

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Ten Baptists Everyone Should Know: Benjamin Keach

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Benjamin Keach (1640-1704) has been identified by historian Michael Mullet “as the leading Baptist theologian of his era, similar in importance for his denomination as Richard Baxter was for the English Presbyterians, John Owen for the Congregationalists and Robert Barclay ... for the Quakers.”¹ Keach’s theological pilgrimage took him from his baptism as an infant in the Church of England, to becoming a convinced credo-baptist as a teenager, to his position as the leading Particular Baptist theologian at the end of the seventeenth century.

Although christened into the Anglican Church within a week of his birth on February 29th of 1640, by the age of fifteen Keach had become convinced by Scripture that his baptism as an infant was invalid and subsequently applied to be immersed upon his profession of faith into a General Baptist congregation.² In 1660 at the age of twenty, Keach began preaching regularly to the congregation meeting at Winslow. During the 1660s, Keach faced innumerable hardships and persecutions because of his preaching and publishing in an era (1660-1688) which seventeenth-century English Baptist historian B.

¹ Cited by Michael A. G. Haykin in *Kiffin, Knollys and Keach: Rediscovering Our English Baptist Heritage* (Reformation Today Trust, 1996), 83.

² The designation “General” was to distinguish from other Baptists known as “Particular” who held that Christ’s atonement was particular in its application to the elect. General Baptists held to a general atonement.

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R. White called “The Era of the Great Persecution.”³ On one occasion Keach nearly lost his life when soldiers were planning to trample him to death with their horses. Just before they executed their plan on his bound body, a commanding officer appeared who spared Keach’s life. Instead of being killed, Keach was imprisoned, but was eventually released.

In 1668 Keach made the move to London where the rest of his ministry would be carried out. On his way to London calamity struck as Keach was waylaid by robbers and all of his possessions were taken. Thus, Keach arrived in London penniless with only his family and the clothes on their backs. The Baptists of London welcomed Keach and his family by taking up collections for their welfare. Keach soon began to lead a congregation of General Baptists meeting in a house on Tooley Street in Southwark, London (south of the Thames River). This group of believers would eventually organize themselves into a church meeting in Horsley-down. This congregation would eventually become the New Park Street Church/Metropolitan Tabernacle later famously pastored by a certain Charles Haddon Spurgeon. Keach remained as pastor of this congregation until his death in 1704.

By the time the church at Horsley-down was established, Keach had become a Calvinist.⁴ The exact circumstances leading to this change in soteriological conviction is unknown. It is known that Keach quickly became acquainted with prominent London Calvinistic Baptist pastors William Kiffin, Hanserd Knollys, and John Norcott shortly after arriving in London. Perhaps these men led in collecting funds for the deprived Keach family after their plunder on the way to London. By 1670 when Keach remarried after his first wife had died, it was the Particular Baptist leader Hanserd Knollys who officiated at his wedding.

Keach was involved in numerous controversies throughout his career. He offered written responses to both Quakerism and Baxterianism, but his most lasting influence likely comes from his role in the hymn-singing controversy of the period. Keach is generally credited with being the first to introduce congregational hymn singing as a part of the regular worship of English-speaking congregations. Though others may have been engaged in this practice previously, Keach’s role was cemented by his publication in 1691 of *The Breach Repaired in God’s Worship, or, Singing of Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs, Proved to be an Holy Ordinance of Jesus Christ with an Answer to All Objections*. This work was actually written against some published objections by Isaac Marlow, one of his own church members! Keach’s response, though the debate continued to rage over the next

³ B. R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* (Didcot: The Baptist Historical Society, 1996), 95-133.

⁴ Nevertheless, he always maintained the General Baptist practice of laying on of hands upon the newly baptized.

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decade, would prove to be the definitive response to all objections to hymn-singing and would eventually win the day.

Recommended Resources

Keach was the most prolific author among seventeenth century Baptists. It should be noted that Keach's allegorical works, though largely forgotten today, rivaled the popularity of the allegories written by his contemporary John Bunyan. Still in print among Keach's works are his massive [Preaching from the Types and Metaphors of the Bible](#) (Kregel Reprint Library),⁵ his dispute with Richard Baxter [The Marrow of True Justification](#) (Solid Ground Christian Books), and the allegory [The Travels of True Godliness](#) (Solid Ground Christian Books). [Available on Google Books for free](#) are *Tropologia (Types and Metaphors)* and three of Keach's allegorical works.

To learn more about Keach, see Thomas J. Nettles' essay "Benjamin Keach (1640-1704)," in [The British Particular Baptists](#), Michael A. G. Haykin, ed., vol. 1 (Particular Baptist Press), I: 95-100; and his chapter on Keach in [The Baptists: Key People Involved in Forming a Baptist Identity, vol. 1](#) (Christian Focus Publications), 163-193. Also see Michael A. G. Haykin, *Kiffin, Knollys and Keach: Rediscovering our English Baptist Heritage*, 83-97, in which a [second edition](#) is scheduled to release soon. An exceptional full-length biography has been done in recent years by British pastor Austin Walker titled [The Excellent Benjamin Keach](#) (Joshua Press). David Bowman Riker's 2006 dissertation from the University of Aberdeen has recently been published by Wipf & Stock as: [A Catholic Reformed Theologian: Federalism and Baptism in the Thought of Benjamin Keach, 1640-1704](#). The most thorough analysis of Keach as a theologian in the Reformed tradition is Jonathan Arnold's Oxford dissertation [The Reformed Theology of Benjamin Keach \(1640-1704\)](#) was published by Regent Park College's Centre for Baptist History and Heritage.

This is Part Two of ten on an ongoing series by Steve Weaver.



Steve Weaver

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⁵ Originally published in 1681 under the title, *Tropologia: A Key to Open Scripture Metaphors*.

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[*Baptist Identity in Early Modern England*](#) and has co-edited of a modern edition of [*An Orthodox Catechism*](#) (a 1680 Baptist revision of the Heidelberg Catechism). Steve and his wife Gretta have been married for twenty-four years and have been blessed with six children. You can follow him on Twitter at [@steveweaver](#).

© *Credo Magazine*, October 4, 2019. Retrieved July 22, 2022.

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