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TO SING HYMNS OR NOT TO SING?

Learning Wisdom from the Worship Wars of the 1690s

I. A Brief History of Disagreement among Particular Baptists

A. Benjamin Keach

- 1. 1673 - London pastor-theologian Benjamin Keach—claiming Matthew 26:30 as scriptural warrant—introduced the singing of a hymn in the Horsleydown church at the conclusion of the Lord's Supper.**
- 2. 1691 - a large majority of church members voted to have a hymn sung at the conclusion of the service every Sunday, which provoked furious opposition and twenty-two members left the church.**

B. Keach's Opponents

- 1. Opposed by members of his own church, some who left to form Maze Pond church, who maintained its opposition to hymn-singing until 1736.¹**
- 2. Opposed by several other prominent London Particular Baptists, including William Kiffen (1616–1701) and Robert Steed (died c.1695).**
- 3. Isaac Marlow, a wealthy jeweller and prominent member of the Mile End Green Baptist Church, became an insatiable opponent of Keach, publishing more than eleven books and tracts during the course of the controversy, which encompassed six years (1690–1696).**

II. Isaac Marlow and His Opposition to Hymn-Singing

A. Marlow's Argument

- The use of pre-written hymns and songs produces a deadening effect similar to reading from a prayer book, a practice that he believed quenched the Holy Spirit.**
- Examples of singing in the New Testament involved the exercise of an extraordinary special spiritual gift.**
- Congregational singing compromised the purity of the church.**

¹ Michael Watts, *The Dissenters: From the Reformation to the French Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), I, 310.

- **Public singing in the early church involved only a single voice and did not include the congregation.**
- **Thus, Marlow rejected any and all congregational singing, even the Psalms of David:**

“Such singing of the Psalms of David is no where instituted, ordained or practiced, either by Christ or his Holy apostles; there is no instance can be given in the New Testament that any of David’s Psalms were ever sung by any persons or churches, or that Christ or his Holy Apostles when ever they had occasion to translate any one text out of the Hebrew into the Greek Tongue, did ever turn them into Metre; and therefore finding no Institution nor Example, we have no Warrant for the Singing of them.”²

B. Marlow and the Regulative Principle

- **There was no singing instituted before David’s time.**
- **The Solomonic Temple witnessed only outward, formal ceremonies.**
- **Songs in the OT were destined to disappear with their fulfillment in Christ:**

“...carnal Ordinances [were] a Figure for the time then present, and Pattern of Heavenly things, and [a] Shadow of good things to come; but not the very Image of the things; and were imposed on them until the time of Reformation, and change of the Priesthood, Law, Temple, and Service, or Worship of God; which things being all removed by Christ...”³

- **The NT forbade the corporate use of Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs because they were instituted neither by precept nor example in the New Covenant.**

C. Marlow’s Concerns

- **The human composition of hymns in forms to be “imposed” on the church would serve to introduce formalism into the worship of God, an unbiblical innovation that quenched the Spirit and corrupted worship.**
- **Congregational singing would give occasion for unregenerate persons to pollute Baptist bodies with their “carnal brayings” and that it would empower women to employ their voices in church, a practice he believed strictly forbidden by Scripture:**

“I therefore greatly marvel that any Man should assert and admit such a practice as Womens Singing; and that any woman should presume to sing vocally in the

² Marlow, *A Brief Discourse Concerning Singing in the Public Worship of God in the Gospel Church* (1690), 15.

³ Marlow, *Brief Discourse*, 12–13.

Church of Christ, when he positively and plainly forbids them in his Word: for Singing is Teaching, Coloss. 3:16 and speaking Ephes. 5:19, both of which are plainly forbidden to Women in the Church. And besides, they are commanded to learn in silence with all subjection. And if this be not Truth, I am at a loss how to find it. And such as deny the Authority of these Scriptures to forbid Womens Singing, do of necessity destroy the Authority of the Word of God, and leave us destitute of a Rule of Worship.”⁴

III. Benjamin Keach and an Old Ordinance Reclaimed

A. Keach’s Pastoral Concerns

- **Traced the “want of God’s presence” in the churches to, in part, “the neglect of this great duty” of corporate singing.⁵**

“Reformation, ‘tis evident, is a hard and difficult Work, and ever was; ‘tis no easy thing to restore lost Ordinances, I mean, such as have for many Years been neglected, and strangely corrupted, through that Antichristian Darkness that hath for so many Ages and Generations spread over the Earth... I must confess, I my self, when first God enlightened me into his Truth, was an opposer of this Sacred Ordinance; but it was not for want of Ignorance, and partly through Prejudice, perhaps to such who I esteem, and ever looked upon since that time, a corrupt people in false in their Church-Constitution, and polluted with human Innovation, or Inventions of Men: the abuse of an Ordinance is subject to raise Mens Spirits to a dislike of the thing itself. But, blessed be God, I have, for near twenty Years last past, been fully convinced of the Truth of the Ordinance I now contend for, and have an equal esteem for it, (through Grace) as I have for any other Truth, knowing every Word of God is pure; and have found no little comfort in the practice of it, publickly in the Church, and in private also.”⁶

B. Keach’s Argument

- **The singing of Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs was a holy ordinance of God, a permanent part of Gospel worship.**
- **Keach saw Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19–20 as providing sufficient and necessary warrant for congregational singing.**
- **Singing was practiced before the law (Exodus 15:1–2), under the law (David, etc.), and in the gospel dispensation (Matt. 26:30).**

“Did not Christ sing an Hymn after the Supper? Would he have left that as a Pattern to us, and annexed it to such a pure Gospel-Ordinance, had it been a

⁴ *Truth Cleared*, 21.

⁵ 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 (London, 1691), 176.

⁶ *Breach Repaired*, 3–4.

Ceremony, and only belonging to the Jewish Worship? Or would the Apostle Paul have given, by the Authority of the Holy Ghost, such a Precept to the Church of Colosse to sing Psalms and etc., whom he strives so much to take off from Jewish Rites, Days, and Ceremonies? Had singing of Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs been a Jewish Ceremony, he would not have done thus. This is sufficient to convince any sober and unbiased Person, i.e. that Singing Praises to God is a Gospel-Duty; and that it did not belong to the Jews, in the Days of the Old Testament.”⁷

C. Refuting Marlow’s Argument

- ***If the angels sang at creation as Job 38 declares, then it is the duty of men to sing because singing is an act of divine worship and an expression of joy.***
- ***Since 2 Timothy 3:16 teaches that all Scripture is breathed forth by the Holy Spirit, “then the Book of Psalms” is inspired in the same way.***
- ***Keach compared hymn-singing to preaching: both were divinely-ordained elements of worship with the content of both also governed by Scripture.***
- ***Spiritualizing away a clearly-prescribed element of worship leads to a similar abolishment of all others:***

“Our Sermons are no more made for us in God’s Word than our Hymns are, and we have equal direction in both these weighty cases; and I must tell you, this way of arguing you use is enough, if people did observe it, to overthrow all visible Worship and Ordinances, unless we could make it appear, that we had the immediate extraordinary help of the Spirit in the discharge of them. Away, saith one, with your carnal and human preaching, tis a Form invented and done by Art, will you call this Gospel-preaching? The Apostles spake as they were moved by a mighty Spirit within them; you must preach by immediate Inspiration and not precomposed Sermons, or else your sermons are formal. Thus you open a Door for Quakerism, and throw Stumbling blocks before the weak: I intreat you to consider of it.”⁸

D. The Outcome

- ***Hope of a debate disappeared when the two men reached a stalemate over the rules that would govern such an event.***
- ***By 1696, the furor over hymn-singing among the Particular Baptists was essentially over.***

⁷ *Breach Repaired*, 130.

⁸ *Breach Repaired*, 137.

- ***The hymn-singing Baptists rapidly gained ground, and by the close of the seventeenth century the use of hymns was well on its way to become a generally recognized part of public worship among the Particular Baptists.***
- ***The breakaway church at Maze Pond, on the other hand, maintained its resistance to congregational singing throughout the first third of the eighteenth century. But in 1736 the body adopted congregational singing when the pastor it called refused to come unless the church agreed to reform its practice in favor of corporate singing.⁹***

IV. Joseph Stennett's hymns on the Lord's Supper

- A. One of the earliest of these hymnals was Joseph Stennett's (1663–1713) Hymns In Commemoration Of the Sufferings of Our Blessed Saviour Jesus Christ, Compos'd For the Celebration of his Holy Supper (first published in 1697).***
- B. A letter was written by one of Stennett's friends that commended Stennett's hymns for their ability to raise such affections during the celebration of the Lord's Table as "an humble Reverence of the Divine Majesty, and a deep Contrition for our numerous Sins, with Faith in the Assistance of the Holy Spirit, and steady Resolution of Obedience to all the Laws of Jesus Christ."***

V. Conclusion

A key reason why the Holy Spirit has used hymns down through the years: they have proven to be an ideal vehicle for the Spirit's great new-covenant work: the glorification of the Lord Jesus.¹⁰

⁹ Michael Watts, *The Dissenters: From the Reformation to the French Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), I, 310.

¹⁰ See John 16:14.