”, pp.205-11. In the words of Richard Bauman [*Let Your Words Be Few: Symbolism of Speaking and Silence among Seventeenth-Century Quakers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p.38]: “The Quakers were intensely devoted to the Bible, not as a source of traditional authority, but as historical validation of the patterns and dynamics of their own charismatic prophetic mission.”

For a Puritan response to the Quakers regarding the Scriptures, see Michael A.G. Haykin, “‘The one and Only, absolute and perfect, rule’: John Owen and the Challenge of the Quakers” in Robert W. Oliver, ed., *John Owen—the man and his theology* (Darlington, Co. Durham: Evangelical Press/Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2002), pp.131-55. On the Puritan balance of Word and Spirit, see Christopher Bennett, “The Puritans and the Direct Operations of the Holy Spirit” in *Building on a Sure Foundation. Papers read at the 1994 Westminster Conference* ([London]: The Westminster Conference, 1994), pp.108-22. More specifically, on the conflict between the Baptists and the Quakers, see T.L. Underwood, *Primitivism, Radicalism, and the Lamb’s War: The Baptist-Quaker Conflict in Seventeenth-Century England* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²⁰ *The Scribe Instructed unto the Kingdom of Heaven, Under Variety of Temptations in Three Books: Viz. I. The Scribe instructed unto the Kingdom of Heaven. II. Mountains of Brass: Or, A Discourse upon the Decrees of God. III. A Poem on the Birth, Life, Death, Resurrection and Ascension of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (London, 1696), pp.23-4. On Collins, see Michael A.G. Haykin with Steve Weaver, eds., “Devoted to the Service of the Temple”: *Piety, Persecution, and Ministry in the Writings of Hercules Collins* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2007).

Pneumatology, “the hinge of the theologizing” of the Particular Baptists

Alongside this biblicism, Particular Baptists also had a profound concern with the work of the Holy Spirit, a concern that they derived from their Puritan forebears.²¹ Whatever else the Puritans may have been—social, political, and ecclesiastical Reformers—they were primarily men and women intensely passionate about spirituality and Christian experience. The Puritans in turn had inherited this interest in the Spirit from the continental Reformers of the sixteenth century, and from John Calvin (1506-1564) in particular.²² Benjamin B. Warfield (1851-1921), the distinguished American Presbyterian theologian, has, in fact, described Calvin as “preeminently the theologian of the Holy Spirit.”²³ And of his Puritan and Nonconformist heirs, including the Particular Baptists, and their interest in the Spirit, Warfield has this to say:

The formulation of the doctrine of the work of the Spirit waited for the Reformation and for Calvin, and...the further working out of the details of this doctrine and its enrichment by the profound study of Christian minds and meditation of Christian hearts has come down from Calvin only to the Puritans... it is only the truth to say that Puritan thought was almost entirely occupied with loving study of the work of the Holy Spirit, and found its highest expression in

²¹ Irvonwy Morgan, *Puritan Spirituality* (London: Epworth Press, 1973), pp.53-65, esp. p.60; Dewey D. Wallace, Jr., *The Spirituality of the Later English Puritans. An Anthology* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1987), pp.xi-xiv; J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1990), pp.37-8.

²² Richard B. Gaffin, “The Holy Spirit,” *The Westminster Theological Journal*, 43 (1980) 61. See also the detailed discussion by Garth B. Wilson, “Doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the Reformed Tradition: A Critical Overview,” in George Vandervelde, ed., *The Holy Spirit: Renewing and Empowering Presence* (Winfield, British Columbia: Wood Lake Books, 1989), pp.57-62.

²³ “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Knowledge of God” in his *Calvin and Augustine*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Repr. Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), p.107. See also “John Calvin: The Man and His Work” and “John Calvin the Theologian,” in his *Calvin and Augustine*, ed. Craig, pp.21, 487.

dogmatico-practical expositions of the several aspects of it... For a century and a half afterward, indeed, this topic, continued to form the hinge of the theologizing of the English Nonconformists.²⁴

Now, when it came to worship, this pneumatological passion emphasized that worship had to be marked by inner sincerity and arise from a heart truly devoted to God.²⁵

Thus, as Ken Simpson has noted, the emphasis in seventeenth-century Nonconformist liturgy, including that of the Baptists, was “on the Word and Spirit rather than on the repetition of prescribed acts.”²⁶ In what follows, we look at the way in which this twin emphasis of Word of Spirit, biblicism and pneumatology, is displayed in convictions about worship—the first as it relates to preaching and hymn-singing, and the second with regard to prayer.

“The main and principall Work of the Gospel”

The most visible expression of the desire of the Particular Baptists to be guided by Scripture in all things, including worship, is to be found in the centrality that they gave to the preaching of the Bible in their worship

²⁴ “Introductory Note” to Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (1900 ed.; repr. Grand Rapids Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1956), pp.xxxv, xxviii. More recently, Richard F. Lovelace has reiterated Warfield’s judgment and maintained that “the English Puritans (particularly John Owen and Richard Sibbes) have given us the most profound and extensive biblical-theological studies of the ministry of the Holy Spirit which exist in any language.” [*Dynamics of Spiritual Life. An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), p.120].

²⁵ Ellis, *Gathering*, pp.81-9.

²⁶ “For the Best Improvement of Time”: *Pilgrim’s Progress* and the Liturgies of Nonconformity” in David Gay, James G. Randall and Arlette Zinck, eds., *Awakening Words: John Bunyan and the Language of Community* (Newark: University of Delaware Press/London: Associated University Presses, 2000), p.119.

services. Preaching would usually occupy at least an hour of the worship service, by far the service's major element.²⁷ The reason for its dominant place in worship is given in a sermon on John 10:27 by the London Baptist pastor, Benjamin Keach. He likened preaching to

rich pasture, especially when it is preached powerfully by the Influence and Demonstration of the Spirit; the opening and explaining the Word of the Gospel is like the opening the Pasture-Gate, and so letting the Sheep into it. ... 'Tis like the opening of the Box of precious Ointment, causing a sweet Perfume in the Soul, like as Mary's did in the House. The Work of the Ministry is to open the Scripture... The preaching the Gospel, is the feeding of the Soul.²⁸

The analogies to which Keach compared preaching so as to emphasize its importance—rich pasture land, a box of precious ointment that fills the soul with “sweet perfume,” food for the soul—reveal a conviction that preaching is more than a cognitive exercise. For Keach and his fellow Baptists, the act of preaching is a medium of spiritual nurture where godly affections—vital in the shaping of character—are developed and Christ-like transformation enacted.²⁹ Nor was Keach alone in this conviction. Speaking of the sufficiency of God's Word for every human situation, Hercules Collins voices sentiments similar to those of Keach:

²⁷ Ellis, *Gathering*, p.129.

²⁸ *A Golden Mine Opened* (London, 1694), pp.131-2. See also Renihan, “Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists”, pp.260-1.

²⁹ See Renihan, “Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists”, pp.262-4.

In the sacred Scriptures [there is] a salve for every sore and a remedy for every malady, and direction for every condition and consolation for every one under temptation, which should engage our love more and more to that Word which is lantern to our feet that we stumble not upon the dark mountains, a compass to steer by for avoiding rocks and sands till we come to our eternal rest, and a cordial to comfort our drooping spirits, which unless his law be our delight, we shall perish in our affliction...³⁰

No wonder, then, when the Northern Baptist Association, which was composed of Baptist churches in the old counties of Northumberland, Cumberland, Westmoreland, and Durham, met in 1701 and, among other questions, considered whether “any Preaching disciple may Administer the Ordinance of the Lords Supper and Baptisme?” the representatives from the churches responded affirmatively. “Those Persons that the Church approves of to Preach the Gospel,” they argued, “we think it safe to Approve likewise for ye Administering other Ordinances Preaching being the greater work.” And when, two years later, a similar question was posed to the association, it was answered that “those whom the Church Approves to preach the Gospel may also Administer the Ordinances of Baptism and the Lords Supper Preaching being the main and principall Work of the Gospel.”³¹

³⁰ *The Scribe Instructed unto the Kingdom of Heaven*, p.16.

³¹ S. L. Copson, *Association Life of the Particular Baptists of Northern England 1699-1732* (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1991), pp.89, 95. Spelling original. For further discussion of preaching among the seventeenth-century English Baptists, see Ellis, *Gathering*, pp.125-49, *passim*.

“*Sweet incense*”³²

Baptist biblicism was also central to what amounted to a seventeenth-century worship war over whether or not hymns could be sung in corporate worship. Certain Puritan communities, such as the English Presbyterians and Congregationalists, were convinced that only the Psalms should be sung in public worship.³³ Others, like the General Baptists and the Quakers, largely rejected the practice of any form of congregational singing. While early Baptist worship would have generally followed the Presbyterians and Congregationalists and sung only the Psalms, there were some Baptists who believed that their worship could include hymns as well as psalms. The Welsh open-communion, open-membership Baptist Vavasor Powell (1617-1670) declared his conviction in a personal confession of faith that the “Singing of Psalms (particularly Scripture-Psalms), Hymns, and Spiritual songs, is a continued Gospel-ordinance, and duty; and to be performed by all, but especially in the Churches.”³⁴ Around the same time Hanserd Knollys (1599-1691) also maintained that the singing of “spiritual Songs and Hymnes” was “an ordinance of Gods worship,” though, on the basis of 1 Corinthians 14:15, he held that the only legitimate instance of such singing was when the Holy Spirit “dictated”

³² This section reproduces much of the material in Haykin, *Kiffin, Knollys and Keach*, 91-6.

³³ See, in this regard, *The Westminster Confession of Faith* 21.5 and *The Savoy Declaration* 22.5.

³⁴ *The Life and Death of Mr. Vavasor Powell, that Faithful Minister and Confessor of Jesus Christ* (N. p., 1671), p.41.

the words and tune. Moreover, it seems that the singing Knollys had in mind was that performed by a solo voice and not congregational.³⁵ And in 1680 Hercules Collins published *An Orthodox Catechism* in which there was “an appendix concerning the Ordinance of Singing” that gave clear support for congregational hymn-singing, which Collins, citing Basil of Caesarea (c.330-379), described as “sweet incense.”³⁶ But it is Benjamin Keach who is remembered as the first to introduce hymn-singing into the normal worship of an English congregation.³⁷

Keach had first introduced the singing of a hymn between 1673 and 1675 at the conclusion of the celebration of the Lord’s Table in his London congregation. A few years later hymns were also being sung at thanksgiving services. Finally, at a church meeting on March 1, 1691, a large majority of the members of the church voted to have a hymn sung following the service every Sunday.

³⁵ Hanserd Knollys, “[To the] Courteous Reader”, Preface to Katherine Sutton, *A Christian Womans Experiences of the glorious working of Gods free grace* (Rotterdam: Henry Goddaeus, 1663), [p.ii]. It is noteworthy that by the time of the hymn-singing controversy Knollys had come to believe in the legitimacy of the congregational singing of hymns.

³⁶ See Michael A.G. Haykin and Steve Weaver, eds., “*Devoted to the Service of the Temple*”: *Piety, Persecution, and Ministry in the Writings of Hercules Collins* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2007), pp.79-84.

³⁷ Hugh Martin, “The Baptist Contribution to Early English Hymnody”, *The Baptist Quarterly*, 19 (1961-1962), p.199. There is a significant amount of literature on Keach’s place in the history of English hymnody. See especially David W. Music, “The Hymns of Benjamin Keach: An Introductory Study”, *The Hymn* (July 1983), pp.147-52; James Patrick Carnes, “The Famous Mr. Keach: Benjamin Keach and His Influence on Congregational Singing in Seventeenth Century England” (Unpublished M.A. Thesis, North Texas State University, 1984); Alan Clifford, “Benjamin Keach and Nonconformist Hymnology” in *Spiritual Worship* (London: Westminster Conference, 1985), pp.69-93; 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), pp.128-87; Donald C. Brown, “To Sing or Not to Sing: Seventeenth Century English Baptists and Congregational Song” in *Handbook to The Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville, Tennessee: Convention Press, 1992), pp.55-64.

On the hymn-singing controversy among the Particular Baptists, see especially Michael Watts, *The Dissenters. From the Reformation to the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p.308-12; MacDonald, “London Particular Baptists”, pp.49-82, *passim*; Walker, *Excellent Benjamin Keach*, pp.275-303.

Yet, right from the start of Keach's introduction of hymns there were some in the congregation who felt that this practice was an unscriptural innovation. They eventually left the church in March of 1691 and formed themselves into a new cause that met at Maze Pond. In the articles of faith that the founders of the Maze Pond church drew up in February, 1694, it was explicitly stated that congregational hymn-singing was "a gross error equall with common nationall Sett forme Prayer."³⁸ Earlier in the century Baptists had been uniform in their rejection of the use of written prayers, typified by the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, in corporate gatherings for worship.³⁹ Should not the principle that guided the Baptists on that occasion—namely, where is Scripture warrant for the use of such prayers and will not the use of set forms quench the Spirit's freedom—order this discussion about hymn-singing?

The convictions of these Maze Pond dissidents were shared by a number of other London Baptists, including William Kiffin and Hanserd Knollys' co-pastor, Robert Steed (d.1700). Steed preached against congregational singing on at least one occasion and wrote a book against the practice. Steed also appears to have encouraged Isaac Marlow (1649-

³⁸ MacDonald, "London Particular Baptists", p.88. For the early development of the Maze Pond cause, see MacDonald, "London Particular Baptists", pp.83-108.

³⁹ See below for further discussion.

1719), a wealthy jeweler and a prominent member of the Mile End Green Baptist Church, to publish a book on the issue, which was entitled *A Brief Discourse concerning singing* (1690). Although others would write against congregational singing, it was Marlow who became the chief opponent of the practice. In the course of the hymn-singing controversy, which ran from 1690 to 1698, Marlow wrote no less than eleven books that dealt with the issue.⁴⁰ The heat generated by the controversy may be discerned to some degree by the terms that the two sides tossed at each other. Marlow tells us that he was labelled a “Ridiculous Scribbler,” “Brasen-Forehead,” “Enthusiast,” i.e. fanatic, and “Quaker.” But Marlow could give as good as he got. He called his opponents “a coterie of book burning papists” who were seeking to undermine the Reformation, for, as far as he was concerned, they were endorsing a practice that had no scriptural warrant at all.⁴¹ Keach, on the other hand, felt that having hymns was a “going forward in the glorious work of reformation,” implying that opposition to their use in worship hindered the work of the Holy Spirit.⁴²

These acerbic remarks by both sides in the debate indicate that the division over hymn-singing was no trivial matter. It rent the London Baptist community in two, and, in the words of Murdina MacDonald, “effectively destroyed the capacity of the Particular Baptists as a whole

⁴⁰ For a list, see MacDonald, “London Particular Baptists”, pp.387-91.

⁴¹ MacDonald, “London Particular Baptists”, pp.62, 72-3, 74.

⁴² Walker, *Excellent Benjamin Keach*, p.293.

to establish a national organization at this time.” As MacDonald further notes, the extent of this division is well revealed by the fact that the community’s two elder statesmen, Hanserd Knollys and William Kiffin, found themselves on opposing sides.⁴³ Keach personally had to admit that the controversy was “the hardest Disputation...that ever I met withal since I have been in the World.”⁴⁴ Not only was the division within the London Baptists as a whole, but also there were also splits within individual congregations. Keach’s own congregation suffered a split as did the Petty France Baptist church in 1700 and again in 1706.⁴⁵

Eventually, a committee of seven pastors from outside of the London churches—including Andrew Gifford, Sr. (1649-1721) of Bristol and Samuel Buttall of Plymouth—was established to render a decision in the case. They ruled in 1692 that both sides had erred by their lack of love and failure to be Christ-like. All of the books generated by the controversy were to be brought together and destroyed and no more books were to be published on the subject. All agreed but Marlow.

Marlow and those who opposed the practice of hymn-singing advanced five main arguments in support of their position.⁴⁶ First, they maintained that the use of a pre-composed hymn produces the same effect as the

⁴³ MacDonald, “London Particular Baptists”, pp.69, 63.

⁴⁴ Cited Walker, *Excellent Benjamin Keach*, p.275.

⁴⁵ See Walker, *Excellent Benjamin Keach*, pp.277-8; Watts, *Dissenters*, p.311.

⁴⁶ MacDonald, “London Particular Baptists”, pp.53-4.

reading of a written prayer, namely formalism, and thus leads to a quenching of the Spirit. In arguing thus, they were seeking to uphold what they considered to be an important principle in Baptist worship, namely sincerity.⁴⁷ They were also convinced that examples of singing in the New Testament era involved the exercise of an “extraordinary” spiritual gift. Since these gifts had ceased with the passing of that era, the examples of singing found in the New Testament could not serve as a precedent for their day. Then they argued that congregational singing compromised the purity of the church, for it might well involve people in the congregation who were not regenerate individuals. Fourth, they believed that where there was public singing in the early church it was done by a single voice and was not a congregational effort at all. Finally, where men and women were involved in congregational singing it was a clear violation of 1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12, for these texts were understood to mean that women should not utter a word in the public worship of the church.

Though it came early in the controversy, Keach’s *The Breach Repaired in God’s Worship: or, Singing of Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs, proved to be an Holy Ordinance of Jesus Christ* (1691) proved to be the definitive answer to these various arguments. Keach was eager to defend the practice of congregational singing because he was convinced that

⁴⁷ Ellis, *Gathering*, pp.169-70.

one of the main reasons that Baptist causes of his day were beginning to experience “sad witherings” and a “want of God’s Presence, or liveliness of Spirit” was their neglect of this scriptural “ordinance.”⁴⁸ In other words, far from fostering formalism, Keach actually viewed hymn-singing as a means of spiritual renewal. The failure to engage in hymn-singing was thus robbing God of “one great part of his glorious Praise” as well as depriving believers of “much sweet and Heavenly Joy and Refreshment.”⁴⁹ However, as Alan Clifford has noted, Keach did not build his case primarily upon such pragmatic arguments.⁵⁰

First, he turned to Scripture to demonstrate that the angelic hosts in heaven sing praises to God—thus Job 38:7—as have done the saints of God throughout history.⁵¹ Moreover, Keach was able to cite explicit commands in the New Testament that urge this practice upon believers: Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16, and James 5:13. Given Keach’s desire as a Baptist to ground all of worship in the explicit commands of the New Testament, these were obviously the crucial verses for Keach.⁵²

Then Keach pointed out that if singing in the New Testament was based on an “extraordinary” gift of the Spirit, the same was true of many other

⁴⁸ *The Breach Repaired in God’s Worship: or, Singing of Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs, proved to be an Holy Ordinance of Jesus Christ* (London, 1691), pp.99, 176. For a more extensive analysis of Keach’s argument than is possible here, see especially Vaughn, “Public Worship and Practical Theology”, pp.172-87.

⁴⁹ *Breach Repaired*, p.21.

⁵⁰ “Benjamin Keach and Nonconformist Hymnology”, p.79.

⁵¹ *Breach Repaired*, pp.22-6.

⁵² *Breach Repaired*, pp.54-9; Walker, *Excellent Benjamin Keach*, p.294.

areas of the life of the Apostolic Church. “The Apostles,” he noted, “had an extraordinary Spirit, nay, an infallible Spirit, in Preaching, in Praying, in Propheying, in Interpreting the Scripture.” Keach was of the opinion that these extraordinary gifts “are all ceased, since none have these miraculous Gifts now.” If the logic of those opposed to congregational singing were thus followed, “there’s none now can, or ought to Preach, Pray, Interpret.” If congregational singing is to be rejected because it can only be done on the basis of an “extraordinary” spiritual gift—and since all such gifts have ceased—then the conclusion demanded by the position of Keach’s opponents was that “all Ordinances are gone, or must be cast off” and Christian worship would be well nigh impossible.⁵³

The fear that congregational hymn-singing would involve the unregenerate polluting Baptist assemblies was also decisively answered by Keach.⁵⁴ The Baptist divine rightly pointed out that for unbelievers to come into their assemblies and sing with the believers who were present was one thing, believers “joyning with Unbelievers, is another.”⁵⁵ Moreover, if a Christian assembly is not to engage in corporate singing for fear that there might be one or more unbelievers present, can other acts of congregational worship, like prayer, take place?

⁵³ *Breach Repaired*, pp.62-4.

⁵⁴ *Breach Repaired*, pp.100-10.

⁵⁵ *Breach Repaired*, p.105.

[In prayer] the Communion together in Spirit is more close and intimate than that of uniting the Voice; so that if it be unlawful to let them sing with us, 'tis unlawful to let them in their Hearts joyn in Prayer with us. Must not the Children have their Bread, because Strangers will get some of it?⁵⁶

In fact, Keach believed that the reasoning of Marlow and others like him in this regard would ultimately spell an end to evangelism. For was not “Hearing the Word of God preached” just as much a “Sacred Ordinance” as singing? If Marlow’s reasoning regarding the latter were applied to the former, then the Baptists should “shut the Doors upon them [i.e. unbelievers]” and worship God by themselves without fear of being polluted!⁵⁷

To the argument that “Women ought not to sing in the Church, because not suffered to speak in the Church” Keach replied by pointing out that there were certain occasions when it was quite permissible for women to speak in the assembly of God’s people. For instance, Keach drew his readers’ attention to the fact that when women were admitted into the membership of their local churches they were asked “to give an account of their Conversion in the Church, or how God was pleased to work upon their Souls.”⁵⁸ In other words, Keach was arguing that 1 Corinthians 14:34 or 1 Timothy 2:11-12 had to be understood as

⁵⁶ *Breach Repaired*, p.106.

⁵⁷ *Breach Repaired*, p.110.

⁵⁸ *Breach Repaired*, pp.139-41.

prohibiting women from specific types of speaking in front of the congregation. These texts did not demand from women absolute silence in the meeting-house. As such, they could not be used to prohibit women from singing with the male members of the congregation.

Keach's method of replying to the final argument, that singing in the New Testament was a solo affair, was to show simply that singing was "performed with united voices" in the New Testament, as it had been done in the Old Testament era. For instance, the commands to sing in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 are clearly directed "not to any select Christian, but to the whole Church."⁵⁹

Keach was not merely content to argue the case for singing hymns, he also wrote them. Keach published two hymnbooks, *Spiritual Melody* (1691) and *Spiritual Songs* (1700), which contained in total over four hundred hymns. Although none of them bear comparison with the finest of Watts' hymns, Keach's compositions are not to be rejected *in toto* as mere "doggerel" as they have so often been. There is no doubt that some of his hymns make for awful poetry. However, as James Vaughn has shown, Keach was not seeking to be a Christian poet as much as a Christian herald: his hymns were intended to be "metrical doctrine" and "metrical sermons." Sounding forth the great truths of Christianity, they

⁵⁹ *Breach Repaired*, pp.74, 80-1.

were “long on objective praise and doctrine,” though generally “short on inwardness” and Christian experience.⁶⁰

By the middle of the eighteenth-century Keach’s position had largely prevailed in Baptist circles. The Baptists’ embrace of hymn-singing—an innovation from their Puritan heritage, since the Puritans sang only metrical versions of the psalms⁶¹—would be of great significance in the eighteenth century, for, as Mark Noll has noted, hymnody became “the great engine of evangelical expansion” and a crucial aspect in the revival of the Baptist cause in the late eighteenth century.⁶²

“When the Spirit gets into the heart”

Two years after the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 Parliament passed the Act of Uniformity by which it was legislated that the only permissible structure for worship in England and Wales was the *Book of Common Prayer*. The steadfast refusal of the Particular Baptists, along with those other groups known as Nonconformists, to go along with this ruling led to their being persecuted throughout the reign of Charles II (r.1660-1685). At the heart of their quarrel with the Church of England was the freedom of the Spirit in worship. Take, for instance, the case of

⁶⁰ Vaughn, “Public Worship and Practical Theology”, pp.155-7, 162. For studies of his hymns, see Vaughn, “Public Worship and Practical Theology”, pp.143-62; Music, “Hymns of Benjamin Keach”; Walker, *Excellent Benjamin Keach*, pp.297-301.

⁶¹ Watts, *Dissenters*, p.308.

⁶² “The Future of Protestantism: Evangelicalism” in Alister E. McGrath and Darren C. Marks, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Protestantism* (Malden, Massachusetts/Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p.428.

the open-membership Baptist John Bunyan (1628-1688), who was arrested in the autumn of 1660.⁶³ Though he was arraigned under a law forbidding illegal conventicles that dated from the reign of Elizabeth I (r.1558-1603), the principles at stake were the same as those under attack in the Act of Uniformity.

At his trial in January, 1661, Bunyan was asked by Sir John Kelynge, one of the judges, to justify his absence from worship in the local parish church. Bunyan, biblicist to the core, stated that “he did not find it commanded in the word of God.”⁶⁴ Kelynge pointed out that prayer was a duty. Bunyan agreed, but he insisted that it was a duty to be performed with the Spirit’s aid, not by means of the *Book of Common Prayer*. Bunyan pointed out:

Those prayers in the Common Prayer-book, was such as was made by other men, and not by the motions of the Holy Ghost, within our hearts. ...The scripture saith, that it is the Spirit as helpeth our infirmities; for we know not what we should pray for as we ought; but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us, with sighs and groanings which cannot be uttered [Romans 8:26-27]. Mark, ... it

⁶³ On the controverted question about whether or not Bunyan actually was a Baptist, see especially Thomas Armitage, *A History of the Baptists* (New York: Bryan, Taylor, & Co., 1887), pp.529-39; John Brown, *John Bunyan (1628-1688): His Life, Times, and Work*, revised Frank Mott Harrison (London/Glasgow/Birmingham: The Hulbert Publishing Co., 1928), pp.221-5, 236-8; Joseph D. Ban, “Was John Bunyan a Baptist? A Case-Study in Historiography”, *The Baptist Quarterly*, 30 (1983-1984), 367-76.

This author would agree with the estimation of Richard L. Greaves when he states that “Bunyan is rightly regarded as an open-membership Baptist” [“Conscience, Liberty, and the Spirit: Bunyan and Nonconformity” in N. H. Keeble, ed., *John Bunyan: Conventicle and Parnassus. Tercentenary Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p.35].

⁶⁴ *A Relation of the Imprisonment of Mr. John Bunyan* in John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, ed. W. R. Owens (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1987), p.95.

doth not say the Common prayer-book teacheth us how to pray, but the Spirit.⁶⁵

Quickened by this debate with Kelynge, Bunyan's thoughts about the nature of true prayer found written form not long after his trial in *I will pray with the Spirit*. There are no surviving copies of the first edition. The second edition, dated 1663, appears without a bookseller's or publisher's name on the title page. The title page simply states "Printed for the author". The book was probably too hot for any publisher to handle!⁶⁶ And no wonder when Bunyan declared near the end of the book: "Look into the Gaols in England, and into the Alehouses of the same: and I believe, you will find those that plead for the Spirit of Prayer in the Gaol, and them that look after the Form of men's Inventions only, in the Alehouse."⁶⁷

Bunyan's tract on prayer opens with a mini "definition" of prayer:

Prayer is a sincere, sensible, affectionate pouring out of the heart or soul to God through Christ, in the strength and assistance of the Holy Spirit, for such things as God hath promised, or according to the Word, for the good of the Church, with submission, in Faith, to the will of God.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ *Relation of the Imprisonment in Grace Abounding*, pp.95, 96.

⁶⁶ Roger Sharrock, " 'When at the first I took my pen in hand': Bunyan and the Book" in Keeble, ed., *John Bunyan*, p.80.

⁶⁷ *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded and I Will Pray With the Spirit*, ed. Richard L. Greaves (*The Miscellaneous Works of John Bunyan*, vol.II; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p.294.

⁶⁸ *I Will Pray With the Spirit*, ed. Greaves, p.235.

The rest of the book takes up each individual item in this “definition.” Understandably, it is his discussion of the clause “in the strength and assistance of the Holy Spirit” which forms the heart of his treatise, for it was this very point which was in dispute with the Established Church.

In discussing this clause regarding the Spirit’s role in prayer, Bunyan takes his start from Ephesians 2:18 and Romans 8:26-27. On the basis of these Pauline texts, Bunyan asserts that “there is no man, nor Church in the world, that can come to God in Prayer but by the assistance of the Holy Spirit.”⁶⁹ He then proceeds to detail a number of reasons as to why the Spirit’s aid is so vital when it comes to prayer. A consideration of the more important of these reasons brings the reader to the centre of Bunyan’s theology of prayer, a theology that is typical of seventeenth-century Baptist thoughts about worship.⁷⁰

First, only by the Spirit can a person think rightly of the One to whom he prays. They then, not being able to conceive aright of God to whom they pray, of Christ through whom they pray... how shall they be able to address themselves to God, without the Spirit help this infirmity?⁷¹

⁶⁹ *I Will Pray With the Spirit*, ed. Greaves, p.246.

⁷⁰ On this subject, see also the discussions by Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* (2nd ed.; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1947), pp.62-73; Davies, *Worship and Theology in England. I. From Cranmer to Hooker, 1534-1603*, pp.261-80. Some of what follows is drawn from Michael A.G. Haykin, “The Holy Spirit and Prayer in John Bunyan”, *Reformation and Revival Journal*, 3, No.2 (Spring 1994), 85-95.

⁷¹ *I Will Pray With the Spirit*, ed. Greaves, p.249.

Bunyan is emphatic that the *Book of Common Prayer* is of absolutely no help when it comes to the imparting of such spiritual understanding. The Spirit, and he alone, can reveal the Father and the Son as the proper recipients of prayer.

Second, only the Spirit can “shew a man clearly his misery by nature, and so put a man into the posture of prayer.”⁷² Such a sensibility of sin, though, would cause the believer to flee from God’s presence were it not for the Spirit’s encouragement to run to God for mercy. Third, it is the Spirit who enables a man to know the right and only way to come to God, namely through his beloved Son, the Lord Jesus. “Men may easily say,” Bunyan writes, “they come to God in his Son: but it is the hardest thing of a thousand to come to God aright and in his own way, without the Spirit.”⁷³

Fourth, it is only the Spirit who can enable a person fully conscious of his sinful nature to address God as “Father.” Bunyan’s discussion of this point is worth quoting in full:

O how great a task is it, for a poor soul that becomes sensible of sin, and the wrath of God, to say in Faith, but this one word, *Father!* I tell you, how ever hypocrites think, yet the Christian, that

⁷² *I Will Pray With the Spirit*, ed. Greaves, p.251.

⁷³ *I Will Pray With the Spirit*, ed. Greaves, p.251.

is so indeed, finds all the difficulty in this very thing, it cannot say, God is its *Father*.

Oh! saith he, I dare not call him Father; and hence it is, that the Spirit must be sent into the hearts of God's people for this very thing, to cry, *Father*, Gal. 4.6, it being too great a work for any man to do *knowingly*, and *believingly*, without it. When I say, *knowingly*, I mean knowing what it is to be a Child of God, and to be born again. And when I say, *believingly*, I mean, for the soul to believe, and that from good experience, that the work of Grace is wrought in him: this is the right calling of God *Father*; and not as many do, say in a babbling way, the Lord's Prayer (so called) by heart, as it lyeth in the words of the Book. No, here is the life of Prayer, when in, or with the Spirit, a man being made sensible of sin, and how to come to the Lord for mercy; he comes, I say, in the strength of the Spirit, and cryeth, *Father*.

That one word spoken in Faith, is better than a thousand prayers, as men call them, written and read, in a formal, cold, like-warm way.⁷⁴

Here Bunyan speaks from experience. The right calling of God "Father" and experience of intimate communion with him comes not from the mere recitation of the Lord's prayer "in a babbling way", but from the inner work of the Spirit.⁷⁵

Fifth, Bunyan refers again to his own experience in prayer when he goes on to stress that only the Spirit can enable the believer to persevere in prayer once he has begun.

⁷⁴ *I Will Pray With the Spirit*, ed. Greaves, p.252.

⁷⁵ Richard L. Greaves, "Introduction" to his ed. *I Will Pray With the Spirit*, pp.xliii-xliv.

May I but speak my own Experience, and from that tell you the difficulty of Praying to God as I ought; it is enough to make your poor, blind, carnal men, to entertain strange thoughts of me. For, as for my heart, when I go to pray, I find it so loth to go to God, and when it is with him, so loth to stay with him, that many times I am forced in my Prayers; *first* to beg God that he would take mine heart, and set it on himself in Christ, and when it is there, that he would keep it there (Psalm. 86.11). Nay, many times I know not what to pray for, I am so blind, nor how to pray I am so ignorant; only (blessed be Grace) the *Spirit helps our infirmities* [Romans 8:26].

Oh the starting-holes that the heart hath in time of Prayer! none knows how many by-ways the heart hath, and back-lains, to slip away from the presence of God. How much pride also, if enabled with expressions? how much hypocrisie, if before others? and how little conscience is there made of Prayer between God and the Soul in secret, unless the *Spirit of Supplication* [Zechariah 12:10] be there to help?⁷⁶

This passage displays a couple of the most attractive features of seventeenth-century Particular Baptist piety: its honesty and its in-depth knowledge of the human heart. From personal experience Bunyan well knew the allergic reaction of the old nature to the presence of God, and he sees the use of written prayers as simply fostering and helping to cover up this desire to run from God. Little wonder that Bunyan says right after the above passage: “When the Spirit gets into the heart then there is prayer indeed, and not till then.”⁷⁷ Thus, were it not for the Spirit, none would be able to persevere in prayer. “A man without the

⁷⁶ *I Will Pray With the Spirit*, ed. Greaves, pp.256-7

⁷⁷ *I Will Pray With the Spirit*, ed. Greaves, p.257.

help of the Spirit cannot so much as pray once; much less, continue ... in a sweet praying frame.”⁷⁸

Where “God is most glorified”

Driving both Benjamin Keach’s defence of what he called “this sweet Ordinance” of hymn-singing⁷⁹ and John Bunyan’s willingness to go to prison for extemporaneous prayer was the conviction that both of these ordinances deeply enriched the corporate worship of the local church. In that corporate worship Keach, Bunyan and their fellow Baptists believed that they experienced, to quote Keach, “the nearest Resemblance of Heaven” and received the “clearest manifestations of God’s Beauty” in this world. “The publick Worship of God ought to be preferred before private,” Keach continued, though the latter should certainly not be neglected, for the place where “God is most Glorified” is in the midst of a worshipping congregation.⁸⁰ Bunyan made the same point though phrased it quite differently when he stated in *Solomon’s Temple Spiritualized*: “the way into heaven is through the church on earth.”⁸¹

⁷⁸ *I Will Pray With the Spirit*, ed. Greaves, p.256.

⁷⁹ *Breach Repaired*, p.69.

⁸⁰ *The Glory of a True Church, and its Discipline display’d* (London, 1697), pp.63-8, *passim*.

⁸¹ *Solomon’s Temple Spiritualized; The House of the Forest of Lebanon; The Water of Life*, ed. Graham Midgley (Miscellaneous Works of John Bunyan, vol. VII; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), See the discussion of Bunyan’s view of the church and its ordinances by Simpson, “For the Best Improvement of Time” in Gay, Randall and Zinck, eds., *Awakening Words*, pp.113-26.