

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

The First Hymnbook in Use.

JUST two hundred and fifty years ago, Benjamin Keach issued through John Hancock a pocket hymnbook entitled, "Spiritual Melody, containing near Three Hundred Sacred Hymns." It was not quite the first book of the kind, for Miles Coverdale, in the days of the Tudors, had written original hymns; but that book was instantly suppressed by Henry VIII. When the people insisted on singing for themselves, instead of being sung at, Thomas Sternhold versified some of the Psalms; then Stephen Hopkins and William Whittingham added such as they thought breathed a Christian spirit; till others with less discernment completed the whole one hundred and fifty, with the Commandments and songs such as the Magnificat. These came into use before and after the official Common Prayer in church worship. Again, George Wither had written real poetry, and had secured from King James an order that his book was to be bound with the psalter and the Bible; but the Stationers' Company, who had a monopoly of these, successfully evaded the order.

In Commonwealth times a few propaganda hymns were sung occasionally, and even found their way into print; but the chief effect was to start an opinion that human hymns, as distinct from godly psalms, were not only out of the Church tradition, but ought not to enrich it. So it was left for Baptists, a generation and more later, to begin singing original hymns at worship, and then to publish a hymnbook for many congregations to use.

Benjamin Keach, about 1665, came into some notoriety for writing a primer for children, which included some verse to be learned by heart. Though he was for this act condemned to the pillory, and the whole edition was burned, he followed Jeremiah's precedent and wrote it again, larger. It came into such favour that it became the foundation of the New England Primer. Other Baptists had the same idea of catering for children, such as Abraham Cheare at Plymouth and John Bunyan at Bedford. But none of their verses were accompanied with music, nor is there any sign that they were sung generally, whether at school, at play, in the home, or at public worship.

Keach and Joseph Stennett approached the question from a Biblical standpoint. Since after the Last Supper of the Lord with His disciples, before they quitted the upper room, they sang a hymn, was it not fitting for a Church, after celebrating the Lord's Supper, to close with a hymn? Both ministers persuaded

their congregations, and wrote hymns for the purpose. Here is one of Keach's, shortened :

WONDERS OF GRACE.

Let Christ be had in great esteem, and lifted up on high ;
O let us all remember Him who for us all did die.

How did he, Lord, with bitter cryes, make known His grief to Thee,
While languishing His Body hung for us upon the Tree.

Unto the Cross they did Thee nail, Thy Sides they pierc'd also ;
O let us all apply Thy Blood which from Thy Wounds did flow.

Its precious vertue we receive to purge and make us white,
That through it we might all indeed be lovely in Thy sight.

Lord, didst Thou die that we might live? O let us sigh and mourn
With fervent hearts unfeignedly, to think what Thou hast borne

To save our Souls from Wrath and Hell, that we might changèd be,
And so at last in Heaven dwell to all eternity.

This shows that Keach was wise enough to write in the English or Common metre, for which scores of tunes were in general use. He did not imagine himself a poet, but he did try to be as good a craftsman as Sternhold; and another "hymn of praise after the Sacrament" gives an extra rhyme, as two verses will show :

His Grave was made, and Body laid with the rich and unjust ;
His Honour high despised did lye all covered up in dust.

Prais'd be the Lord, prais'd be the Word and Spirit too therefore ;
Sing praise will we to the Bless'd Three now and for evermore.

From this express Biblical precedent it was easy to widen to hymns at a baptism and after a sermon :

In ev'ry Ordinance also in which we should be found
O Thou art all ; for we well know grace in Thee doth abound.

The Sacraments do hold Thee forth and witness bear to Thee ;
And we by one to see by faith Thou nail'd wast to the Tree ;

Thy Body broke, and blood was shed ; in Baptism we do espy
Thou in the Grave wast covered, but long Thou didst not lye :

But as the Body raised is that cover'd was all o'er,
So Thou wast raised unto life, and diest now no more.

(Note how, like a good workman, he distinguishes the three

syllables covered from the two cover'd). One hymn was published expressly for the close of an Association Meeting; it would be most fitting for the L.B.A. or the Union to ask the Tabernacle congregation to lead in this, two hundred and fifty years after it was first published :

We have had a sore winter's day, a pinching time was here;
But shall such weather fly away, and springing times draw near?

We praise Thy great and glorious Name for Seasons we have had,
O let us not be put to shame, but in Thyself be glad.

We now must part, and for a while not see each other here;
So let us walk, that when Christ comes, with Him we may appear,

And sing sweet Songs of Melody, and Joy in God above;
And ravish'd be eternally with His transcendent Love.

As Fraternalists were already established, and he wanted to introduce hymns in other churches, he penned some verses on the text, " My doctrine shall drop as the rain " :

Thy Ministers are like to Clouds who do the rain retain;
Of whom thou dost make equal use to pour it out again.

O let us then cry unto God his Clouds may all be full,
Not empty ones which hold no Rain, but do deceive the Soul.

And pray that we may always have rain as we do it need,
That Grace may grow, and in us all spring up like to choice Seed,

And praise the glorious God above who doth such Blessings send;
If we His mercies do improve, our days will joyful end.

In this way Keach accumulated 76 hymns which seemed worthy of print for permanent use in many congregations; not simply to be lined out, to be sung from dictation once only. Moreover he was a diligent student of scripture, and he had broken new ground with a massive folio to expound the metaphors of the Bible. He had the idea of compressing his voluminous prose into rhyme that could be memorised by adults as well as children, though he was careful to say that he did not recommend them as proper to be sung. He lost few chances of urging the duty and the beauty of public song, but it is unexpected to find this flowering out of the Burning Bush.

This Bush long time on fire has been, O 'tis a wondrous sight,
Though in the fire, yet not burn'd, This may our Souls invite

To take a view, as Moses did, O why is this thing so?
Alas thy Church is dear to thee Beyond all things below!

O then let all those precious Birds who in this Bush are hid
Sing forth thy praise continually, and none their Souls forbid.

The time of singing, O 'tis come, since the sweet Turtle-Dove
Did let us hear, in this our Land, his voice from Heav'n above.

Keach was very clever in blending many allusions; Moses, Isaiah, Christ and Paul contribute to one hymn which apparently inspired Toplady:

The Rock of Ages, Lord, Thou art, on Thee we do depend;
Upon this Rock let us be built, and then let Rains descend;

Let Floods rise high, and let Storms beat, we shall securely stand,
While others Fall, Lord, will be great, who build upon the sand.

This Rock is high, mount up with speed, you Canaan may espy;
If you by faith ascend this Rock, to you it will seem high.

Then sing ye praise unto your Rock, no Rock is like to this;
The Rock of our Salvation great a Sanctuary is.

The Proverbs of Solomon yielded a luminous suggestion, which in after years prompted the greatest of Keach's successors to work up a famous lecture:

Once was our Candle lighted, Lord, and did most clearly burn;
But soon did Satan blow it out, and we were all undone.

O let our Candle lighted be! O light it once again,
And by it search to find out sin which may in us remain.

That in Thy light we may see light, and thereby may rejoice,
And sing Thy Praises day and night with heart and cheerful voice.

Hosea's moth prompted a sermon with remarkable inferences, and other prophets caught attention. But the New Testament was most suggestive in facts and parables, as well as metaphors. The story of Christ's baptism leads him to emphasise the fact that the Spirit is come already, a doctrine obscured by many hymns pleading that He would come, a doctrine reiterated by Spurgeon echoed from Keach:

Behold He's come, an Olive-leaf within His mouth we see;
God's wrath is o'er, it is asswag'd, O therefore joyful be.

Let's see Thy face, and hear Thy voice, and taste Thy sweetest love!
O Souls ascend! but O for Wings, the Wings of Noah's Dove!

Then should we fly away from hence, leaving this world and sin,
And soon would Thou, Lord, reach Thy hand, and kindly take us in.

Is Christ the Door? How few people in 1691 discerned the duty of leading others to that Door, preaching for conversion :

All good lyes hid in God above, like to a House of store;
And such as would go in and eat, must enter by this Door.

We in Thy church ought all to dwell, bring in more souls and more,
By Thy Example, Doctrine too, Thou art the only Door.

All praise and glory unto God let us now sing again;
For showing to us the right Door, and bringing of us in.

Did Jesus tell of a weedy field, left to grow till harvest? This suggested two hymns, with such verses as :

The Angels they the Reapers be, the Wheat are God's Elect,
Which shall, Lord, gathered be to Thee, the Tares Thou wilt reject.

Thou sendst Thy glorious Rays on us, and Dews, our Souls to cheer,
But ere long we with open Eyes the Vision shall have clear.

Or rather in Thy precious Arms we being ripenèd,
Shall housèd be with lasting Charms of Glory on our Head.

He extracts good Baptist doctrine, based on the motto in *Hebrews*, God the chief Builder; though he did not discern that God has more patterns than one, and does not work by mass-production :

'Tis He that built His Glorious Church, and laid the corner Stone;
In all the Earth there is None such, O praise the Holy One.

The matter and the form also, did He alone ordain,
No alteration must be made upon eternal pain.

All other builders Servants have to labour with their hands;
Who according to the pattern act, and just as He commands.

So Ministers does God employ, who must the pattern know,
And if they alter anything, they do their folly know.

The Rule it is God's Holy Word, would you the Pattern view,
'Tis the first Church the Lord did build, as th' Apostles Acts do show.

Keach saw around him some men like those who shocked Paul with their inference that the more they sinned the more would God's grace abound, and he often sets out the call to live as heirs of God, to strive like runners in the arena :

He that the Prize doth think to have must take the greatest care
To set out timely, must begin before old age draws near.

He that would win the Prize also, must know what way to run;
And must hold out, not weary be, until the Prize he's won.

O then, ye Saints, run you apace in ways of Piety;
Gird up your Loyns, and nothing fear, look up, lift up your Eye

The Prize to see: Ah! 'tis your own, and when you end your days,
You shall receive it, therefore now break forth and sing God's praise.

But all the glory for a holy life is due to the Lord. This is expressed in verses where Keach takes care to place the emphatic little word just where the accent falls—as many versifiers do not:

Our works are all wrought *in* us, Lord, and *for* us too by Thee;
Thy praises therefore we will sing, and that continually.

He never delves into the mysteries contained in the *Revelation*, but bases himself on the actual vision to John as he evangelised on Patmos:

Thy Churches, Lord, are like unto rich Candlesticks of Gold,
In whom shines forth that glorious light which sinners do behold.

As Candlesticks in a large House in which the Light they place;
And also are for Ornament (:) Ev'n thus, through Thine own Grace

Are all Thy Churches here on Earth of use, Lord, unto Thee,
And unto others, who likewise Thy Riches in them see.

While nearly all his hymns deal with eternal things, yet twice he glances at the events of the last few years. Once, the excellency of the Gospel wrings a sigh of relief from the doings of James II by the coming of the Prince of Orange:

Blessed be God that we were born under the joyful sound,
And rightly have Baptized been and bred on English ground,

Dumb Pictures might we all ador'd, like Papists in Devotion;
And with Rome's Errours so been stor'd to drink her deadly Potion.

The Sun which rose up in the East and drove their shades away,
Hath sent His Light unto the West and turn'd our Night to Day.

The other allusion is to the other rhymester, with whom he was in friendly competition for a quarter of a century, each prompting the other to some new enterprise. It was only three years since Bunyan had crossed the river and the trumpets had sounded for him on the other side, when Keach published:

Lord, we are Pilgrims on the Earth, as all our Fathers were,
For this is not our dwelling-place, no 'biding for us here.

A Pilgrim loves good company, don't care to go alone;
So do God's Saints delight in such who do Christ Jesus own;

And walk with them in the same way, if that they be sincere,
They prize their precious company, they helpful to each are.

A Pilgrim, when he's come near home, he greatly doth rejoyce;
O let such Saints whose work's near done, lift up with joy their
voice.

None of Keach's hymns are still sung in England. Yet exactly two hundred and fifty years after he published this book, we do well to honour him as the father of English hymnody. Isaac Watts bettered him, but Keach was the first pilgrim along this road.

W. T. WHITLEY.

THOMAS NEWCOMEN, ironmonger, of Dartmouth, Devon; and others, by letters of agreement dated 10th November, 1715, covenanted with James Lowther to erect a "fire engine," with a steam barrel of at least sixteen inches diameter within and eight feet in length, as his Stone Pit, situate between Whitehaven and a place adjoining called Howgill. It did such good pumping that after 1726 they supplied a second, which was used till about 1780. Then the Saltom Pit was sunk 152 yards close to the shore, and two larger engines were installed about 1731, which lasted fifty years. It is somewhat remarkable that while most of Newcomen's partners were Baptist, and churches often gathered in the midlands round their engines, no such result was here; the Whitehaven church originated only in 1751 by the energy of a newcomer from Liverpool.

W.T.W.