

Biblical Authority as the Basis for Singing in Benjamin Keach’s Philosophy of Congregational Song

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Benjamin Keach, London Particular Baptist pastor at the church of Horsley-down, was zealous for pure worship, worship that reenacts both the prescribed elements and forms found in Scripture. This desire led him to defend strongly the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in the corporate worship service. On his church’s singing, Keach states that “if our people (I mean, the church to whom I belong) are one of the first churches of our persuasion in this sacred ordinance [song], I am satisfied it will be to their great honor, (and not to their reproach) and that not only in succeeding ages, but also in the day of Jesus Christ.”² Keach’s arguments influenced the implementing of congregational song into Baptist churches, and his legacy is seen today in the common practice of the ordinance of singing praises among Baptists.³

This essay traces Keach’s arguments supporting congregational song. It spends a smaller amount of time developing the history of his role in the hymn-singing controversy, a topic more commonly examined. Although many are aware that Keach defended congregational song, far fewer know of his arguments supporting the practice of the ordinance. Some have claimed that Keach departed from the traditional Baptist adherence to the biblical regulation in worship (commonly called the regulative principle) in his philosophy of congregational song, putting him in conflict with Isaac Marlow and others. James C. Brooks notes that Keach “challenged fun-

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² Benjamin Keach, *An Answer to Mr. Marlow’s Appendix* (London: John Hancock, 1691), 7–8.

³ Keach considered every prescribed element for corporate worship found in the New Testament an ordinance; see Benjamin Keach, *The Articles of Faith of the Church of Christ, or Congregation Meeting at Horsley-down* (London: n.p., 1697), 20–28.

damental worship practices of the Particular and General Baptists and, on the issue of congregational singing, promoted interpretive principles generally embraced by those of a Lutheran heritage in a fellowship that had strictly adhered to principles derived from John Calvin.”⁴ Similarly, James Barry Vaughn claims that Keach and Marlow disagreed in the “fundamental principle of Reformed worship.”⁵ In contrast to Vaughn and Brooks, this essay contends that Keach was not rejecting the regulative principle of worship in his defense of congregational song, but rather he based his arguments on the principle. To accomplish this, I first briefly explain the historic context of Keach’s use of congregational song, and then I explore his writings to determine his philosophy as it relates to the church’s singing. I argue that it actually is his strict adherence to the regulative principle of worship that shaped Keach’s philosophy of congregational song.⁶

Historical Context

Before analyzing Keach’s philosophy of congregational song, this section briefly describes his position on the ordinance of song in its historic context. It opens with an explanation of Keach’s use of congregational song in the Lord’s Supper, and it closes with a concise summary of Keach’s disputes with Isaac Marlow.

Early Promotion of Congregational Singing

When Keach introduced congregational song to the church at Horsley-down, singing was practiced but not prevalent in Partic-

⁴ James C. Brooks, “Benjamin Keach and the Baptist Singing Controversy: Mediating Scripture, Confessional Heritage, and Christian Unity” (Ph.D. diss., The Florida State University, 2006), 130.

⁵ James Barry Vaughn, “Public Worship and Practical Theology in the Work of Benjamin Keach (1640–1704)” (Ph.D., diss., University of St. Andrews, 1990), 174.

⁶ This principle states that for worship, whatever is not prescribed in Scripture is forbidden. For more information on the regulative principle of worship, see T. David Gordon, “Some Answers about the Regulative Principle,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 55, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 321–29, and R. J. Gore Jr., “Reviewing the Puritan Regulative Principle of Worship,” *Presbyterian* 21, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 29–47.

ular Baptist churches.⁷ The 1689 Second London Baptist Confession permitted singing, but it did not specify what kind of singing was allowed. The confession's wording could be understood as singing of the heart, psalmody only, or singing all spiritual songs, and there were Baptists who defended each of these positions.⁸ Into this historical context Keach implemented congregational song around 1673.

Keach first used congregational song following the Lord's Supper, which, being held at the end of the service, allowed for those strictly opposed to leave before singing occurred. David Copeland notes that most Particular Baptist congregations practiced the Lord's Supper once a month, so congregational song could have been practiced monthly.⁹ Four to six years later Keach began to implement hymns into other services, and after twenty years singing was practiced regularly at the church of Horsley-down.¹⁰ This practice did not avoid conflict, and by 1691 Keach was fully entrenched in it.

Benjamin Keach's Disputes with Isaac Marlow

As congregational song began to become more prevalent in London Particular Baptist congregations, Isaac Marlow (1645–1710) felt it was necessary to write a treatise against it. In 1690 he penned *A Brief Discourse Concerning Singing in the Public Worship of God in the Gospel Church*. This anti-singing document led Keach to respond with a treatise of his own titled *The Breach Repaired in God's Worship: or Singing of Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs Proved to be an Holy Ordinance of Jesus Christ*. James Carnes explains that the controversy "turned into a red-hot issue when Marlow published the appendix to his *A Brief Discourse* before Keach's *Breach Repaired* was off the

⁷ David Copeland states that "the Broadmead Baptists employed song in their worship from 1671–1685" (David Copeland, *Benjamin Keach and the Development of Baptist Traditions in Seventeenth-Century England* [Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2001], 119).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 119–20.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 122.

press.”¹¹ This led Keach to write a response titled *An Answer to Mr. Marlow's Appendix* later that same year. The controversy led twenty-six congregants to withdraw their membership from the church at Horsley-down, including Isaac Marlow's wife.¹² Michael A. G. Haykin notes that the departed church members eventually formed a church in Maze Pond with a statement directly opposing congregational song in their articles of faith.¹³ After the treatises were written, Keach and Marlow scheduled a public debate, which unfortunately “fell through when Keach felt Marlow was being too manipulative with its conditions.”¹⁴ The controversy over congregational song became so heated that it dominated the discussions of the 1692 London Particular Baptist's national General Assembly Meeting.¹⁵

¹¹ James Patrick Carnes, “The Famous Mr. Keach: Benjamin Keach and His Influence on Congregational Singing in Seventeenth Century England” (Master's thesis, University of North Texas, 1984), 60.

¹² Brooks, “Benjamin Keach and the Baptist Singing Controversy,” 49.

¹³ Michael A. G. Haykin, *Kiffin, Knollys, and Keach: Rediscovering English Baptist Heritage* (Queen Creek, AZ: Evangelical Press, 1997), 92. Haykin also offers helpful information on Baptists that opposed Keach's position on congregational song and the disruption that the conflict caused the Particular Baptists. He states that “the convictions of these dissidents were shared by a number of other leading London Baptists, including William Kiffin, Robert Steed (d. 1700), co-pastor with Hanserd Knollys, and Isaac Marlow (1649–1719), a wealthy jeweler and a prominent member of the Mile End Green Baptist Church. Steed preached against congregational singing on at least one occasion and appears to have encouraged Marlow to publish a book against the practice, 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. 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 viewed his opponents as ‘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. 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 Calvinistic Baptists as a whole 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” (Haykin, *Kiffin, Knollys, and Keach*, 92–93).

¹⁴ Matthew Ward, *Pure Worship: The Early English Baptist Distinctive* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 189.

¹⁵ Brooks, “Benjamin Keach and the Baptist Singing Controversy,” 47–52. Brooks provides insight about the 1692 Assembly meeting: “In 1692 . . . the assembly was dominated by the stirrings produced by the introduction of congregational hymn singing by Benjamin Keach at Horsleydown. . . . Keach's introduction of singing led his detractors, a minority of his congregation, to challenge him on ‘will-worship,’ the introduction of a man-

About the meeting, Brooks observes that “the narrative never reflects any discussion on the merits or demerits of the argument concerning singing, whether it was right or wrong, helpful or harmful, required or voluntary.”¹⁶ Instead, it focused primarily on the process of the disputes and the attitudes of those involved.¹⁷

Matthew Ward provides insight to why the controversy was so intense, observing that “each man absolutely believed that he employed the proper understanding of Scripture with respect to worship; any compromise would of necessity be a step away from pure worship and thus unacceptable.”¹⁸ Compromise was objectionable to both men because Keach believed congregational song was necessary to “restoring” Baptists to “favor with God and . . . everything they held dear as tradition,” and Marlow strongly regarded congregational song to be in direct contradiction to God’s Word.¹⁹ Ward later suggests that the “hymn-singing controversy” proved that worship was a clear distinctive of the London Particular Baptists.²⁰ Both holding Scripture as their only rule of faith, Keach and Marlow affirmed that God prescribed worship and that man had no right to add or subtract from what God ordered.²¹

made element into the worship service. Twenty-six members left the Horsleydown congregation, including the wife of Isaac Marlow. A respected layman as well as a delegate to the General Assemblies and the treasurer of the assembly’s fund, Marlow launched a pamphlet war on the matter. Keach and Marlow, as well as supporting pastors on both sides of the issue, exchanged public pamphlets and private letters in support of their causes. These documents display reprehensible actions and the dispute degenerated into unkind, even unchristian, accusations toward each other. Thus, in 1692, the assembly had just cause to attend to the dispute” (49).

¹⁶ Ibid., 51.

¹⁷ Ibid., 52.

¹⁸ Ward, *Pure Worship*, 198.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 209.

²¹ For more information on the background of the hymn-singing controversy, consult the following: Vaughn, “Public Worship and Practical Theology”; Austin Walker, *The Excellent Benjamin Keach*, 2nd rev. ed. (Kitchener, Ontario: Joshua Press Inc., 2015); Carnes, “The Famous Mr. Keach”; Copeland, *Benjamin Keach and the Development of Baptist Traditions*; and Brooks, “Benjamin Keach and the Baptist Singing Controversy.”

The Importance of Biblical Prescription for Keach's Philosophy of Congregational Song

Keach's philosophy on the ordinance of singing can be analyzed through three of his writings.²² Based on his own words, I trace Keach's philosophy and how the regulative principle shaped it.

The Articles of Faith of the Church of Christ, or Congregation Meeting at Horsley-down

Keach wrote *The Articles of Faith* for his church in Horsley-down in 1697. Article Twenty-Seven related specifically to singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs:

We believe that singing the praises of God, is a holy ordinance of Christ, and not a part of natural religion, or a moral duty only; but that it is brought under divine institution, it being enjoined on the churches of Christ to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; and that the whole church in their public assemblies (as well as private Christians) ought to sing God's praises, according to the best light they have received. Moreover, it was practiced in the great representative church, by our Lord Jesus Christ with his disciples, after he had instituted and celebrated the sacred ordinance of his holy supper, as a commemorative token of redeeming love.²³

A few observations can be made from this statement. First, this article claims that singing is an "ordinance of Christ," and second, it describes singing as a "moral duty." Singing is not ceremonial law, it is a moral duty for all people to practice even today (this will be shown in more depth later). Third, it is a "divine institution." God demanded people to sing, so singing is not an invention of man. Fourth, Keach identifies what people should sing: "psalms, hymns,

²² *The Articles of Faith of the Church of Christ, or Congregation Meeting at Horsley-down* (specifically the article on congregational song), *The Breach Repaired in God's Worship*, and *An Answer to Mr. Marlow's Appendix*.

²³ Keach, *The Articles of Faith of the Church of Christ*, 27.

and spiritual songs," drawn directly from Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16. Fifth, Keach believes that none in the church should abstain from singing when they are gathering for corporate worship. Sixth, the church in Acts practiced singing, so the Bride of Christ today should follow its example. Seventh, Jesus and his disciples sang a hymn after they ate the Passover meal before Christ's death. Since Christ sang, the church should sing. Last, Keach explains that Christians sing because Christ's love has redeemed them. This, if nothing else, provides reason for Christians to sing.

Keach's *Articles of Faith* clearly reflects his commitment to the regulative principle, which affirms that anything not prescribed in Scripture is strictly prohibited, and everything prescribed for worship must be included. The document asserts that God initiates congregational song, it finds prescription in the Scripture, and all should practice it. Because God prescribes song, and it is not an invention of man, it is a requirement of the church.

The Breach Repaired and An Answer to Mr. Marlow's Appendix

Keach's two treatises written specifically in defense of congregational song—*The Breach Repaired* and *An Answer to Mr. Marlow's Appendix*—express his philosophy more thoroughly. Because both documents were written with the same objective and in response to Isaac Marlow, Keach's central arguments in them will be discussed jointly.

The Thesis of Each Treatise

Keach clearly presents his thesis for *The Breach Repaired*:

That all may see upon what authority we have received, and do practice this ordinance of singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, I have wrote this treatise; and do hope, with the Blessing of God, it may tend to establish such who own

it to be an ordinance of Christ, and convince others, who either oppose it, or through want of light, live in neglect of it.²⁴

This statement expresses that Keach believed song to be a scripturally commanded ordinance for the corporate worship of the church. Keach further clarifies his thesis: "I sincerely desire that the Lord would make this friend [Marlow] sensible of the evil and vanity of this attempt, to remove out of the church this part of religious worship, which hath been kept up so many ages, both under the law, and under the gospel."²⁵ This articulates his zealous belief that God commands the church to practice congregational song, and he also mentions his position that singing is part of the moral law, a belief to be examined later.

Keach's strict adherence to the regulative principle shaped his telos for both treatises. This is seen in the salutation of *An Answer to Mr. Marlow's Appendix* when he explains that those practicing the ordinance of singing have every right to be angry with those not practicing it because they are subtracting from God's Word.²⁶ Both sides of the argument believed that only what was commanded in Scripture could be performed in corporate worship. Likewise, in the opening epistle of *The Breach Repaired* Keach pens strong regulative language when he states that "you have not made men, general councils, nor synods, your rule, but God's Holy Word: your constitution, faith, and discipline, is directly according to the primitive pattern; God hath made you (in a most eminent manner) to be the builders of the old wastes, and raisers up of the former desolations, and repairers of the waste cities, the desolations of many generations (Isaiah 61:4)."²⁷ He desires the present church to worship in the same way that the scriptural church worshiped, not with the inventions of men. He believed that a breach had occurred in the worship of the body of Christ, not properly practicing song, and it grieved him.²⁸ These treatises aimed to return the church to a pure, biblically prescribed form of worship, neither adding to nor sub-

4. ²⁴ Benjamin Keach, *The Breach Repaired in God's Worship* (London: Hancock, 1691),

²⁵ Keach, *An Answer*, 55.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁷ Keach, *The Breach Repaired*, iv.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, vii.

tracting from what God had designed. Thus, Keach's aim was fully rooted in the regulative principle.

What Is Singing?

Keach supports his thesis in multiple ways. First, he explains what it means to sing. Many, including Marlow, taught that singing was only done within the heart or mind, that it should not include the use of the vocal folds or tongue. Keach strongly disagreed with this presupposition, and he argued that without the tongue, the soul cannot preach, dispute God's Word, or "sing in the proper sense."²⁹ He defends physical singing in several ways. First, Scripture calls people to sing joyfully. He stresses that "'tis not merely that in word, joy or rejoicing in spirit, but an expressing of it with a melodious voice."³⁰ Second, people can hear when birds make melodious song, and it is easy to hear when the Lord's people are singing and which ones of them are practicing the ordinance.³¹ Third, prayer and song are two distinct ordinances, and, fourth, singing and rejoicing are distinct. Keach elucidates that "for though all right singing to God is a praising of him, . . . yet all praisings of God are not singing of his praise."³² Finally, one can hear singing as revealed in Exodus 32:7. If God prescribes physical song in Scripture, then the church must practice it.³³ Keach believed song must be practiced the way Scripture commanded it, physically; thus he agreed with the regulative principle in his definition of singing.

Singing Is an Ancient Practice Founded in Scripture

Keach also argues that physical singing in worship of the Godhead is "as ancient as the world."³⁴ Keach defends this claim scripturally with Job 38, explaining that angels sang during the creation of the world and at the birth of Christ.³⁵ Interestingly, Keach

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 18.

³³ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 24–25.

recognizes that the disciples sing his praises, but the Pharisees did not care for song, asking Christ to rebuke the disciples. Thus, Keach maintains that Satan is the enemy of singing praises to Christ. Keach believed that “if Heaven, and all of the host of Heaven, or all that is therein, and Earth, and all that is in it, are commanded by the Holy Ghost to sing the praises of God; then ’tis the duty of men and angels to sing his praise.”³⁶ All of creation sings praises to God, so it is prescribed for man to sing praises to God.

Singing Is a Scriptural Ordinance

Singing is not only an ancient practice, it is thoroughly found in Scripture. Keach traces how song appears in different parts of the Bible. He declares that God’s people should sing “because the Lord (who alone appoints his own worship) hath commanded and required it at our hands; and his command and precept is the rule of our obedience.”³⁷

Keach provides several examples of singing from the Old Testament. The angels sang in the book of Job, and singing was practiced before the children of Israel received the law. After God gave the law singing was seen with Moses, David, and Asaph, and the Jewish people sang both before and after they were sent into exile. Prophetic psalms like Psalm 100 give warrant to singing in the gospel days.³⁸ Not only are there Old Testament examples for song, there is also singing in the New Testament. Mary, Zacharias, Elizabeth, Paul and Silas, and Christ all sang. Keach states, “that which was the practice of the Lord’s people before the law, and under the law, and also in the gospel-dispensation, is the indispensable duty of the saints and people of God, to practice in all ages.”³⁹

Keach also looks at the New Testament commands to sing in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16. Although Paul urged Christians to leave behind the ceremonial Jewish rites, he still “enjoins the duty of singing of psalms and hymns and spiritual songs upon them by the authority of the Holy Ghost, as that which is the absolute duty

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 41–49.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

of the saints and churches of Jesus Christ in gospel-days."⁴⁰ In *An Answer to Mr. Marlow's Appendix*, he argues that Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 give clear New Testament merit to singing.⁴¹

In *The Breach Repaired*, Keach notes that Christ sang with the disciples after the Lord's Supper was instituted in Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14:26.⁴² Keach clearly explains his understanding of *hymnos* (the hymn sung after the institution of the Lord's Supper) in *An Answer to Mr. Marlow's Appendix*. Because Marlow translated *hymnos* as praise, he believed that song was not prescribed clearly in this passage.⁴³ Keach compares Marlow's translation of *hymnos* as praise to that of the paedo-baptizers translating *baptizo* as washing. Keach warns Marlow: "You, it seems, take the same way to destroy the ordinance of singing God's praises, as they take to destroy the ordinance of baptism: but this will do your business no better than that will do theirs; dipping is washing, but every washing is not dipping."⁴⁴ Keach explains that scholars translate *hymnos* as singing. The singing that took place after the Lord's Supper was "vocal, melodious singing," so the church must sing in the same manner.⁴⁵

Because there is such a clear New Testament prescription for singing, Keach believed that it was the duty of the local body to practice "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to the end of the world."⁴⁶ Whether a person or church should sing is not a choice left to Christian liberty because it is so clearly commanded in the New Testament. Keach lucidly proclaims regulative language: "whatsoever given forth under the law, or enjoined as an ordinance (unless a moral precept) that is not given forth anew under the New Testament (there being neither precept nor precedent for it) I never believe it doth in the least concern us."⁴⁷

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴¹ Keach, *An Answer*, 31.

⁴² Keach, *The Breach Repaired*, 59.

⁴³ Keach, *An Answer*, 15.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁶ Keach, *The Breach Repaired*, 59.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

Singing Is a Moral Duty

Not only is song a scriptural ordinance, it is also a moral duty. A moral duty is an act that all men should practice, so singing is a moral duty.⁴⁸ Even if Scripture did not command people to sing, Keach avows that nature would teach people to do so, supplying Genesis 4 and Exodus 15 as examples. Keach suggests that song is a moral duty for a few reasons. First, he claims that “to sing forth the praises of God or man, is the highest manner or mode of praising, either God or man, that we know of, or are able to attain unto, which doth appear.”⁴⁹ He argues that joy naturally leads to song, and it “is called by the Holy Ghost a praising of him in the heights.”⁵⁰ Second, God calls all creatures to praise him, so they should sing to him. Third, because God grants men the physical ability to sing, all men should sing praises to God. Men should not sing “foolish” songs, but songs that bring the Godhead glory.⁵¹ Fourth, 1 Corinthians 14:15 and James 5:13 list singing with prayer, showing that it is a moral duty like prayer. Keach contends that “though prayer is a moral duty, yet it is commanded, and also the manner prescribed how to be performed as acceptable to God; so is preaching likewise; . . . so is singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.”⁵²

Some, like Marlow, believed that song was a ceremonial or formal law and not a moral law. Keach insists that he is not calling for formal prayer, preaching, or song, but spiritual prayer, preaching, and song.⁵³ Although Keach believed that song is a moral duty placed upon all men, he still expressed that corporate worship should only contain that which was prescribed in Scripture. In response to Marlow he used strong regulative language:

I deny that we have any rule to expect men should bring forth anything in the worship of God by an extraordinary Spirit to be preached or sung, but what is contained in the Word of Christ, or is taken out of the Scripture, or agrees

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 40.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 159.

thereunto; because that is a perfect rule both for matter and form, in the performance of all religious worship, and ordinances of the gospel; and that which you call carnal and formal, I say, is spiritual.⁵⁴

Since singing is a moral law that is prescribed by God in Scripture, Keach believed that all men should sing.

Miracles Confirm Singing Is an Ordinance

Not only is singing prescribed in Scripture and a moral duty, miracles prove singing to be a gospel ordinance. Keach traces how miracles occur in Scripture with the ordinances. Gathering on the first day of the week was miraculous because of the “wonderful effusion of the Holy Ghost (Acts 2:1–3).”⁵⁵ The Holy Spirit fell during Peter’s sermon (Acts 10), confirming preaching to be an ordinance, and baptism was confirmed with the miracles of God’s voice speaking and the Spirit’s descent after Christ’s baptism. Similarly, laying on of hands also was confirmed to be an ordinance by the Holy Spirit’s indwelling in Acts 19:6, and prayer was accompanied with the apostles being filled with the Holy Spirit in Acts 4:31. Keach believed that the miracle of the jail cells opening with the earthquake, after Paul and Silas had sung praises to God in Acts 16, confirms song to be a gospel ordinance. He defends this claim by stating that “all gospel ordinances were witnessed to by the miraculous gifts of the Holy Ghost, in the apostles’ days, and so likewise they had extraordinary gifts to discharge those duties respectively.”⁵⁶

Singing Was Continued by the Patristic Fathers

Although Keach mainly defends the ordinance of singing with Scripture, he also defends it with early church tradition, specifically the patristic fathers’ use of song in worship. Keach notes that Pliny (the Younger) wrote about the early church singing hymns of

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 62–63.

worship to Christ, and Philo Judaeus also confirms that the early Christians sang in worship.⁵⁷ Keach recognizes that Tertullian, around AD 194, spoke about singing from the Bible. He also observes that Athanasius, Cyprian, Chrysostom, Estius, and Ambrose supported singing. Interestingly, Keach notices that Samosatenus, the heretic, was against the ordinance of singing. He writes that none of the early church fathers speak of any type of singing “but that of united voices.”⁵⁸ Thus, the patristic authors advocated and practiced congregational singing.

Although Keach defended congregational song as a church ordinance with church tradition, he still relied heavily upon scriptural prescription:

I must confess, I value not the practice of all mankind in anything in God’s worship, if the Word of God doth not bear witness to it, but since ’tis positively enjoined in the New Testament, and also an example left of our savior, and his disciples practice, I thought it could not be amiss to take notice of the unanimous agreement, and joint consent and practice of the churches and godly Christians in the succeeding ages next after the apostles, and to this very day; but all this is needless, since ’tis to me all one has to go about to prove the saints in every age of the world did pray and praise God, this of singing being an ordinance of the same nature.⁵⁹

Congregational song has a rich tradition within the church, but even more importantly it has a New Testament prescription for its practice.

The Ordinance of Song Must Be Congregational

The local body should “sing together harmoniously.”⁶⁰ In contrast to Marlow and others, Keach believed that singing should be done by the congregation and not individually. The Old Testa-

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

ment includes examples of people singing together such as the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15 and Deborah and Barak. Keach also points to the “great noise” mentioned in scriptural examples to defend the concept of people singing together.⁶¹ Exodus 32:17–18 must have been a song in united voices so that Joshua could hear it. Some might say that this passage cannot be used as an example because the song was sung to the golden calf. Keach answered this objection: “’tis no matter to whom they sung, it was their sin and horrid wickedness to give that divine worship and praise to a molten image, that belonged to God only; but there is no question that they sung now to this false god, as they had done.”⁶² Despite the children of Israel singing to a false god, they still were singing in a way that could be heard. Keach also considered Psalm 81:1–2 and Revelation 19 to defend congregational song with a loud noise that was audible. He argues that “to sing together with a melodious voice, is to be our rule and practice in singing, and there is no other.”⁶³ Further, Keach defends his claim that singing should be congregational with New Testament support from Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16, which show that it is the church who sings, and they should sing “together with united voices.”⁶⁴ If it is only for some to practice, it opens the door for people to choose not to practice God’s prescribed duties for his bride.⁶⁵

In response to those who supported solo singing only, such as Marlow, Keach charged them with practicing inventions of man and not God’s prescription. He considered individual singing in corporate worship a “mere innovation in God’s worship, being without precept or example.” He supported this claim with biblical examples of Christ and his disciples as well as Paul and Silas. Ward rightly recognizes that Keach held congregational song to be the scriptural form, and Keach’s opponents thought congregational song should be rare and individual.⁶⁶

Keach’s strong reliance upon the regulative principle is extremely lucid in his support for congregational song instead of solo singing:

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 84.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁶⁶ Ward, *Pure Worship*, 201.

If it was never commanded of God, not the practice of his people under the Old Testament, nor in the New, in the ordinary worship of God for one man alone to sing by himself in the public congregation; then for any to attempt to bring such a practice into the church would be a great evil, and an absolute piece of will-worship, or an innovation. But it was never the practice of God's people under the Old Testament, nor in the New, nor commanded of God in the ordinary worship of God, for one man alone to sing by himself in the public congregation. Ergo, for any to attempt to bring such a practice into the church, would be a great evil, and an absolute piece of will worship, or an innovation.⁶⁷

Man must not add to or subtract from Scripture. Keach clearly argued that God only prescribed congregational song and that any form not prescribed by God, like individual song, was prohibited.

Keach's Understanding of the Meaning of Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs

Keach recognized the difficulty in understanding the meaning of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. In contrast to Marlow trying to render the meaning of each form of singing, Keach responded, "pray, brother, let you and I leave those nice distinctions to better scholars than you or I pretend to be."⁶⁸ Keach recognized that some hold the distinctions to be differing categories of psalms. He believed that commanding psalms ensures the singing of David's Psalms, and he considered psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to refer to all types of sacred song. He notes that "I am of the same mind with those learned men that Mr. Wilson in his dictionary, and others speak of, that psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs comprehend all kinds of spiritual songs, whereby the faithful sing to the glory of God, and the edification of the church provided they are taken out of the Word of Christ."⁶⁹ Though hesitant in delineating

⁶⁷ Keach, *The Breach Repaired*, 85.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 97. Keach refers to Thomas Wilson, *A Complete Christian Dictionary* (London, 1661).

exactly what type of song each is, Keach believed that all corporate spiritual singing should be allowed.

In answering Marlow's objection to singing words not in Scripture, Keach offered a solid argument. In sermons, preachers speak words that are not exact quotations of the Bible. The ordinance of song should be treated in the same manner. The English translations of the Bible are also not what was originally penned because the inspired writings were in Greek and Hebrew (and Aramaic). Translators add many words for the readers' clarity. If songs that lack a quotation in Scripture cannot be used, then neither can sermons nor translations of the Bible be used that are not the original inspiration.⁷⁰ Some may argue that this perspective is antithetical to the regulative principle, but Keach's position on the ordinance of song was consistent with his practice of other ordinances. Although he allowed for singing of extrabiblical text, he also allowed for extrabiblical words (any word not in Scripture, not false doctrines) in sermons and English translations of the Bible for clarity. This expresses the difficulties that London Particular Baptists faced with agreeing on what was a circumstance and what was an essential element to pure worship.⁷¹

The Spirit's Role in Congregational Song

Keach also wrote about the requirement for the congregation's psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to be spiritual. In *An Answer to Mr. Marlow's Appendix*, Keach explains that "now singing flows from that joy that all the saints ought to labor after; and also from the fruits of righteousness, we have an equal need to be filled with the Spirit, to pray, to meditate, to praise God, and to preach and hear the Word, as well as to sing psalms and hymns, etc."⁷² If it is a scriptural song, the form of that song is spiritual, and if it accompanies a correct tongue and heart, spiritual worship will occur. Keach also insists that a Christian does not need to have any more of a special gifting to make singing a spiritual act than a preacher

⁷⁰ Ibid., 94–97.

⁷¹ For more information refer to Ward, *Pure Worship*.

⁷² Keach, *An Answer*, 30.

needs special spiritual gifting to make his sermons a spiritual act.⁷³ To be spiritual, all ordinances must be practiced with the “right performance.” For singing to be spiritual, the worshiper should sing in the way that God prescribes them to sing, with the right tongue and proper heart. In arguing this, Keach was consistent with the regulative principle.

Keach on Musical Instruments

As has been analyzed, Keach was a zealous defender of congregational singing. As part of his argument, he also provides insight into his philosophy of instrumental music in corporate worship. Singing is a moral law, per Keach, but instruments are only ceremonial. He states that “therefore there is now no other instrument to be used in singing but that of the tongue, well-tuned with grace, from a holy and spiritual heart.”⁷⁴ He contends that singing is prescribed in the New Testament, but instruments were not given a fresh prescription. Like the Aaronic priest, instruments “fled away, and then nothing was left but singing with heart and voice, by the spirit, to the Lord.”⁷⁵

Keach’s rejection of instruments in corporate worship displays clearly his strict adherence to the ideals of the regulative principle in corporate worship. Because he sees no prescription in the New Testament for instruments, he believes they must be prohibited in worship.

Should Women Sing in Congregational Song?

In both *The Breach Repaired* and *An Answer to Mr. Marlow’s Appendix*, Keach wrote about the issue of women singing in congregational song. In *The Breach Repaired*, he addressed Marlow’s stance: “You say, women ought not to sing in the church, because not suffered to speak in the church, and also because singing is teaching.”⁷⁶ Keach held that if women cannot take part in the ordinance of con-

⁷³ Ibid., 41.

⁷⁴ Keach, *The Breach Repaired*, 54.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 150.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 139.

gregational song, they also cannot share the testimony of their conversion. Sapphira was expected to answer Peter after he charged her and her husband, and Miriam sang the Song of the Sea in Exodus.⁷⁷

Keach produces a more thorough defense in his *An Answer to Mr. Marlow's Appendix*. He proclaims that "'tis a hard case that women should be debarred to speak in any sense, or any ways to break silence in the church, as you [Marlow] affirm through a mistake of the text."⁷⁸ He gives a few reasons that women must be required to speak in the assembling of the body. First, women cannot ask how other congregants are doing, and they cannot produce evidence or witness in church discipline without being able to speak. Second, when a woman is late, she cannot ask what passage is the basis of the sermon. Third, she cannot say the amen when the prayer closes, and finally, as he mentions in *The Breach Repaired*, she cannot give an account of her conversion unless allowed to speak when the congregation assembles.

Keach also responds to the objection that women must not teach and that song is a mode of teaching. He clarifies that "as to that teaching which is in singing, it doth not lie in a ministerial way, and therefore not intended by the Spirit of God here, preaching or teaching is not singing, nor singing preaching or teaching, though there is a teaching in it."⁷⁹ God intends that all sing in congregational song because it is an ordinance for the entire church. This argument is consistent with the regulative principle despite not being an argument solely for the regulative principle. If God commands all to sing in congregational song, as seen in the aforementioned section on congregational song, then both men and women must sing.

Conclusion

Benjamin Keach was zealous for the use of congregational song in the corporate worship service because he believed the Bible commanded churches to sing. J. M. Givens Jr. aptly summarizes Keach's contributions: "His arguments sought to explain how congregational singing was neither promiscuous nor disorderly; how

⁷⁷ Ibid., 141.

⁷⁸ Keach, *An Answer*, 33.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 34.

the church could utilize precomposed forms and yet retain spiritual worship; and how hymns were not human inventions but instruments of worship and proclamation similar to the sermon.”⁸⁰ Keach valued singing and he wrote around five-hundred hymns.⁸¹ In 1691 his hymnal *Spiritual Melody* was published containing 147 hymns.⁸² He published a second hymnal in 1696 titled *The Feast of Fat Things*. James C. Brooks rightly notes that Keach’s boldness led English non-conformists to a greater acceptance of hymnody.⁸³ Keach applied his philosophy, shaped by his strict adherence to the regulative principle, to the corporate worship of his congregation in Horsley-down. His goal was to follow God’s prescription in worship while rejecting the inventions of men in the assembling of the body. Keach expressed why he was so zealous for the holy ordinance of congregational song when he proclaimed that “’tis only spiritual worship . . . that I plead for, in contending for singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.”⁸⁴

⁸⁰ J. M. Givens Jr., “‘And They Sung a New Song’: The Theology of Benjamin Keach and the Introduction of Congregational Hymn-Singing to English Worship,” *American Baptist Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (December 2003): 415. According to Givens, promiscuous singing is “the mixed praise of the believer and nonbeliever” (407). Keach believed that singing was a moral duty for all to practice; thus congregational singing could not be promiscuous. Whether congregational song could be promiscuous was one of the disagreements between Marlow and Keach.

⁸¹ Carnes, “The Famous Mr. Keach,” 94.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 94–95.

⁸³ Brooks, “Benjamin Keach and the Baptist Singing Controversy,” 6.

⁸⁴ Keach, *An Answer*, 6.