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“AN HONOURABLE ESTEEME OF THE HOLY WORDS OF GOD”:
PARTICULAR BAPTIST WORSHIP IN THE 17TH 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 Keach¹

Introduction: The case of William Kiffin (1616-1701)

I. *Word and Spirit: “An honourable esteeme of the Holy Words of God”*

- William Kiffin: it “is a great truth, that as we are not to omit anything 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.”²
- William Kiffin, speaking in 1676 at the funeral of a fellow Baptist pastor, John Norcott (1621-1676):

“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.”³

- Letter from Dublin Baptists to a Welsh Baptist cause at Ilston, Glamorgan: “labour to keep up in one another’s heart an honourable esteeme of the Holy Words of God in opposition to the present delutions of the times.”⁴
- Baptist response to the Quakers: Hercules Collins (1646/7-1702), the pastor of Wapping Baptist Church, London, 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.”⁵

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 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.

³ Cited Joseph Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: B. J. Holdsworth, 1823), III, 300.

⁴ *The Ilston Book: Earliest Register of Welsh Baptists*, transcribed and ed. B.G. Owens (Aberystwyth: The National Library of Wales, 1996), pp.75-76, original spelling.

⁵ *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.23-24.

II. *Preaching, “the main and principal Work of the Gospel”*

- Benjamin Keach (1640-1704) on preaching: it is

“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.”⁶

- Hercules Collins on preaching:

“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...”⁷

III. *Hymn-singing: “sweet incense”*

- The hymn-singing controversy
- The position of Isaac Marlow; and the view of Benjamin Keach, *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)

IV. *Prayer: “When the Spirit gets into the heart”*

- John Bunyan (1628-1688) on written prayers:

“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 doth not say the Common prayer-book teacheth us how to pray, but the Spirit.”⁸

- John Bunyan’s 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,

⁶ *A Golden Mine Opened* (London, 1694), pp.131-132.

⁷ *The Scribe Instructed unto the Kingdom of Heaven*, p.16.

⁸ *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), pp.95, 96.

or according to the Word, for the good of the Church, with submission, in Faith, to the will of God.”⁹

- John Bunyan on calling God “Father”:

“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 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.”¹⁰

- John Bunyan on struggling in prayer:

“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 hypocrisy, 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?”¹¹

V. Where “God is most glorified”

In corporate worship the seventeenth-century Baptists believed that they experienced “the nearest Resemblance of Heaven” and received the “clearest manifestations of God’s Beauty” in this world. Thus, Benjamin Keach unequivocally declared that “the public Worship of God ought to be preferred before private,” though the latter should certainly not be neglected, for the place where “God is most Glorified” is in the midst of a worshipping congregation.¹²

⁹ *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.235.

¹⁰ *I Will Pray With the Spirit*, ed. Greaves, p.252.

¹¹ *I Will Pray With the Spirit*, ed. Greaves, pp.256-7

¹² *The Glory of a True Church, and its Discipline display’d* (London, 1697), pp.63-68, *passim*.