

# THE UNIVERSAL TRADITION AND THE CLEAR MEANING OF SCRIPTURE: BENJAMIN KEACH'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE TRINITY

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**ABSTRACT.** Leading Particular Baptist theologian Benjamin Keach (1640-1704) came to prominence just as an antitrinitarian theology native to England gained a stronghold. What had previously been deemed off-limits by the Establishment became a commonplace by the end of the seventeenth century based on a strict biblicism that eschewed the extra-biblical language of trinitarian orthodoxy. As one who considered himself a strong biblicist, Keach deftly maneuvered his theological writings between what he saw as two extremes: the one that refused to consider any language that moved beyond the mere words of scripture, represented by many of his General Baptist contemporaries and the other that over-emphasized the role of tradition with no eye toward biblical truth, represented by the Roman Catholics. Keach's explication of trinitarianism demonstrated that these two extremes did not have to be seen as competing with each other. Instead, the correct understanding of the Bible included 'the just and necessary consequences' that could be deduced from Scripture, and the 'universal tradition' aided the pastor theologian in ascertaining the truth. The result, for Keach and his audience, was an ancient view of trinitarianism that offered a way of peace between the the two extremes vying for the public ear in the late seventeenth century.

**KEYWORDS:** trinity, Socinianism, Benjamin Keach, trinitarianism, antitrinitarianism, biblicism

## **Introduction**

After the execution of Bartholomew Legate (d. 1612) and Edward Wightman (1580?-1612) for charges of heresy, the public burning of the *Racovian Catechism* in 1614 at the behest of James I could not have caused much surprise. The antitrinitarian teachings of the recently-deceased Fausto Sozzini (1539-1604) codified in that Latin work had been soundly rejected by the establishments—both those committed to Reform and those still ensconced in Roman loyalty. Merely having the hint of Socinianism in their writings had been enough to make an appointment for Legate and Wightman with the public executioner.

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But seventeenth-century England has not been described as ‘the world turned upside down’ for no reason. After a mere three decades passed, the same teachings returned to the fore in the English theological landscape, but this time, the results were quite different.

On paper, precious little differentiated the teachings associated with Legate and Wightman from the teachings of the men incarcerated in the Gatehouse, Westminster in 1647, Paul Best (1590-1657) and John Biddle (1615/16-1662). Both events led to charges of Socinianism, complete with its blatant dismissal of trinitarian orthodoxy, and to convictions at the hands of the establishment. Unlike Legate and Wightman, however, Best and Biddle lived to see freedom beyond their incarceration. Additionally, in the immediate aftermath of the Best and Biddle trials, the fate of the *Racovian Catechism* also reversed course, finding a permanent place in the English literary landscape, safe from the fires that had consumed them previously. Even more telling, John Biddle actually claimed to have developed his views on the Trinity independent of Socinus or his Bohemian followers. Enough changes had occurred in England for a uniquely English heterodox underground to develop.

The cultural shifts in England that came to a head in the Biddle and Best test cases laid the foundation for the trinitarian discussions that took center stage amongst the Dissenting community in the second half of the century. Doctrinal issues that had earlier been ‘extirpated’ by James I carrying out ‘one of the principall parts of that duetie which appertaines vnto a Christian King’ (James I 1612: 1) reappeared with a vengeance and begged for a response from the religious community still seeking a place in polite religious society. Standing outside the established church meant being the perennial target of heresy charges, necessitating an apologetic response that both distinguished the dissenting communities from the legitimate heretics—especially if the government no longer played the role of adjudicator—and anchored the orthodoxy of the various dissenting communities for both their own congregants and the public at large. Amongst the burgeoning sect of self-described ‘churches which are commonly (though falsly) called Anabaptists’ (*First London Confession*: title page) and the ‘congregations of Christians (baptized upon Profession of their Faith)’ (*Second London Confession*: title page), the task of defending the doctrinal legitimacy fell to passionate clergy who not only guided their congregations during the tumultuous seventeenth century but also laid out the theological systems that would influence future generations of Baptist dissenters.

One of the most vocal of the second generation of those pastoral apologists, Benjamin Keach (1640-1704), found himself awash in the trinitarian debates that continued to thrive well into the 1700s. Keach’s own literary mentor, the illustrious John Owen (1616-1683), directly attacked the still-

prevalent arguments of John Biddle in his 1655 publication, entitled *Vindiciae evangelicae or The mystery of the Gospell vindicated, and Socinianisme examined*. In that tome, Owen used nearly 700 pages to refute all of the major points of Biddle's version of Socinianism. That massive volume by Owen only piled onto the already-lengthy list of publications defending the historical doctrine of the trinity from the more acceptable dissenters as well as the establishment. Presbyterians like Matthew Poole, the Presbyterian dissenter known for his *Annotations upon the Bible*, and Church of England clergy like Nicolas Estwick (ca. 1584-1658) all saw fit to publish book-length responses to the increasingly accepted and now native-English anti-trinitarianism.

When the major sects of English Protestantism saw fit to publish their confessional statements around the middle of the century, the article on the trinity, then, served as more than a merely perfunctory nod to classical creeds. In fact, both the *Savoy Declaration* (1658), penned by the Independents, and the Baptist congregations' *Second London Confession* (1677) explicitly declared that the 'doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation of all our Communion with God, and comfortable dependence on him' (*Savoy Declaration* and *Second London Confession*, article 2). This specific acceptance of classical trinitarianism and the defensive posture of the 'acceptable' versions of Christianity in seventeenth-century England in no way calmed the noisy discussions instigated by Biddle and Best; rather, they often made the work of the average dissenting pastor even more difficult. In fact, by the time Benjamin Keach explicitly joined the published discussion in 1700, the fight over trinitarianism had moved decidedly inside the bounds of acceptable religion. No longer were those who questioned the long-accepted position of the creeds seen as obvious heretics. Instead, new discussions arose from such ensconced theologians as William Sherlock (1639/40-1707), installed as Master of the Temple in London in 1685, and Stephen Nye (1648-1719), an outspoken Unitarian whose work on the history of that movement ultimately led to the squelching of the debate by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Tenison (1636-1715).

### **Keach's Involvement**

Despite coming of age at a time when Biddle and Best garnered the most attention (Keach joined the General Baptist congregation meeting in Buckinghamshire in 1655 and began preaching in Aylesbury in 1658), Benjamin Keach did not directly involve himself in the trinitarian discussions until the last decade of the seventeenth century. Even then, his focus remained far more on the practical outworkings of the doctrine than on the often-pedantic discussions regarding terminology. This silence from Keach stemmed ostensibly from his understood calling as a pastor to laity—and to Baptist laity, at that—rather than to any ignorance on Keach's part. Throughout his writings, Keach demonstrated an active knowledge of the theological discussions that

engulfed the academics of his day, and he rarely hesitated to engage even the most well-respected, well-educated theologians should the opportunity present itself. In the trinitarian debates, that opportunity never fully materialized.

Keach actually remained uncharacteristically aloof from the often-heated polemical discussions on this particular issue, not publishing a work focused directly on the topic until the year 1700 with a work entitled *Beams of divine light*. That publishing distance, however, did not render Keach's trinitarian writings any less pointed, nor did it indicate a lack of concern on his part. Rather, the relative quiet from Keach's pen could more aptly be attributed to Keach's view of the doctrine of the trinity as *the* foundation of all of his theological writings and, only secondarily, to the efficacy of the polemical works which had been published by those closest to him, including the work of a prominent church member, Isaac Marlow, who published his *A treatise of the Holy Trinunity* in 1690. Thus, the work required for modern readers to understand Keach's trinitarian theology proves to be more labor-intensive than, for instance, comprehending his views on baptism, sabbatarianism, or even eschatology given the number of polemical writings he published directly on those issues. This labor, however, does not come without rich rewards as Keach's trinitarianism—shaped in the midst of near-constant academic discussion—provides unique insights into the foundations of trinitarian theology for successive generations of Baptists.

### **Keach's Trinitarian System**

Unsurprisingly, from his earliest forays into public ministry, Keach organized his theological teaching around a trinitarian structure in use since the earliest days of the church. The first of his published works, a children's primer that—due to its anti-paedobaptist teachings and perceived radical eschatology—had been burned at the order of Judge Robert Hyde in 1664, almost certainly included the confession of faith that appeared at the end of the version he reportedly reproduced from memory in 1695. That work, like the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed or the Apostles' Creed, centered around several 'I believe' statements aligned in a clearly trinitarian fashion.

I believe with my Heart, and Confess with my Mouth, That God is one Almighty, Eternal, Infinite, and admirable Essence ... I also believe in Jesus Christ our Lord, who is the only begotten Son of God, being the brightness of his Glory, and express Image of his Person, and he is verily God of the substance of the Father; so he is truly Man ... I also believe in the Holy Ghost, who is one with the Father & Son, proceeding from them ... I believe also, God hath a holy and blessed Church on Earth, who are a select People, separated from the evil customs and worships of the World according to Gods Holy Word. I also believe *the* Resurrection of the

Dead, the Eternal Judgment, with the Life everlasting, Amen (Keach 1704: 50-51).

Keach made clear from the earliest stage of his career that he stood firmly in the trinitarian camp. By identifying Jesus Christ as ‘the only begotten Son of God’ who is ‘verily God of the substance of the Father’ and ‘the Holy Ghost, who is one with the Father & Son’, Keach distinguished his brand of theology from any number of dissenting groups, including the group of Baptists who signed the so-called *Standard Confession* in 1660. That confession—signed by, among others, Joseph Keeich, Benjamin’s brother—notably did not contain explicit trinitarian language save for the direct quotation of the by-then-controversial *Comma Johanneum* (1 John 5:7). Benjamin Keach’s use of the trinitarian formulation, then, was far from a mere formality.

### **Extra-biblical Terminology**

Many in Keach’s early circles, including the authors of the *Standard Confession*, almost certainly avoided much of the common trinitarian language primarily due to a deep-seated reticence toward any use of extra-biblical language to describe God. That reticence led to a strange consortium of cobelligerents, consisting of traditional trinitarians and radical antitrinitarians connected by their mutual opposition to such language. Thus, such disparate theologians as Thomas Grantham (1634-1692), the eminent General Baptist messenger and traditional trinitarian, and Matthew Tindal (1657-1733), the early English deist and defender of Unitarianism, could agree that the use of extrabiblical terminology caused more problems than solutions. As Grantham argued, ‘It is not necessary to impose words upon any Man which God himself hath not used, by which to make himself known’ (Grantham 1678: Book 2, part 1, 40). Tindal was more forceful: ‘[t]o prefer Tradition before our clearest idea’s [in biblical revelation]’, he argued, ‘is to prefer probably before certain, Belief before Knowledge, that which we possibly may be mistaken in, before what we are most certain of’ (Tindal 1694: 34).

Those arguments held no sway for Keach, who not only eschewed that reticence in his works intended for his broader readership but also ensured that his own congregation would align with the traditional language by including it in his church’s confessional statement. According to that statement of faith, published in 1697, ‘there are three Persons in the Godhead, the *Father*; the *Son*, and *Holy Spirit*; and that *these three are One God*, the same in Essence, equal in Power and Glory’ (Keach 1697). Given his interaction with William Sherlock and Robert South and his close connection to John Owen and Isaac Chauncy (1632-1712)—all of whom had been involved in the trinitarian debates which centered on the semantic usage of terms like *person* and *essence*—Keach’s use of these terms could hardly be seen as coincidental.

### Use of Tradition

The debate around trinitarian terminology also called into question the relationship of the church to tradition as a whole. Those who shied away from the use of extra-biblical terminology did so consistently on the basis of an extreme biblicism that had come into vogue in England alongside the development of a native English Socinianism. Paul Best, for example, grounded his own anti-trinitarianism in the simple fact that ‘for the Son to be coequall to the Father, or the holy Spirit a distinct coequall person I cannot finde [in Scripture]’ (Best 1647: 5). According to that view, expressed accurately in the *Racovian Catechism*, an individual should reject ‘every interpretation [of Scripture] which is repugnant to right reason’ (Rees 1818: 18). This emphasis on reason required believers to discard the interpretations of the past, the ‘historical writings, or other authentic testimonies and sources of information’ (Rees 1818: 16) should they be deemed to be in opposition to the Bible as interpreted by right reason.

For Keach, this pervasive Socinian understanding of tradition and even the Bible as subservient to reason stood against historic Christianity. In response, Keach enumerated a clear hierarchy of authority which he utilized throughout his many theological writings, including those focused on the doctrine of the trinity (Keach 1700b: 186). That hierarchy began with the Word of God, but it did not end there. His hierarchy also made room for human reason, the tradition of the church, and the wisdom of theologians of every age (including his contemporaries).

Unsurprisingly, the first level of that hierarchy—the argument from ‘the Word of God’—provided Keach with the most fodder for his doctrinal writings. After all, he, like the Reformers he admired, viewed ‘the holy Scriptures as a sufficient Rule in all points of Faith and Practice’ (Keach 1698a: 10). Without fail, Keach turned to the Bible first and repeatedly for his arguments. He also berated those of his opponents who did not see the obvious arguments from scripture. To ignore the clear reading of Scripture in favor of tradition meant succumbing to nothing more than ‘humane’ arguments—one of the many shortcomings of the popish religion and various other sects. Keach, indeed, celebrated those of his audience who did ‘not ma[k]e Men, General Councils, nor Synods, your Rule, but God’s Holy Word: your Constitution, Faith, and Discipline’ (Keach 1691a: iii-iv). Moreover, Keach did not limit his understanding of the clear meaning of Scripture simply to the literal words of the text; rather, he argued:

That which by a just and necessary Consequence is deduced from Scripture, is as much the Mind of Christ, as what is contained in the express words of Scripture (Keach 1692: 33).

This understanding allowed Keach to harmonize his high view of the authority of Scripture with his argument for the use of ‘Universal Tradition’ and ‘the Testimony of most approved Writers’—the second and third levels of his hierarchy, respectively. Those latter terms had distinctive meanings in Keach’s system. The ‘Universal Tradition’, or ‘Apostolical Tradition’ (Keach 1691b: 23), referred to the doctrines of the church as established by the earliest councils and accepted by all branches of Christendom. The final level of his hierarchical system allowed Keach to place himself in a broader contemporary conversation without losing sight of the conversation at hand. Those ‘most approved Writers’, for Keach, included his favorite theologian, John Owen, Owen’s successor at the Independent Church meeting at Bury-Street, Isaac Chauncy), any number of baptist pastor-theologians, and those leaders of the Reformation who defend the ‘Orthodoxy of Matter’ (De Laune and Keach 1681: Book II, sig A3r).

In enumerating this structure, Keach clearly intended to aid his readers as they navigated the complex theological discussions of their day. For Keach’s theological stance, this method allowed him to hold a high view of Scripture in tension with a respect for historic Christianity and engage the contemporary debates without losing sight of the final objective, namely, to understand God as He ‘hath revealed or made known himself’ (Keach 1694: 91) in scripture. In other words, it allowed Keach to stand firmly in what he deemed to be classical Christianity while not running the risk of being out oblivious to the theological trials of his day.

### **The Doctrine**

Despite his inherent respect for human reason and the Christian tradition, Keach’s ultimate understanding of the Triunity of the Godhead fell into a category of divine mystery which could only be accepted by faith (Keach 1702: 141). Any accurate concept of the Godhead could only come via divine revelation of the three Persons, specifically ‘their properties and operations [rather than] by their essential forms ... which are in themselves absolutely incomprehensible’ (De Laune and Keach 1681: Book III, 22). Keach, then, attempted to describe the three Persons according to their unique, individual tasks, but he remained firm in his understanding of the essential union of the Triune God. That understanding, after all, involved a God who ‘though three Persons or Subsistences, yet [was] but one and the same God, one in Essence, though distinguished as to their distinct Personalities’ (Keach 1694: 377). While Keach did not often write exclusively on the doctrine of the Trinity, he did touch on the connected issues throughout his writings. His teaching on salvation, for example, proved to be quite fruitful for Keach to introduce his audience to the contemporary debates on the topic. Two of his collections of sermons provided helpful insights into his understanding of the significance

of the doctrine of the trinity as a foundation for salvation. Both of those collections—*A golden mine opened* (1694) and *Gospel mysteries unveil'd* (1701)—were published in the last decade of his ministry during a time when the debates over trinitarianism grew increasingly heated.

In a sermon entitled ‘The Glory of the Lord Revealed’, Keach took the opportunity afforded by the quotation of Isaiah found in Luke 3 to explore the glory-revealing aspect of the divine work of salvation. According to his exposition, the Father served as the ‘first in order, in all the Divine Operations’ (Keach 1701: I, 132). This understanding, combined with the modified form of the satisfaction theory of the atonement which Keach found to be both biblical and helpful, led Keach to espouse the teaching that ‘[t]he Father was [the divine Person who was] injured, His glory seemed to be eclipsed by Sin’ (Keach 1694: 377). Thus, the Father acted in choosing and sending the Son into the world, raised the Son from the dead, justified Him and ‘us in him’, and secured union for the believer in the Son (Keach 1701: I, 32). Thus, Keach could argue, as he did in a sermon on Hebrews 2:3, that the Father functions as ‘the Fountain and Spring of [our great Salvation]’ (Keach 1694: 377).

Keach understood quite well the potential pitfalls associated with this understanding of the First Person of the Trinity. By seeing the Father as the injured upholder of justice, some, including the Socinians, held that this teaching rendered ‘the Son more merciful and kind than the Father’ (Keach 1694: 378). Because of both the co-essential nature of the three Persons as well as the fact that the Father could rightly be seen as the ‘Contriver or first Author of this Salvation’ (Keach 1694: 377), Keach dismissed these concerns as nothing more than ‘absurd Notion[s]’ made by those who did not understand either the nature of the Triune God or the outworking of salvation. According to the biblical account, ‘[a]ll the Blessings of our Salvation are ascribed to the free Bounty, Mercy, Love and Goodness of God the Father’ (Keach 1694: 378). Even more, Keach argued that the Father’s justice did not necessitate the relinquishing of His mercy. The unique glory of the salvific plan came in the fact that the Father could indeed be ‘Just as well as Gracious’ (Keach 1694: 379).

At the most basic level, Keach’s understanding of the Second Person of the Trinity closely followed his teaching on the Father. Whereas the Father’s glory was bestowed in His orchestration of the work of salvation, the Son’s glory was revealed in the actual carrying out of the plan. The ‘Exercis[ing] of his Offices ... when he was actually anointed and proclaimed *King, Priest and Prophet*’ and His ‘obedience to the Law ... and ... his Death, glorious Resurrection and Ascension into Heaven’ all combined to demonstrate both His essential divinity and His unity with the Father (Keach 1701: I, 32).



In fact, none of Keach's teachings specifically on Christ would have surprised anyone who held to a classic view of the Godhead. He actively defended the basic teachings of Christendom: the divinity of Christ, the humanity of Jesus, and even the hypostatic union as defined by the Council of Chalcedon. According to his view, Jesus Christ revealed Himself as 'the Eternal God; not God by Office, but God by Nature, the most High God who made Heaven and Earth, and yet truly Man, taking our Nature into a mystical Union with his Holy Deity ... and thus both God and Man in one Person' (Keach 1694: 93).

Discussions surrounding the Second Person of the Trinity commanded a larger portion of Keach's published works, especially as his readership struggled with the teachings of the General Baptist messenger, Matthew Caffyn (d. 1714), whose espousal of something akin to a celestial flesh view of Christ led to Keach labeling him as a 'Destable [sic] and *Damnable*' (Keach 1700: 23), '*rank Heretick*' (Keach 1698b: 136; cf. Bass 2020). Caffyn's teachings, though uniquely associated with the still-developing Baptist associations in the British Isles, were not unique in their attacks on this historic doctrine. Both Socinianism and Arianism presented their own unorthodox views of the Second Person of the Trinity as did the Quakers who were quickly gaining popularity in the English world and who had claimed one of Keach's own daughters, Hannah, as a convert (Crosby 1738: IV, 308-309). Thus, Keach presented his apology of the Reformed orthodox view of Christ from a distinctly personal position. His writings on the subject provided a clear demonstration of that personal involvement, with his most passionate condemnations being reserved for those who questioned this historical view of Christ.

The doctrine of the Holy Spirit garnered nearly the same opposition from the antitrinitarians as the doctrine of the Son. The debate once again involved the usual suspects with the Socinians, on the one side, referring to the Spirit simply as 'virtue or energy' (Rees 1818: 39) and the Quakers, on the other side, arguing that the Spirit is 'the Light Within' or 'Christ within' (Penn 1699). Both of those antitrinitarian attacks presented the Holy Spirit as something less than a distinct, divine Person of the Godhead.

For Keach, then, a defense of the Trinity required a robust explanation of a biblical pneumatology, whereby the Spirit could be rightly seen as 'the voluntary Author of all Divine Operations' and is the divine Person who '*inlightneth, reneweth, regenerates, sanctifieth, teacheth and guideth*' (Keach 1701: I, 32).

In other words, the Father orchestrates, the Son achieves, and the Spirit applies the work of salvation. By enumerating the unique roles of the Spirit, Keach provided a full-fledged discussion of his understanding of sanctification, or 'union with Christ' (Keach 1693: 13). This particular discussion had far-reaching implications for Keach's theology, directly affecting his

definition of the church—which he limited in its visible sense to baptized believers duly received into a local congregation, his identification of the ordinances and their roles—which he noted included the usual baptism and Lord’s Supper but also included (at some points in his writings) the practice of laying on of hands of new believers (Keach 1697: article xxiii), and his understanding of assurance for the believer who could be absolutely certain that the Spirit would neither desert Christ nor the believer, thus rendering the Union unbreakable. In each of those areas, the very idea that the Spirit could be viewed as anything less than a distinct, consubstantial Third Person of the Triune Godhead made no sense to Keach’s understanding of Scripture and of historic Christianity.

### Outcomes

At some level, nearly all of Benjamin Keach’s published works engaged the trinitarian debates of his day. By the time Keach’s ministry reached its peak in the last decade of the seventeenth century, William III intervened, issuing a royal injunction on the trinitarian debates in 1696. Parliament followed suit with the Blasphemy Act of 1697—an attempt to quell the groundswell of antitrinitarianism that had become commonplace since Biddle and Best had successfully avoided execution. Keach rightly saw that effort on the part of the establishment as too little and too late to serve as a legitimate defense of the doctrine that he saw as foundational to every aspect of Christianity. Nearly all of his writings attacked, in one form or another, the increasingly acceptable forms of unorthodoxy and delivered for his audience what he hoped was a clear, concise explanation of this key aspect of ‘the Essentials of Christ’s Doctrine of the Principles of true Religion’ (Keach 1694: 85). As he did so, Keach demonstrated his capabilities as a pastor-theologian, his awareness of the theological struggles common to his audience, and his passion for what he perceived to be ‘matters of Reformed orthodoxy’. Ultimately, he laid a solid groundwork for the discussions that would arise in successive generations as trinitarianism continued to command the spotlight of English dissent.

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